

Supporting roles

Green Wing star Stephen Mangan discusses fame, fatherhood and fitness with Celia Dodd

When you meet Stephen Mangan you can't help but think that he'll resemble, at least in part, his most famous character: the arrogant, public-school-boy anaesthetist Guy Secretan from the hospital comedy series *Green Wing*.

Secretan is a monstrous egotist, a misogynist, a bully. But Mangan is none of these things. He's charming, self-controlled, thoughtful — and, frankly, it's a bit of a let down that he doesn't make at least one tasteless joke or cruel comment in all the time I'm with him. But then Guy Secretan is also funny ("Monogamy? It's a sort of nice, dark wood, isn't it?" he quips in *Green Wing*). And so, in a quiet way, is Mangan.

It may be that Mangan, 36, is especially well-disposed at the moment because he's in the first flush of new fatherhood and taking three months off to spend time with his one-month-old baby, Harry. While he is as dewy-eyed as the best of them, there is always a "but . . .", a thoughtful adjunct to his statements, an inner voice urging moderation in case he comes across as overdramatic or too sorted.

For example, when talking about fatherhood, he gushes: "Harry is mesmerising; it's turned me inside out, it really has. You half expect that, the wonderment and adoration . . ." And then his thoughtfulness kicks in: ". . . but no one tells you the other side of having a kid, about the fear and worry for them. I see how easy it would be to wrap your children in cotton wool. I think there has got to be an element of adventure. I think it can be crippling for children, that constant adult refrain: 'Be careful, be careful.'" And then he displays that sense of humour: "Of course, the morning after Harry was born, I ran out into the hospital corridor shouting, 'Help! He's choking!' and the nurse said, 'He's fine, Mr Mangan, go back and put some trousers on.'"

It's not surprising that there's a thoughtful, philosophical edge to Mangan's take on life. He might be a funny man but his life has been marred by a double tragedy. The first was the death of his mother from bowel cancer at the age of 45, when 22-year-old Mangan had just graduated from Cambridge — he had to take six months out to nurse her. Then, two years ago, his father died, also from cancer.

He abandoned a legal career for acting

On the morning we meet, Mangan is taking turns with his wife, the actress Louise Delamere (*Doc Martin, No Angels*), to look after Harry between auditions in Soho. He is tall, affable and wears the new dad's uniform of schoolboy jersey adorned with dribble. The twin tragedies seem to have had little effect: in fact, he retains an almost bloody-minded optimism about life. This, he says, is because he comes from a big Irish family that has given him a grounding in the realities of life. Being in demand as an actor — he's just finished filming a new BBC Two comedy series called *Never Better* about a recovering alcoholic and he's made a US mockumentary about a carbon neutral/organic/vegetarian expedition to the North Pole — may also have something to do with his serenity.



Funny, peculiar: Mangan, top, in *Green Wing* and, bottom, with his wife Louise Delamere

He may have found success as an actor but his career path could have been quite different. He studied law at Cambridge and a legal career loomed. But he was also acting in student productions — and loving it. Then his mother became ill. He remembers: "My mother's diagnosis was a massive shock. You go into a different world — the world of the unwell. And it's heartbreaking. Mum didn't want to talk about her illness, so it was good to be able to do things for her — take her to Bart's every day, get the wheelchair, bring her home, get her into bed and make her some food. And just be around . . ." His thoughtful side emerges. "After she died, I remember having days of meltdown yet at other times feeling quite elated and thinking what a bad person I must be to be feeling good when my mum had just died. I suppose your emotions are all over the place. Grief is a very random process."

His mother's illness was a catalyst; he abandoned plans for a legal career and decided he had to do what he really loved. Weeks after she died, Mangan auditioned for Rada. Initially, Mangan wanted to work in straight theatre and, after graduating from Rada, he spent seven

years playing classical parts in rep until he was picked out as the perfect Adrian Mole in the 2001 BBC adaptation of *The Cappuccino Years*. This led to small parts in the TV comedy shows *I'm Alan Partridge* and *Nathan Barley*, and the Brit film comedy *Confetti*, before achieving misogynistic infamy in *Green Wing*.

He says he relishes the risky life

He admits that he must also be pretty secure to have exposed the "dark, arrogant, egocentric, idiotic sides of myself" as Guy Secretan. "It's the equivalent of running down the street with no clothes on," he says. But then taking risks is par for the course for any actor, and he says he relishes the uncertainty of not knowing where January's mortgage payment is coming from.

In this respect his father's influence is clear; Mangan senior was a builder who left school at 14: "He was a great mixture of being carefree and being reckless but making sure that he and everyone else was looked after. I hope I've inherited that combination."

After his father's death two years ago, he considered therapy but found other ways of coping with grief. Namely acting which allows him to express his emotions, but also his background: "I'm not religious but my parents were both Irish and very emotional and I've retained enough of that, despite going to boarding school at 13, where classically your emotions are repressed." He says: "I like a good cry every now and again. I'm no expert but I think that as long as you're not bottling everything up it's OK." Then he adds with characteristic thoughtfulness: "At least I feel like I'm dealing with stuff, but you can always second guess yourself, can't you? There's a voice saying: Are you really dealing with stuff or are you massively in denial?"

Losing both parents has inevitably made him anxious about his own health. "I'm terrified of dying myself but death and illness are not a mystery to me. I don't live that healthily; I'm all or nothing — I'll run 20 miles and then drink eight pints." He insists that he's not a sporty person but he does love running — and he's taken part in two triathlons and two marathons. "It's a bit like a meditation," he says. "In the period of grieving after my dad died, running definitely helped."

Surprisingly, for an actor who has given so much joy through his comic roles, Mangan says doing comedy can make him cross. And, at last, he sounds just like Guy from *Green Wing* when he recalls being in *Noises Off* in the West End six years ago: "The audience would howl with laughter but there was something very angry-making about doing the play. Some nights you'd hear the whole house erupt and part of you would be going yes, that's right, laugh, I'm killing myself up here, you have a good time." He considers for a moment. "It's total irrational," he says, thoughtfully.

The Green Wing Definitive Edition 8-Disc DVD box set is out now.

