

THE BATH magazine

THEBATHMAG.CO.UK

ISSUE 277 | MARCH 2026

£4.95 where sold

Shortening the Odds

Meet Harriet Dickin,
the local horse trainer
chasing success

Before Dad's Army

There was far more to
Bath's Arnold Ridley
than Private Godfrey

Curious Minds

The return of the
Festival of Ideas

Changing Rooms

Find fresh inspiration
with our homes and
gardens special

Have they got laughs for you

Paul Merton and Suki Webster
bring their improv show to
the Bath Comedy Festival

THEBATHMAGAZINE 

AND... SO MUCH MORE IN THE CITY'S MOST INTELLIGENT GUIDE TO LIVING IN BATH

The art of improv...

When two wits are double the fun

*After 17 years of marriage and more than two decades touring together, Paul Merton and Suki Webster have turned improvisation into an art form built on instinct, trust and razor-sharp timing. Ahead of their Bath Comedy Festival appearance, they talk to **Melissa Blease** about cruise-ship calamities, marital harmony and why it's okay to have the occasional wobble*

The combination of two elements can create a synergy where the total output is greater than the sum of individual efforts. Think, Batman and Robin, salt and pepper, socks, nostrils, sunglasses; just a handful of examples that confirm the power of two becoming one.

Now I'm certainly not implying that either Paul Merton or Suki Webster couldn't stand up (weak pun intended) as stand-alone forces to be reckoned with in their own right; heck, we're talking about two of the UK's best-known, fastest-witted comedians here. But together, they create uproarious, full-on hilarity magic, unscripted and impromptu, spontaneous and gloriously haphazard – and they'll be bringing that magic to the Bath Forum on Saturday 28 March ('Paul Merton and Suki Webster's Improv Show') as part of this year's annual Bath Comedy Festival.

But does that magic happen despite or because of being married for 17 years... and what if they have a marital spat before going on stage?

"We don't row," says Paul, in the familiar, deadpan-but-friendly tone that so many of us are familiar with from his 35-year stint on Radio 4's *Just a Minute*, or his 36-year stint on the BBC's *Have I Got News For You*, or *Room 101*, or one of his many TV travelogues, or – oh come on, we all 'know' Paul so well and are so familiar with Suki being by his side that we'll feel as though we're welcoming old friends home when they come to Bath.

But despite Paul's response to my initial question, I'm pushing them on that 'pre-show spat' theme; surely even Mickey and Minnie Mouse had their cat and dog moments... and they didn't have to be funny all the time.

"Honestly, we're just not very argue-y people!" says Suki, who first met Paul way back when they were working together in The Comedy Store Players troupe decades ago before romance eventually blossomed over a shared stomach bug contracted while on tour in India. "What's hard about being in a showbiz marriage is that you're apart a lot, and there's a strain on the showbiz person because they're living in a sort of heightened world that your partner isn't a part of. There's only so much you can explain about it when you get home at night; it's like being in a different reality, really."

"I quite often look at Suki and think I wish I was in a different reality!" Paul deadpans again – but it's already clear that this is a man protesting too much. "I am of course joking!" he adds (a little nervously, perhaps?). "What Suki says is right: I think the fact that we do what we do together is really good for our marriage. And improvisation relies on being on the same wavelength as the person you're improvising with, so the fact that we're married and spend all day together is helpful. I'm often puzzled that people think it's unusual that we're married and we work together; maybe it is, I don't know!"

Okay, so let me push those marriage/working life crossover boundaries in a slightly different direction: if Paul and Suki are together 24-hours a day in their personal lives, how do they keep their ongoing banter fresh when they 'go to work'?

"I think both of us are really vigilant about constantly striving to really be the best that we can be, and stretching ourselves – that's not a funny answer, but it's the truth," says Suki. "Paul has done *Have I Got News For You* forever, he's been on *Just a Minute* forever, and he constantly reviews what he's doing and constantly works on what he's doing to make sure he's always as good as his last show. If he's not happy with what he's just put out there, he goes back in with fresh ideas and renewed energy. That's how we both play it."

