

# Siadwel's back - and taking centre stage!

## THE **BIG** INTERVIEW

From Peppa Pig to Barry Welsh, Swansea-born comedian John Sparkes has carved out a successful - and varied - TV career for himself. Next week sees his breakthrough character, aspiring poet Siadwel, return after 25 years in the wilderness. He tells MARK REES why it was the right time to bring him back.

"I THOUGHT I'd finished with Siadwel" says Swansea-born comedian John Sparkes of the character that first propelled him into the national consciousness when he stumbled, somewhat poetically, onto our screens alongside the likes of Rab C Nesbitt and The Baldy Man in 1986 on Scottish sketch show Naked Video.

"I got the job on Naked Video by not being Scottish," explains John of his initial TV breakthrough.

"All the Scottish guys had already worked together on Naked Radio, but before it went on TV they were told to get some non-Scottish people involved. So I got the job because I wasn't Scottish!"

Siadwel's last outing was 25 years ago,

and John has since carved out a varied and successful career as a comedian specialising in Welsh-centric caricatures, including loveable fool Barry Welsh and Fishguard reporter Hugh Pugh, and more recently in the world of children's entertainment on a roll call of shows that read like a who's who of characters guaranteed to drive the little ones giddy: Fireman Sam, Shaun the Sheep, Ben and Holly's Little Kingdom, Wallace and Gromit and Peppa Pig to name a few.

But now, somewhat inadvertently, John has turned his attention back to his original comic creation, who returns to the air waves with a new radio show next Friday.

"I was just scribbling ideas down for a

new character, thinking about growing up in Wales, and I just thought ... actually, this is Siadwel," he says of the characters rebirth.

But unlike his previous appearances, which were short and snappy two minute snippets as part of a larger show, Siadwel will be taking centre stage in his own radio show. "I think it works better on radio," says John of the transition.

"The characters are so extreme that they wouldn't work on TV.

"I wouldn't want to see Siadwel's terrifying girlfriend Gravel in the flesh. She's the girl next door ... but more next door than girl!" he jokes.

And while 25 years might have passed since we last caught up with Siadwel, John is hoping to pick things up right where he left off.

"His age is non-specific, and I hope to carry the old audience with me" he says of the passing of time between programmes.

"I don't know how old people thought he was back then, but I was in my 30s, though he was probably in his teens.

"It's still set in Swansea, in real places like Mumbles and Llansamlet, and anyone who remembers it from the 80s will remember the girlfriend, Billy, mam and dad.

"He went to a school in Swansea, that



was very strong on discipline — even the teachers got caned. And there were terrible spelling mistakes there; one of the boys got canned!"

And Siadwel is still an aspiring poet — not that his poetry's improved significantly over the years.

"The haikus are very good; they lend themselves well to comedy. And some of his poems are homages to other poets," he says of Siadwel's creative swiping.

"For example, Shakespeare's 'shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' becomes 'shall I compare thee to Swansea Bay?'" he laughs.

Comedy aside, John has been keeping himself more than busy with the continued success of the children's characters that he voices, with Peppa Pig in particular leading the way.

"There's the talking books, apps and all that, even a Peppa Pig theme park," says John, who is allowed to have a little bit of fun with some of the voices.

"The narrator voice must be standard of course, but for some characters I can experiment.

"They came up with this new character called Mr Potato, and they said 'John, John, can you do us a voice for this one?' so I came up with this outrageous French accent — which they used!"

But unlike his adult characters, children very rarely recognise him on the street for his voice.

"Very occasionally they will, but children can't usually make the connection.

"A friend of mine asked his son, a Peppa Pig fan, 'do you know who this is'? He was utterly confused."

John currently lives in London with his wife and daughters, having moved there in 1983 chasing the comedy dream, but still has fond memories of his hometown.

"I miss the sea, and I miss Gower," says John of Swansea, and credits one local

institution with setting him up on his path in life.

"John Chilvers was brilliant" he says of local theatre legend and former manager and artistic director of the Swansea Grand Theatre.

"How he coped with about 60 small children I don't know. The Grand was a fantastic introduction which left a big impression on me."

And while John can't see himself re-treading the boards of the famous theatre anytime soon — "I'm too old for stand up," he says — he was there a few years ago in an altogether different capacity: as a paranormal investigator.

"I spent the night there looking for ghosts. And no, I didn't see anything!" he says of his experiences on Ghost Story, a series in which he investigated supposedly haunted locations in Wales.

"I watched a couple of episodes of Most Haunted, and I just thought, why am I not frightened?" explains John of his inspiration for the show.

"It's because there was always a lot of people about when they were filming. I thought, what if it was somebody on their own?" and so John set out on a solo ghostbusting mission.

"I didn't see a ghost on the show, but some very peculiar things happened."

John recalls one such occurrence: "I was in a solitary confinement cell in an old jail in Anglesey, and when I stepped back into the corridor somebody touched me on the shoulder.

"Another time I was asking questions into a tape recorder to see if any answers would be there when I played it back, and I felt a cold sensation come over me. Not like a breeze, it was aggressive; like an icy cold fluid being poured over my head.

"But unfortunately it didn't make very good TV, because if anything happened, by the time you got the camera ready and everything, it was over."

● **Siadwel returns to BBC Radio Wales on Friday, March 21 at 6.30pm.**



## It's not just Siadwel... Here's our top 5 of John's other characters:



### Peppa Pig

Peppa Pig is one of the most instantly recognisable children's characters on the planet, and as the narrator John is kept more than busy voicing the shows and its myriad of associated merchandise.



### Barry Welsh is Coming

Possibly John's finest creation, Barry Welsh is to Wales what Alan Partridge is to Norwich. He also introduced us to roving Fishguard reporter Hugh Pugh.



### Shaun the Sheep's Farmer

Granted, it's more mumbling than speaking – but John mumbles well, at it makes it a universal language! John teases that there's a feature length Shaun the Sheep film in the pipeline...



### Ghost Story

Indulging his love for the paranormal, John set off across Wales on a one-man hunt for things that go bump in the night. He says that the jails were the most haunted locations he visited.



### Fireman Sam

Possibly the most iconic of Welsh children's TV characters, John voiced the Pontypandy hero between 2003 and 2005.



John Sparkes as Siadwel.  
Photo by Richard Bailey.

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