

# Poetry of the ridiculous

**POETRY** Murray Lachlan Young is back with poems about toupees, the Taliban and naked rambling

MURRAY LACHLAN YOUNG prefers to dwell on the ridiculous aspects of life. That's just as well. In 1997, he was catapulted to fame on signing a £1m recording deal with EMI – unheard of for a poet. Just as suddenly, and with a first album in the can, the team working on the project was sacked. No public explanation was given, and EMI refused to sell the album back to Young. He was told to take the money and run.

He bought a house in East Sussex with his wife, Zoe, and lay low as sales of his first book, *Casual Sex and Other Verse*, edged above 20,000. Now, at 35, he's back in full satirical flow for a three-week stint at the Old Red Lion, in London. But what has he been doing for the past five years? Well, there were occasional performances – he was commissioned by Mark Rylance, artistic director at the Globe, to write a prologue to the stage adaptation of Lucius

Apuleius' mock-epic Latin novel *The Golden Ass*, and a poem commemorating the theatre's relocation to its current home. He has also been a regular at the Edinburgh Festival, gigged for the United Nations and toured with the musician Julian Cope and the poet Attila the Stockbroker. He even appeared as a gallows poet in the film *Plunkett and Macleane*.

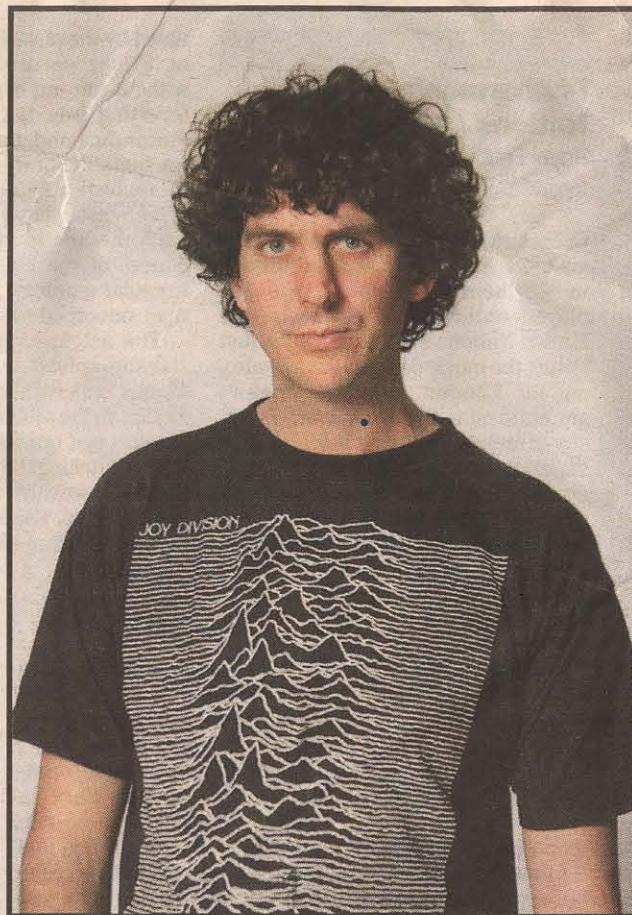
But, as Young admits, he has been struggling with writer's block. "I was having trouble writing anything at all. For a long time, I got by with just one new poem – 'To a Scrotum' – a celebration of this rarely mentioned part of the male anatomy. It was a take on the address to the haggis, narrated in the style of Robert Burns, which I got away with because I'm half-Scottish."

Then, six months ago, a breakthrough. "I was in Hastings when I saw what looked like a tumbleweed bouncing across

a zebra crossing," recalls Young. It turned out to be a toupee, and he was inspired to write "Tumbleweed Toupee".

On the heels of that came poems about the Taliban, the resignation of Robert Kilroy-Silk, the flipside to Ronald McDonald's cheery smile and the English penchant for spanking. He was particularly moved by the exploits of the naked rambler who walked from Land's End to John o' Groats. "I felt he was making a powerful if eccentric statement about the outdated public-decency laws. But he was turned into someone faintly ridiculous." It's a sentiment that Young sums up in the lines: "Imagine if a child should see/ This shocking lack of dignity/ And then be scared and turn to drugs/ And end up on an Afghan rug/ Cavorting in a naked pile/ And then become a paedophile."

These days Young is, he says, less vain and more ugly than



Murray Lachlan Young has struggled with writer's block

before, and he has slowed down his Nineties high-octane delivery: "I've learnt that I can carry people a lot further if I allow them time to breathe."

JANE HUGHES

Murray Lachlan Young performs at the Old Red Lion, 418 St John Street, London EC1 (020-7837 7816; [www.oldredliontheatre.co.uk](http://www.oldredliontheatre.co.uk)) 23 March to 10 April

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► Steve Varden, an actor who has cerebral palsy, and Sir Derek Jacobi (left)

will introduce the UK premiere of *Cloud Cuckoo Land*, the closing film of this year's Bradford Film Festival. In this modern tale of romance, endeavour and dreams, Varden plays a young man who goes to the Lake District to find a missing aircraft from the Second World War. *Pictureville Cinema, Bradford (0870 701 0200), 27 March*

► The worlds of cinematic funk and contemporary dance collide in a collaboration between sonic pioneer Barry Adamson and dancer Russell Maliphant. Adamson has created a cinematic soundscape to Maliphant's highly individual choreography. *Barbican, London EC2 (020-7638 8891), 8 April*

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