

TELEVISION

Selfie improvement

Rachel Cooke

The Culture Show; Imagine

BBC2; BBC1

Dear old Alan Yentob and I have had our differences over the years; I've often teased him in this column (and he has sometimes berated me for it). But the sound you can hear now – yeeerk! – is the loud screech of my critical brakes as I perform a rapid three-point turn right here at my desk. Yentob recently gave us two biographical films – the first an episode of *The Culture Show* (19 May, 10pm) about Lynn Barber, the newspaper interviewer extraordinaire; the second an *Imagine* documentary about the great Philip Roth (20 May, 10.35pm) – and both were insightful, funny and generally quite delightful. Crikey. What's going on? I'm not sure. But I like it and in this column I'll endeavour to keep jokes about Yentob's salary, pension and tendency to gild his profiles with rather too many selfies to an absolute minimum.

Barber is a great subject for a film, being both mischievous and startlingly artless (unlike many of her interviewees, she responds to questions with straight answers). Yentob made a show of failing to control her – she kept rushing out of the house to smoke – but she was ready and willing to tell him the secret of her success, which is that she is embarrassment-proof (a legacy of her rather odd parents) and “quite cosy” with people shouting at her (ditto).

She's as shallow as a puddle, too. When Yentob asked her if she didn't sometimes fancy interviewing a “real” person – a neuroscientist, say – she could barely contain her horror. “On *Desert Island Discs*, I always avoid the neuroscientists,” she said. What she wants in an interviewee is a veneer of glamour and the occasional touch of scandal. “Don't *you* like reading about scandal?” she asked Yentob, as they stood in the Tasiemka cuttings archive in Golders



Back pages: Lynn Barber with Alan Yentob in *The Culture Show*

Green, surrounded by yellowing copies of the *News of the World*. Only when recalling the appalled reaction to her interview with Jimmy Savile, in which she asked him if he liked little girls, did her grin momentarily disappear. “Well, at least I asked,” she said.

Yentob's Roth film is in two hour-long parts, which perhaps sounds excessive. Then you start watching and . . . Wow. What a coup to get him talking so openly! As I took in his wonderful face, gaunt now but full of humour, a certain wryness always playing at the corners of his mouth, my chest constricted with envy. Yentob kicked off by reading aloud from *Portnoy's Complaint*, Roth's notorious third novel, a book that the viewer gathered – who knows why? – once had quite an effect on him. “*My wang was all I really had that I could call my own*,” Yentob intoned, sombrely. “I'm a distinguished writer of 80,” said Roth. “I'm not going to let you dredge up my past.”

Yentob pressed on. The word “dick” was uttered, then the word “f***ing”. “What do you want me to say?” asked Roth,

suppressing a smile. “Do you want me to apologise to the world?” Later on, Yentob read aloud something else and Roth chortled and said: “That's very good. Who wrote that?” I love a man who laughs at his own jokes – and if those jokes are 45 years old and the man in question is in his eighties, so much the better.

Nothing seemed to be off limits. Roth spoke of his father, Herman, and his first marriage (he emerged from it “crippled and bewildered” and in need of psychoanalysis). He spoke, too, of his feelings about Israel, which he used to visit often (bafflement predominated). But I liked it best when he talked about writing. His routine in rural Connecticut – now abandoned, since he insists he won't write another novel – was quiet by necessity, he insisted, for writers need to keep the “connections” alive even when they take a break for supper and the “hubbub” of the city too easily drowns them out, making the return to one's desk so much less likely to be fruitful. “Shame isn't for writers,” he said. “You have to be shameless.”

While we're on the subject of shamelessness, there were moments when I wished Yentob had taken a leaf out of Barber's book and asked the obvious question rather than the one that made him sound most well read. But in the end, I had to admit that his reverence for Roth had produced something pretty memorable. There's more than one way to bag a good interview. Some demand talons and Teflon and some just require you to feel the love. ●

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