

COMEDY

'Theresa May eluded me for years'

Ahead of her Edinburgh Fringe debut, impressionist *Jan Ravens* reveals how she finally cracked the Prime Minister

Theresa May is a "bloody difficult woman" in more ways than one. She eluded me for years! Some impressions come easily and I find I can automatically get someone. It helps if there's something about the voice or character that just leaps out at me. As with the BBC's international correspondent Lyse Doucet, for example, who has such an amazingly distinctive voice. When I do her on Radio 4's *Dead Ringers*, I have to notate every vowel sound in the script so I can really do her justice. I love that she has never tried to change her accent. It's so important to keep voices in broadcasting diverse and colourful.

Fiona Bruce was one that came to me immediately. I couldn't believe that a newsreader seemed to be looking at the camera with such a sizzling sexuality. That was the persona I latched on to at once. She's not like that in real life at all. But when that camera rolls...

With the Prime Minister, though, it took me a while to get a handle on her voice. I first started doing her on *Dead Ringers* when she was Home Secretary. It was difficult, first because she kept a low profile and rarely actually said anything and secondly because when she did say something, she spoke almost exclusively in meaningless clichés. We'd have her saying something like: "Going forward, I'll be circling back, so if I could just be perfectly clear..."

Then, last July, she accidentally

became Prime Minister. I suspect it was as much of a surprise to her as it was to everyone else. It was when I watched her outside Number 10, giving her first speech as the country's premier, that I finally got her - partly by studying her mouth. Often if you get the mouth right, you get the voice. Anne Robinson has a slightly twisty mouth and it really alters the way she speaks. The Queen has a sort of grumpy mouth and that affects the way she talks.

May's mouth is very tense and it gives her voice that tremulous quality which emphasises the fact she's not an easy-going or a relaxed person. She doesn't appear to be comfortable in her own skin and she's certainly not very good at thinking on her feet. That's probably why she has all these pre-prepared mantras - even she got sick of endlessly parroting "strong and stable".

I think that very tense mouth and warbly voice give the impression she's embarrassed by what she's saying, as though she's not convinced by the script she's been given. Interestingly, her voice and mouth were most relaxed and she seemed most sincere in the very moving speech she gave after the Manchester Arena bombing. You could tell that she genuinely had fellow feeling for those affected by it.

People recognise when something doesn't come from the heart. Does May's recent revelation that she "shed a tear" over the election exit poll fall into that category? Well, that emergence of hitherto unsuspected emotional depths coincides with the appointment of a new press adviser. Just saying... When I do her now, the



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character is really that of a woman on the run, who doesn't know what to do next and who doesn't have a long-term view that she can cling to. She doesn't have a natural empathy with people on a one-to-one basis.

People sometimes ask me if I think my impression is cruel. Believe it or not, I do actually feel quite a lot of empathy for her. Even though she's having a difficult time, her sense of duty compels her to try to stick it out. And she's brave. When David Cameron lost the vote on the referendum, you couldn't see him for dust, but she

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has stayed in post. I can't help but admire that.

I can't imagine what it must feel like to wake up in the morning knowing you're going to have to listen to 10 minutes of Donald Trump's insane ramblings on the telephone and then stand in the House of Commons trying to prove

that you do have a sense of humour by delivering some of the lamest "spontaneous quips" ever written.

I point out to people that an impression is a cartoon, a caricature. Satire has to be sharp, but I do try not to be cruel. Politics is in such an awful state at present, full of hatred and bile, and there is already far too much witless abuse around. Last week Diane Abbott revealed the ghastly racist and misogynistic insults hurled at her and I find that deeply disturbing and worrying.

My impression of Diane might not be flattering but it's certainly