

And for my next tic ...

There's no telling what will come out of Jess Thom's mouth on stage. That's the joy of having Tourette's, she tells **Jo Caird**



Jess Thom had a lousy night out three years ago. It had nothing to do with the entertainment - the comedian Mark Thomas - and everything to do with the audience and the venue's staff. Thom has Tourette's Syndrome and some of the other customers complained about the noise she was making. The word "biscuit" featured prominently, as Thom finds herself uttering it up to 16,000 times a day.

So although Thom had told staff she would be coming and Thomas had publicly welcomed her at the start of the show, in the interval she was asked to move to somewhere where no one would be able to hear her.

"I agreed to go because I felt humiliated," she says. "But when I got into the sound booth I became very upset because it didn't just speak about the theatre, it spoke about everything. It spoke about the fact that I didn't have the right to experience things in the same way as other people."

It got her thinking: "Where's the one seat in the house where I'm not going to be asked to leave?"

And that's how she ended up on stage. Next month she hopes to wow the Edinburgh festival with a show called *Backstage in Biscuit Land*, its title inspired by her most prominent vocal tic.

"Every show will be genuinely different," Thom promises. "I'm neurologically incapable of staying on script."

Judging by our conversation, this is not an idle threat. "Bryan Adams is allergic to his own sheep!" interrupts her response to a question about the crowdfunding campaign that's enabling her to

'I am neurologically incapable of staying on script. Bryan Adams is allergic to his own sheep' ... Jess Thom. Below, as Touretteshero

take her show to the Fringe, for example. And "Geraniums are illegal in certain parts of East Anglia!" comes out midway through a story about a meeting with ventriloquist Nina Conti and her puppet Monkey.

Thom was diagnosed with Tourette's in her early 20s, but has experienced involuntary vocal and physical tics since she was a child. For clarity's sake, and with her agreement, I've simplified most of her quotes, but here she is ticing about tics themselves.

"I'm aware I've ticced straight after I've done it *biscuit* but I don't *biscuit* think about biscuits nearly as much *biscuit* as I talk about them. *Cats*. So they're not thoughts but neither are they nonsense. They collide *hello* strange ideas together *biscuit*, things that would never normally sit together *cat* like, *biscuit* like *biscuit* like Bernard Manning and a, *biscuit*, stripping aardvark. *Biscuit*. They're not things that would probably come up together very frequently. *Biscuit*. A bottle of Marmite and a piña colada. *Biscuit*. *Biscuit*. A massage by Harold Pinter with a moose's head on. *Cats*. *Aladdin*. *Biscuit*.

So yeah, they put a lot of strange ideas together. *Biscuit*. Who knows? *Cats*."

By day, Thom works as a project coordinator at a charity in south London, but for the last four years she has had a second identity as Touretteshero, spreading the word about the playful and creative side of this often misunderstood neurological condition. As well as chronicling almost 6,000 of her tics at touretteshero.com, she blogs

prolifically about life with Tourette's; writing, she says, has helped her to come to terms with the syndrome. In 2012 excerpts from the blog were turned into a book, *Welcome to Biscuit Land*.

Her live show combines storytelling, standup and puppetry, and every performance will be "relaxed", meaning it will be accessible to audiences who can't tolerate the conventions of traditional theatregoing. It also features a set written by ticcing - surely a first even for Edinburgh.

"I ticced 100 items and we've gone with the 50 most viable," says Thom. "That includes a babygrow for Les Dennis, four toilet rolls and some ducks dressed up as pterodactyls."

In normal conversation Thom ignores her tics - treating them as you would a sneeze or a yawn, and continuing with her point once the ticcing has stopped - but in Edinburgh she will be giving them freer rein.

"My tics could quite happily ramble off about something for ages, and I think it's important that there's lots of room for that real spontaneous, chaotic stuff," she says. She wrote the show with Jess Mabel Jones, who also performs. Part of Jones's role is to keep this "one-woman show for two people" on track so that Thom is "able to say the things that I want to say".

"If there's a through narrative to the piece," she explains, "it's about how I've grown more confident in dealing with my tics - and other people's reactions to them."



i *Backstage in Biscuit Land* is at the Pleasance Above, Edinburgh, 1-16 August. Box office: 020-7609 1800; more info: pleasance.co.uk