

Interview: Simon Amstell

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Actor and comedian Simon Amstell opens up to Eva Mackevic about his troubled past, what drives his comedy, and his new film, *Benjamin*

He's best known for his controversial stint as the host of *Never Mind the Buzzcocks* between 2006–2008, as well as for his introspective, hilariously neurotic stand-up shows and his work on such projects as the comedy series, *Grandma's House* and the bonkers veganism mockumentary, *Carnage*. Now 39, Simon Amstell returns with his second feature film, *Benjamin*, a journey deep into his formerly troubled, 20-

something psyche.

I wasn't sure which Simon to expect when I met him at a busy Soho café on a crisp winter morning: the mocking *Buzzcocks* host or the fragile ego-ed comedian who once professed that instead of easing it, his cat had become a mascot for his loneliness.



I found him sitting in a secluded corner of the room, his lanky frame hunched over the tiny table. Oddly, he seemed restless and giggly, as if he was nervous to talk to me. "Look! I'm wearing long johns!" he exclaimed, frantically pulling up his socks, when I mentioned the weather. We were off to a strange start.

"I thought I had to be funny in every situation or I was worthless"

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Simon's new film, *Benjamin*, tells the story of a rising young filmmaker (played exquisitely by Northern Irish actor, Colin Morgan), who's struggling with self-doubt and severe social anxiety brought on by the impending release of his second film, and a burgeoning romance with the dreamy French musician, Noah.

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"I looked at the relationships and friendships I'd been in, and slowly found that it was a film about someone who's terrified of intimacy, but eventually lets himself be vulnerable enough to love and be loved," he tells me in that characteristically high-pitched tone, avoiding direct eye-contact.

It's hard not to draw analogies between Benjamin and Amstell who, like the character, is in the process of releasing his second film and frequently pokes fun at his own social ineptness and insecurities in his stand-up routines.

"It is autobiographical but not in terms of the exact events that happened in the film. I'd felt all the things that the character feels but not in the locations or with the characters that he feels them. I think the film is *emotionally* true," he explains.

The comedian claims that he struggled with opening up and letting himself be vulnerable throughout his twenties, using humour as a defence mechanism. Perhaps it's no coincidence that it was around that time that Simon started hosting *Never Mind the Buzzcocks*, gaining notoriety for his scathing wit and ruthless treatment of guests, which resulted in several walk-offs, including the infamous Preston episode.



Phérix Brossard and Colin Morgan in *Benjamin*

"I thought that I had to be funny in every situation or I was worthless. It was a panic button that I pressed when I didn't know what else to do.

I was incredibly defensive. I felt I wasn't enough. *It can't be that this beautiful boy wants to kiss you. You have to show him something first. You have to put on a bit of a performance before they'll want to.* I think I learned that I've just been trying very hard to get people's attention."

"I was concerned about the lack of drama—he didn't seem to need to be rescued and he didn't want to fix me either"

I wonder aloud whether that problem is typical of a whole generation of young people who can no longer connect with each other organically, due to heavy reliance on social media and dating apps. Simon pauses, formulating his thoughts before unexpectedly bursting into laughter: "Everything you're saying is so much better than what I'm saying, you should just probably write *that* down.

But it's true," he gets serious. "All young people are writer-performers. Everyone's presenting a version of themselves in a way that's incredibly disconnecting. Apps just exaggerate problems that have always been there with dating. If your head is in your phone it's probably because you're addicted. And if you're addicted to something, you're out of the alignment with what your body needs. I think you might do better romantically by just being in the world with a feeling of curiosity and joy rather than a feeling of lack which comes from not being accepted or chosen enough."



Directing on the set of *Benjamin*

Luckily for Simon, he no longer has to grapple with these feelings. He's been in a committed relationship for seven years, which, as he admits, was an odd feeling to begin with.

I ask what's kept them together for all these years. Simon explains that it all comes down to communication. "If one of us is thinking something that might cause some tension in the relationship, we bring it up and then the tension dies, and that seems to be the key," he smiles.

He tells me about a time in France that assured him that he really was happy with his boyfriend.

"It was a year or two into the relationship. I fell asleep next to him and dreamt that I was in a sex dungeon being seduced by this very wet young man. I panicked in the dream, thinking that I'd betrayed the best relationship I'd ever been in. But then I woke up and thought, *What if that's who I really am? You can't argue with your unconscious, maybe I'm an animal who wants to be in this dungeon with this guy all the time and everything else is a social construct?*

But then, I went to my boyfriend's mum's birthday dinner, where his brother gave a speech about how much he loves his parents—he said this totally sincerely, it was so alien to me—in particular, how accepting they've been no matter who their children turned out to be. I started crying in that moment and turned to my boyfriend and said, "This is better than a sex dungeon."

As we talked over coffee, I discovered several sides of Simon Amstell: the jittery conversationalist who nervously mimics your body language; the mature screenwriter who has learned to be comfortable in his own skin and left attention seeking behind; a settled man who has found solace in the everyday routine of life with his partner... and Simon the fantasy sex dungeon enthusiast. Of course.

***Benjamin* is out in cinemas across the UK and on digital on March 15**

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