

BACK



## ARCHIVE- MAYALL BONDING (1991)

How Rik Mayall brought 'Drop Dead Fred' to life...

Earlier this month comedian Rik Mayall passed away at the age of 56. He was generally regarded as being at the forefront of the wave of ground-breaking, anarchic humour that crashed into the mainstream of the 1980s and 1990s.

In 1991, Rik Mayall went to America. or, in many ways, America came to him. Some predicted a transatlantic transplant and dazzling US career. However Drop Dead Fred turned out to be one of the comedian's very few forays across the Big Pond. It's a film that divided critics, but was arguably an inspired idea, well presented and a great vehicle for Mayall.

When Rik attended a screening of the film, just prior to its original UK release, he sat down to talk about how the project had evolved...

Confession time. When I went to see the special sneak preview of Rik Mayall's new film, I actually walked straight past the actor/comedian without realising. Perhaps I can be excused that faux pas, by revealing that he had longish blond hair, was dressed in a smart black casual suit and carrying what looked like an executive satchel. Here was a man who could have just flown in from a business meeting in LA and be about to ask everyone to '*do lunch sometime*'. Could it be ... had the Young One gone yuppie? - Nah!

The problem is, of course, that we all expect Rik Mayall to be the eternal rebel he has so often appeared as. Despite the dramatic difference, his razor sharp wit and biting satire are still well intact and as barbed as ever. Rik is about to star in a new American movie with the eye-catching title **Drop Dead Fred**. His title role sees him as Elizabeth Cronin's (Phoebe Cates) imaginary childhood friend who comes back to help her when her marriage and life seem to be falling apart. Of course, no one else can see him and all his mischievous tricks are blamed on her. All in all, he seems to be screwing up her life even more. You see, **Drop Dead Fred** is a wacky, crazy guy with the morality of a seven year-old and worse dress sense than early-career Kylie Minogue. He's got red hair, a loud yellow and green suit and loves to play tricks on people. When Elizabeth was young, people excused the tricks, but now they're all beginning to think she's a few sandwiches short of a picnic! What we end up with is a cross between Harvey and Beetlejuice. So how did Rik Mayall get involved?

"It really started when the writers, Carlos Davis and Anthony Fingleton happened to be over here during **Comic Relief** and saw me being whipped by 'Margaret Thatcher'. Basically they thought, here's a guy who's cheap and will do anything! I think they were a bit surprised that an Englishman could be so rude. Anyway, they sent along a film script that they thought I might be interested in. It was set in Oxford, but a terribly 'Americanised Oxford' full of policemen saying '*Keep a stiff upper lip, old boy...*'. They were great guys and understood my reservations about playing a role like that. They still wanted to do something with me and came back with an idea they had been thinking about for a television series. They'd been talking with a mutual friend, Elizabeth Livingston, who was writing a story based on her little daughter's imaginary friend, **Drop Dead Fred**. They decided it would make a better film than series and approached me. I've always been a big performer in the sense of being very full of gestures and shouting. **Drop Dead Fred** is a way of letting that style of performing come over in an acceptable storyline and fun way. I can jump, scream, pick my nose and hit Phoebe over the head with a shovel and it doesn't seem out of place."

The film also gives Rik the opportunity to work alongside top stars such as Carrie Fisher, Tim Matheson and Marsha Mason, not a bad line-up for his first major film to date.

"Everyone was great to work with, even little Ashley Peldon (who plays Elizabeth as a child). We'd be stood ready to do a scene and she'd say '*You're not supposed to be there, your mark's here*'. I'd tell her I was right and ask the crew to tell her. Most of the time they'd look at me and say '*Sorry Rik, the girl's right!*' It was a case of '*Thanks Ashley (wallop)*'. No she was really good. She's just landed a three picture contract with **Disney**.

Of course Rik is better known on these shores than he is in the States.

"Nobody knew who the fuck I was, at least film wise. Here I was, doing something virtually unheard of, a relative unknown who was playing the lead role in a big name feature. While I was promoting the film in the US I appeared on **The David Letterman Show** and was basically introduced as 'that funny guy from England'. It wasn't until he mentioned **The Young Ones** that people made the connection with my name. **The Young Ones** has become quite a cult show over there. It played almost continually on MTV for two years (despite there being only twelve episodes ever made!)"



**Drop Dead Fred** looks every bit an American film. In fact it is something of a British film in disguise. Yes, most of the actors and locations are in America but much of the financing and organising was done by forces on this side of the Atlantic. Davis and Fingleton took the idea to **Working Title** who bought the script at once. That was April 1990. By September principal photography was, as they say, in the can. The film opened in America with a respectable \$4.2 million in its first week. That might not compare with the **ETs** and **Batmans** of the industry, but is excellent news for a film that only cost \$6.5 million to make. ("Having said that," Rik laughs "They then went and spent \$8 million on advertising. I don't know who they got to do it, but he's got a new house!")

A majority of this fantasy was filmed in Minneapolis, with many of the background extras and smaller parts being taken by local actors and actresses. In what I personally think is one of the cleverest scenes in the movie, **Drop Dead Fred** encounters other peoples imaginary friends in a psychiatrist's waiting room, with characters such as 'Velcrohead' and 'Go To Hell Herman' joining the reunion.

There's a distinctive feel to the film that has something of a Tim Burton atmosphere to it. Had Rik seen **Beetlejuice** before starting the movie?

"No and deliberately not. Someone else spotted the similarity in style and advised me not to see the film. I'm glad I haven't seen it. Any similarity between the film's style must be accidental. I will see **Beetlejuice** at some point, but I didn't want it to influence how I saw the character."

Phoebe Cates has until now, been mainly known for her role in the two **Gremlins** movies and, if I'm not mistaken uttering the classic line "*Which one of you bitches is my mother?*" in the emotional, torrid (etc, etc) mini-series **Lace**. This is her first lead role and she does very well. Of course her hubby is the Oscar-winning star of **A Fish Called Wanda** and is better known as Kevin Kline. Phoebe recently made a cameo appearance in one of his movies (**I Love you to Death**) so was there an offer to return the favour in **Drop Dead Fred**?

"Yes. But he said '*Bollocks to that!*' It was weird having him around the set, a case of (at this point Rik blows a great big raspberry indicating a certain bodily function) '*Ooer ... a real actor!*' Rik laughs.

Of course this is all a long way from **Yorkshire Television** and the award-winning role of ultra-right politician Alan B'Stard in **The New Statesman**. The last time we saw him, he was lost in Siberia, so have we seen the last of the man with the biggest...majority in the House of Commons?

"That depends on a lot of things, not least of all who wins the franchise in the regional television company shake-ups," Mayall notes seriously. "I might be prepared to do another series, but I do feel that Alan is, or was, very much a symbol of the 80's and the Thatcher Years. It's not always a good idea to stick with one character too long, particularly one such as him. I like to move on and do new things. At the moment I'm writing a new series with Ade Edmonson (Vivian in **The Young Ones**) called **Bottom** and that should be fun."

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