"We did a show on a cruise ship in the worst seas the petty officer had seen in 42 years... trying to make up a show while trying to not stagger around was hysterical"

"Because we're improvising and not relying on a script, we can't just sit back and think well, we'll just do what we did yesterday," Paul adds. "When you see actors in a long-running play, with the best will in the world you can often see them looking tired, like, 'here we go again'. Because we're doing new stuff all the time I think it's easier to maintain freshness. It won't always come off to the extent that you want it to, but if you're trying for your best and not falling short, if you're aiming high, it works." And then, in true tag-team style, Suki chips in: "And occasionally, you'll sink!"

Now I don't believe for one minute that Paul and Suki ever sink their show; their chemistry is too dynamic, too spirited, too authentic – and clearly strong enough to get them through a moment when they almost did, quite literally, sink.

"We did an improv show on a cruise ship some years ago," Suki recalls, when asked for an example of an inevitable moment when improvised comedy threatens to turn into a tragic farce. "We were on the worst seas that the petty officer had ever seen – and he'd been on cruise ships for 42 years. The stage was vast, like an aircraft hanger. Paul came on from one side and I came on from the other, and we both immediately listed – Paul looked like he was walking up a mountain and I shot on at ➤



Photography by Steve Ullathorne

about 30 miles an hour, and the audience watching us trying to make up a show while trying to not stagger around was hysterical. It was so rough we fell over a couple of times and had to go down on our hands and knees to wait for the wave to pass. But the spontaneity of us trying to justify why we were staggering in that moment, or why one of us had to step back; we incorporated it into the show, and it was sensational!”

And... smooth? “I wouldn’t say that the word is smooth,” says Paul. “But we’re certainly experienced!”

“Improvisation isn’t about perfection – it’s about spontaneity and joy. The audience don’t want you to fall over and fail, but they love a little wobble. That’s all part of the excitement.”

Experienced for sure; Paul and Suki have toured as a double act for over 20 years. But still, their Improv Show is as spontaneous as spontaneous gets and features an ever-evolving line-up of special guests (me, on this very topic: who would be your dream guest, dead or alive? Paul: “I think I’d just prefer somebody alive. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, a round of applause please for Queen Victoria?’ I’m not sure that’d work well...”) and a revolving schedule of games, all of it as reliant on Paul and Suki’s unpremeditated wit as it is on audience participation that can never be anticipated.

“Audiences are unpredictable for sure,” says Paul. “But we reserve the right to filter suggestions. If we ask for a location to riff on, for example, somebody might say ‘abattoir’, and that’s not going to be really funny. So we filter for suggestions that we know are going to have more entertainment value than, say, a slaughterhouse.” “And sometimes, if we’ve had the same suggestion three or four times in a row, we might say ‘oh, we had that one last night, sorry!’ because otherwise your head will be saying, ‘have I already said that line, tonight?’,” says Suki. “Having said that, the audience don’t want you to fall over and fail but they love a little wobble! And that’s all part of the excitement; improvisation isn’t about perfection, it’s about spontaneity and joy. You don’t want to be swimming out of your depths, you want your toes to touch the bottom – that’s where it’s exciting, finding that level.”

“It’s a bit like a football match, really”, says Paul. “No football match is the same as every other football match, but it’s still identifiably a football match. Every show is completely different, even though the format remains the same.” “But we don’t have 11 bare-legged men on the stage with us every night,” Suki points out. “That used to be the only reason I’d watch a football match, but now they wear their shorts longer, honestly, what’s the point?”

And they were off, riffing on football vs rugby kits, bouncing off each other and merging again with seamless, immaculate comedy timing and offering a perfect example of how the combination of two elements can create a synergy where the total output is greater than the sum of individual efforts. Batman and Robin? Kapow! ■

The Paul Merton and Suki Webster’s Improv Show.
The Bath Forum, 28 March, doors 7pm.

The Bath Comedy Festival runs from 21 March to 19 April.
For all event details and to book tickets, visit: bathcomedy.com



Photography by Dean Chalkley