

'The Office' romance

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Insiders swoon over this hip, Brit sitcom

By MICHAEL GILTZ

JUST as American networks struggle to find a new comedy hit, the British deliver "The Office," which may be the most-respected sitcom in a generation.

A mock documentary about life in a miserable little branch office dealing in paper products, "The Office" has been called "hilarious" by Entertainment Weekly, given four stars by USA Today, and raved about in TV Guide.

David Letterman just had co-creator and star Ricky Gervais on his show to help launch the second season (beginning Sunday at 9 on BBC America) and urged viewers to rent or buy season one on DVD and catch the new episodes, calling them "just great."

Even by the hype-filled standards of the UK — where every new band is dubbed "the new Beatles" and every solid TV show hailed as "brilliant" — "The Office" has been deluged with almost-overwhelming praise.



Ricky Gervais plays the boss who wants everyone to like him in the cult comedy hit "The Office."

Like an addict, you require ever greater praise, says Ricky Gervais. "If they say, it's the best sitcom on TV, you think, well, why not drama as well?"

Polls have named it one of the best shows of all time and NBC has bought the idea behind the show to see if they can make an American version.

But in an interview in London, the 41-year-old Gervais says you get used to the adulation and — like an addict — require ever greater praise to get any

sort of thrill. "It's never enough," he laughs. "If they say, it's the best sitcom on TV, you think, well, why not drama as well?"

"If they say it's the best show in the last 50 years, you think, well what was on 51 years ago that was better? If they say it's the best TV that's ever been

made, you think well why not say 'Or ever will be made?'"

"The Office" stars Gervais as David Brent, often described as the boss from hell. Actually, Brent is an ideal boss for shirkers (Letterman pointed out laughingly that virtually no work gets done on "The Office").

If you laugh at his pathetic jokes and have a beer with him after work, Brent will be your friend for life.

Anyone who's had an insufferable boss, a crush on a co-worker, or simply hated their job will find the show hilariously accurate.

Comparisons to "The

Larry Sanders Show" and "This is Spinal Tap" (which Gervais happily quotes at length) are fitting, though as a massive fan of "The Simpsons," Gervais was especially thrilled when Matt Groening sang its praises.

Gervais comes from working class roots, though he got a scholarship to college and studied philosophy. Then he scored a record deal, forcing him to tell his mother he was dropping out to become a pop star.

"Pop star is just another word for heroin addict," she retorted.

Unfortunately, Gervais never got within a mile of glamorous temptations like drugs before his deal soured. He ended up working in an anonymous office for seven years, all the while casually riffing on his David Brent character to amuse co-workers.

Season two received even better reviews (if possible) in the UK and under immense pressure Gervais and co-creator Stephen Merchant (they both co-wrote and co-directed every episode) agreed to film two more episodes, which air in the UK later this year. (One of them is apparently built around a holiday office party.)

Then, Gervais swears, no more "Office."

He's done standup and they've been offered the chance to do almost anything they can think of.

So unlike "Friends" and "Frasier," this is one classic sitcom that will quit while it's ahead.