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Culture | Comedy

Jim Tavaré on returning to comedy after his near-fatal car crash: 'I almost died three times'



Tavaré was Prince Charles's favourite comedian, and a Harry Potter star – then a car crash changed his life CREDIT: GEOFF PUGH/THE TELEGRAPH

For years, comedian Jim Tavaré was 'that guy with the double bass'. But, he tells Dominic Cavendish, a road accident forced him to change his life - and his act

I was told 'Don't look at the Queen, she won't laugh, she has seen everyone under the sun, she won't be interested.' Jim Tavaré is recalling the daunting time he was invited to perform his distinctive double-bass comedy act before Her Majesty and 13 crowned heads of Europe at Highgrove in the summer of 2000. "Funnily enough, she was the one who got it. The rest of them didn't at first. She started clapping and since everyone was watching her reactions, they began visibly enjoying it, too."

Tavaré, 55, has never answered to the description of a comedy colossus but in his heyday he had friends in high places and, if not an army of fans, then a wide pool of admirers. During the Nineties, he was a regular on the stand-up circuit, a welcome relief from blokes ranting into mics.

Downbeat yet eccentric, he lugged on his double bass, looking like a serious classical musician complete with tuxedo, yet subverting expectations with a London accent, daft one-liners and muckings-about with his "comedy partner" ("Bass and I are very close, married, cello on the way").

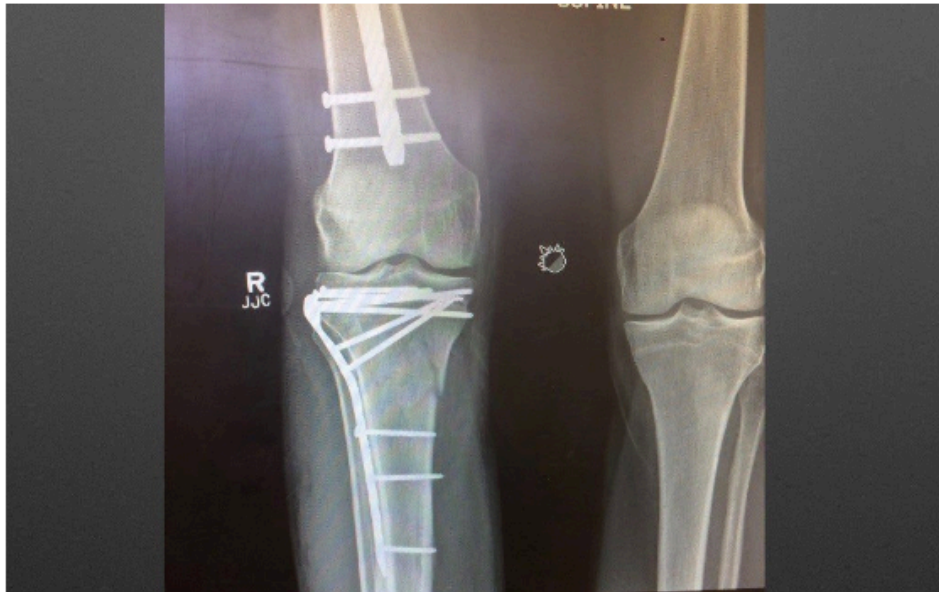
He appeared on the bill of the Royal Variety Performance three times and was known as Prince Charles's favourite comedian, a position he reinforced after doing a Christmas gig in 1998 to entertain Charles's staff at the Ritz. At Highgrove, when the heir apparent asked him where he was next playing, he joshed: "Southampton University. Do you want me to put your name down on the door?"

On March 5 2017, his Mazda MX 5 collided with a five-ton pickup truck on a winding, high-altitude road running through the San Gabriel Mountains – the Angeles Crest Highway. The father-of-two had set off from his home in the Los Angeles neighbourhood of Tujunga to obtain a particular hardy variety of chicken wire. It was his satnav – suggesting a quicker route back – that set him on a path that nearly killed him. The truck-driver emerged unscathed, as did Tavaré's beloved canine companion – his Yorkipoo Mr Kippy – but the catalogue of injuries suffered by the comedian almost makes for too-gruesome reading.



