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Sargeant on Parade

Now that he is finished with probing the nation's politicians, John Sargeant can indulge in larking about, preferably on the barges of Great Britain if his new TV series is anything to go by, says *Sally Saunders*

As a certain water rat once said, there is nothing half as much worth doing as simply messing about in boats.

It's a message that the former chief political correspondent of the BBC has taken to heart.

For, after decades strolling along the corridors of power, or standing in the rain outside No 10, he is simply messing about in boats. And trains. And the odd plane. Not for him penning weighty tomes about the state of modern politics or presenting highbrow discussions on Radio 4, like some of his former colleagues.

No, John Sargeant, it seems, is living the life. "I have reached the age when I don't have to worry about my career, that's sorted," he says. "When you're younger there's a big abyss there that you can fall into. If you take the wrong path your career can disappear.

"It's not so now. Now I don't wake up in the middle of the night and worry. At the back of my mind I think it doesn't really matter. So what do I now do? "Now I lark around. I do things I like doing. That's the good life for me. It's a fantastic opportunity to do things I want to do."

And what that means is messing about on boats. He is currently rushed of his feet because of his new project, *Barging Around Britain*, an eight-part series and accompanying book, in which he navigates eight historic canals around the country, from the Caledonian in Scotland to the Kennet and Avon Canal in the South West.

One gets the feeling it is a little bit of a labour of love.

"I love boats. Every summer I go sailing with my brother, so I was at home with this," he says.

"It was such fun to make the series. We filmed for two months altogether, over a period of three months last summer. And we didn't lose a single day to rain. It was such glorious weather.

"My favourite was the Caledonian. To do that in good weather, in that scenery, was incredible. We were on it for five days and it was wonderful.

"I was a bit worried about Scottish independence, though. I thought for a time we might have to call the series *Barging Around the Former UK*, which doesn't have quite the same ring to it."

You get the feeling that somehow he would have made it work, with a smile and a nudge and a chuckle. Not that he's one to use charm to get his own way, and he certainly didn't shirk his duties on deck. He joined in each voyage, sleeping on the barge, working the locks and meeting the locals. But his priority was always the camera – and having fun.

"I got on very well with the producer; we quickly realised there would be potential for funny things," he says.

"With the canals there's a chance to put jokes into something that could be very dry to make people come with you and share in it.

"It's about involving people in what you are doing, and bringing them in with you," he says. "Opening the door into yourself, as far as you are willing to let them." He adds: "There's a lot of emotion on screen – television is particularly good at that. Facts are easy – facts are Google. So I am keen on television to concentrate more on feelings and intuition, things you can get across quickly and so powerfully, so much more than just a line on the internet.

"But what you also need on television is a rhythm. It's better if you are saying something to have a joke or a twist in it. It's your job to provide something that makes people smile or think. You have to strike the right note and keep it.

"A lot of it is about being true on screen – it's not faked. You might have done something more than once but it's still real. I think that's just fun and if you have it, it works."

He particularly loves working with bystanders ("People are much better than they used to be when they see a TV camera now. They know what's going on and they play to the camera") and animals. One of his favourite parts of the series is when he has a heart-to-heart with a horse that has been towing the barge down part of the canal. "When else are you going to be allowed to talk to a horse on screen?" he asks.

"The whole series was unscripted. That was an amazing level of trust, a real honour for them to trust me with eight episodes with no script. But it was so much better that it was, because if they'd scripted 'and then John will talk to the horse, and give him a mint' it would have seemed really faked. As it was, it was true, and that's why it works.

"I can't do things I am being told to do. A little voice in me thinks, 'I'm not doing that, and I'm certainly not doing that!'" But again, thanks to the freedom of not worrying too much about his career anymore, there are lots of things that he is prepared to do now.

"At my age you probably perform better – you can be yourself more now, you are not looking in the mirror the whole time. I get on and do this the best I can – not as others would do it. So when I did a series on trains I didn't watch Portillo's series, I wanted to do it like me, not like him. That's when you start hitting runs, start scoring sixes, because it's just you."

But for all his devil-may-care attitude, he still clearly does care about what he does a great deal. He speaks passionately about his work on television, and suddenly his transition from an early life in comedy (when he joined the BBC as a journalist, he was referred to as Alan Bennett's sidekick thanks to an early role in *On the*

Margin) to a position at the top of the BBC tree, to a plum role in topical comedy shows plus series such as these, all begins to make sense. He is not a comedian, or a journalist, or a presenter: he is a broadcaster first and foremost, who loves having fun or “larking about” and making good television.

“I am working with Griff Rhys Jones on a museum thing now. We are of the same ilk, in terms of larking around. If someone tells us to dress up and do these silly characters, we don’t need to be told twice. But for me that’s normal, that’s where I’ve come from.”

Even his sojourn in the serious world of politics for the majority of his career turns out not to have been that serious, after all. “Politics really is a giant schoolyard. Behind the scenes cabinet ministers would be passing silly notes to each other, kicking each other under the table. So when they were having to be serious on camera, it was better for them if you could have a joke off screen, let them lark about, relieve the tension.”

The one thing he isn’t joking about now, however, is *Strictly*. He was a national favourite when he appeared on the show in 2008, a huge hit with the viewers but slated by the judges, eventually leaving by his own volition, in case he should happen to win. But this is the one subject on which he cannot be drawn. In his own words, it is just one joke too far. His projects now are rather less energetic, but that doesn’t mean he’s slowing down. In fact, he bristles when he thinks that I’m about to ask him that. He details a week of interviews, speaking engagements, flying hither and thither for *The One Show*, *A Good Read* on Radio 4, grandchildren’s birthday parties and typhoid injections to prepare him for flying to India to film yet another programme (trains this time).

In the face of such a diary I am a little tempted to ask how he does it, however bristly he gets. I’m half his age (he will turn 71 in April) and would be completely floored by such a week, so I can’t imagine how he manages. He says this has been a particularly busy week, thanks to *Bargain Round*, but it’s clear that he thrives on it. “And it might end tomorrow. These are all commissions, who knows if I’ll get any more? So I’m just making sure I’m having fun while I do.”