

Simon Amstell

'Mine's an ayahuasca'

"I used to be like an open wound, hoping the audience's laughter would heal me," says Simon Amstell, giggling incongruously. "Now I do it for the joy. That's better, isn't it? That I'm just there because it might be a nice night out for everyone?" If it's strange hearing the famously awkward, neurotic comic talking about 'nice nights out', it gets even stranger when he starts detailing the reason for his recent transformation. "I went to Peru and drank [hallucinogenic plant drink] ayahuasca and it really got to the root of my depression. It took me to what felt like the moment where my entire absurd personality began. Suddenly I understood my shyness, my need to be funny and to control situations. Once I saw all that I was freed."

Prior to the experience, the 37-year-old had spent more than two years in therapy trying to get on top of hang-ups that made for exquisitely raw, honest stand-up but a very sad clown. One of the biggest of these was a reluctance to fully accept he was gay. "I felt more comfortable talking about boyfriends or being dumped than the actual thing of being a young gay person who feels confused and has to go on some sort of journey to discover who he is."

In his new show *What Is This?* and accompanying book *Help*, he speaks about "being terrified of who I actually was and of having to tell everyone and tell myself." He wasn't the only one who struggled to deal with his sexuality; the response of certain family members suggests they too could have benefited from a draught of mind-opening ayahuasca. "I don't hold a grudge against them now. They just came from a time where suggesting electro-shock therapy and giving me a book about safe sex for



gay men were considered generous gifts. They've since become more evolved."

It was a strange experience writing the book, he says: "The question 'so what?' kept coming up. If something is funny, it's valid because it's provided laughter in the world but I had to get comfortable with the idea of something just being emotionally true and that being enough in itself." But, he adds hastily, "Most of the book is funny."

One might imagine Amstell's change in outlook could send his work in a less introspective direction. Five years after *Grandma's House*, his bittersweet BBC2 sitcom based on his Jewish North London family life, he returned earlier this year with *Carnage*, a brilliant and persuasive BBC mockumentary about veganism, set in a utopian future where meat-eating is a horror of the past. But if his new film *Benjamin* is anything to go on, perhaps Amstell's favourite subject will always be himself. "I think everything I'll ever end up doing will be a bit autobiographical because I only really trust what I've experienced. If it happened to me and is true to me I feel it might connect with someone else." *Nione Meakin*

Brighton Dome, 19th November