In all, 30 bones were broken; one leg was shattered, one lung punctured, one hand held on by skin. An initial photograph, soon after the accident, showed Tavaré, his broken neck in a brace, giving a thumbs-up. But that belied the gravity of the situation. “I nearly died three times, once at the scene and twice more when I was on life support,” he explains, pale, thin but looking surprisingly in the land of the living when we meet in London, what with his natty bow-tie, mutton-chop moustache and big grin. “I was put in an induced coma for 10 days.”

The location of the accident was so remote, with no phone signal, it took more than an hour and a half for the emergency services to arrive and get him extricated. He remained conscious yet only retains “the sensation of waking up and having an out-of-body experience, looking down on myself, seeing my bones sticking out of my leg, my hand snapped backwards, thinking: ‘There’s a show in this somewhere.’” That show – From Deadpan to Bedpan – is getting a premiere at the Edinburgh Fringe. It marks an incredible comeback to the festival for Tavaré for the first time in 20 years, after 18 months of recuperation. He walks stiffly and no longer has the strength to carry his double bass. A blessing in disguise? “I did sometimes think: ‘I’ve created a monster I can’t get rid of, like Rod Hull and Emu’. I don’t miss it.”



An x-ray scan showing various pins and part of a 28-inch titanium rod in Tavaré's right leg

Though his erstwhile shows could fill an hour, this confessional is his first foray into something truly long-form, which he hopes will take people into the heart of what he experienced, without losing vital signs of hilarity.

No self-pity and moaning are allowed, though. “You know when you meet someone and they go on about their divorce and how much money they’ve lost? I didn’t want to be that guy.” He hasn’t sought to impose jokes but allows the mirth to creep in naturally. “If I was trying to be funny I think I would have been stuck.” With audiences only paying what they can (this is the “free fringe”, he’ll be passing a bedpan round at the end), there’s no suggestion of making money but “it has been cathartic”, he says.

There’s a strange irony about Tavaré’s journey. In William Cook’s history of London’s Comedy Store, Tavaré features in a section about comedians who used to die on stage.

“I’m sure my peers thought: ‘When is he going to give up?’” Tavaré says. “I was so bad they had a thing at the Tunnel Comedy Club in Greenwich that Malcolm Hardee hosted called the ‘Get Jim Tavaré Off in Under Three Minutes Spot.’” Having suffered “relentless” bullying at school when his mechanical engineer father and teacher mother moved north to Cheshire, and developed a tough skin there, though, he kept at it. He’s now the textbook definition of a comedy survivor.

What does he want audiences to take away from his new show?

“There are plenty of messages,” he replies. “How a spur-of-the-moment decision can lead to a life change. How, when the world is broken there is still hope of a recovery. And, of course, be grateful for life and don’t take it for granted.”

When the rest of Edinburgh is out partying, he’ll be in bed by 8pm. And he’s completely happy with that: “I honestly didn’t expect to be here,” he says.

Jim Tavaré: From Deadpan to Bedpan at the Laughing Horse @ The Counting House, 38 West Nicolson Street, EH8 from Aug 2-26; 0131 667 7533, edfringe.com

The thought of doing the show is what kept him going during dark lonely days at home, in recovery, after his tirelessly attentive wife Laura had returned to work and he felt like “a corpse in a tomb”. He doesn’t have to pay astronomical US healthcare bills (by a stroke of good fortune, he took out insurance four days before the crash). But he suffered from post traumatic stress disorder for a year and became dependent on opioids (he was put on Fentanyl, 100 times stronger than morphine – “the pain got so bad they had to tie me down like a Victorian medical patient”). And he must daily contend with the kinds of discomfort that would leave most of us howling. “My ribs were left so badly contorted that when I lie down, the right lung rubs along the ribs like a stick running along a metal fence.”



Tavaré in 2012 with his 'comedy partner' CREDIT: GETTY