

Hogmanay TV highlight – Rikki Fulton

He is remembered as one of Scotland's funniest comedy icons, whose annual Hogmanay sketches had Scots audiences laughing into the new year.

But the late Rikki Fulton could have been a Hollywood star instead, according to one of his closest friends, fellow comic actor Tony Roper.

Fulton, who died in 2004, is best remembered for his Scotch and Wry sketch show, which ran on New Year's Eve from 1978 until 1992, drawing up to two million viewers in Scotland.

But he also performed in films, including the 1983 thriller Gorky Park, alongside William Hurt and Lee Marvin.

Fulton was chosen to play KGB Major Pribluda because of his "evil eyes", but Glasgow cinema audiences couldn't take their favourite comic seriously on screen.

Roper, 83, who appeared alongside Fulton in Scotch and Wry, said that despite the reaction in his native city, Fulton could easily have been a Hollywood star playing villains.

Speaking to interviewer George Mair ahead of a BBC Scotland documentary, Rikki, to be shown on Hogmanay [TUES DEC 31], Roper said Fulton had the rare ability to be brilliantly funny or deadly serious and display raw emotions for the cameras.

And he compared Fulton with the great American Oscar winning

actor Walter Matthau.

He said: "Rikki was intrinsically funny, it didn't matter what he was saying. He was a master of mime, his timing, his looks around and his pauses... the way he built on a laugh.

"But he was an actor before he became a comic. With top Hollywood actors, you can see everything they are thinking without them really doing anything and he had that ability. It was quite brilliant.

"I've no doubt he could have been a very good (straight) actor if he hadn't done comedy.

"He talked about a director who cast him in Gorky Park because he had the most evil eyes, and he did.

"In my opinion, if he was going to be a (Hollywood) star he would have been the baddie. He had the look and everything that would go with someone who was the baddie in films.

"It would be a bit like Walter Matthau. He started off as the baddie in every film he did and then went into light comedy and he was superb.

"To me, Rikki had the same ability as Walter Matthau to convince you he was one evil son of a bitch but in another film a genial lovable guy, like in The Odd Couple.

"Rikki had that kind of talent and ability in spades. You didn't see much of the baddie but he did have it.

"A lot of people can act but very few have the comedic genius that Rikki had so I thought that was always going to come out.

"He got within the very soul of Scottish audiences and (after that) people can't take you as a straight actor any longer.

"I think that's what happened with Rikki, he was taken up by his own gift, which was sublime."

Rikki celebrates the life and legacy of Scotland's "King of Hogmanay", marking a century since his birth in the East End of Glasgow and 20 years since he died.

His razor-sharp wit and iconic characters such as Supercop, the Reverend I. M. Jolly and Francie and Josie – the comedy duo he formed with Jack Milroy – captured the hearts of the nation.

The programme tells of Fulton's upbringing in Glasgow and how he fell in love with the theatre as a child.

It also tells how in 1941, at the age of just 17, he joined the Royal Navy and went to war. He was serving on board HMS Ibis the following year when the ship was torpedoed in the Mediterranean, killing two thirds of those on board.

Fulton spent several hours in the water before he was rescued.

Roper, who wrote Fulton's life story in the play "Rikki and Me", said: "Rikki was in the sea quite a while before he was picked up, and a lot of his close friends died in the sea around him.

"Both wars did an awful lot to people, and they tried to hide it. It made them different people when they came out and Rikki may have been one of those unfortunates, who suffered very badly.

"The enormity of being at sea, cold and that going on for hours, I wondered how he came through that.

"Performing is an escape for many actors and Rikki would not have been alone there.

"Acting allows you to take a holiday away from yourself and become somebody else. The ability to make somebody laugh is a very potent drug and I think that played uppermost in his life."

Fulton and Milroy became megastars in Scotland in the 1960s.

Roper said: "Francie and Josie were Scotland's Laurel and Hardy. They were absolutely huge, and they live on for people like myself."

Rikki features contributions from his Scotch and Wry co-stars Roper Juliet Cadzow and Claire Nielson, along with fellow Scots actors including Alex Norton, Gavin Mitchell and Sanjeev Kohli.

* Rikki is on BBC One Scotland Tuesday 31 December, 10pm.



Rikki Fulton as the Rev IM Jolly, Photo courtesy of BBC Scotland



Rikki Fulton as Supercop, Photo courtesy BBC Scotland
Rikki Fulton's own church minister has said it was "unnerving" to have Reverend I. M. Jolly in his congregation.

Fulton is best remembered for his miserable minister character, ironically named Jolly.

His "Last Call" monologues were a send-up of Late Call, a late-night TV sermon of the time.

Fulton, who had been a confirmed atheist, parodied ministers who he said were often "less than joyful".

He turned to religion later in his life after suffering from illness, and attended New Kilpatrick Church in Bearsden, where Rev Alistair Symington was minister.

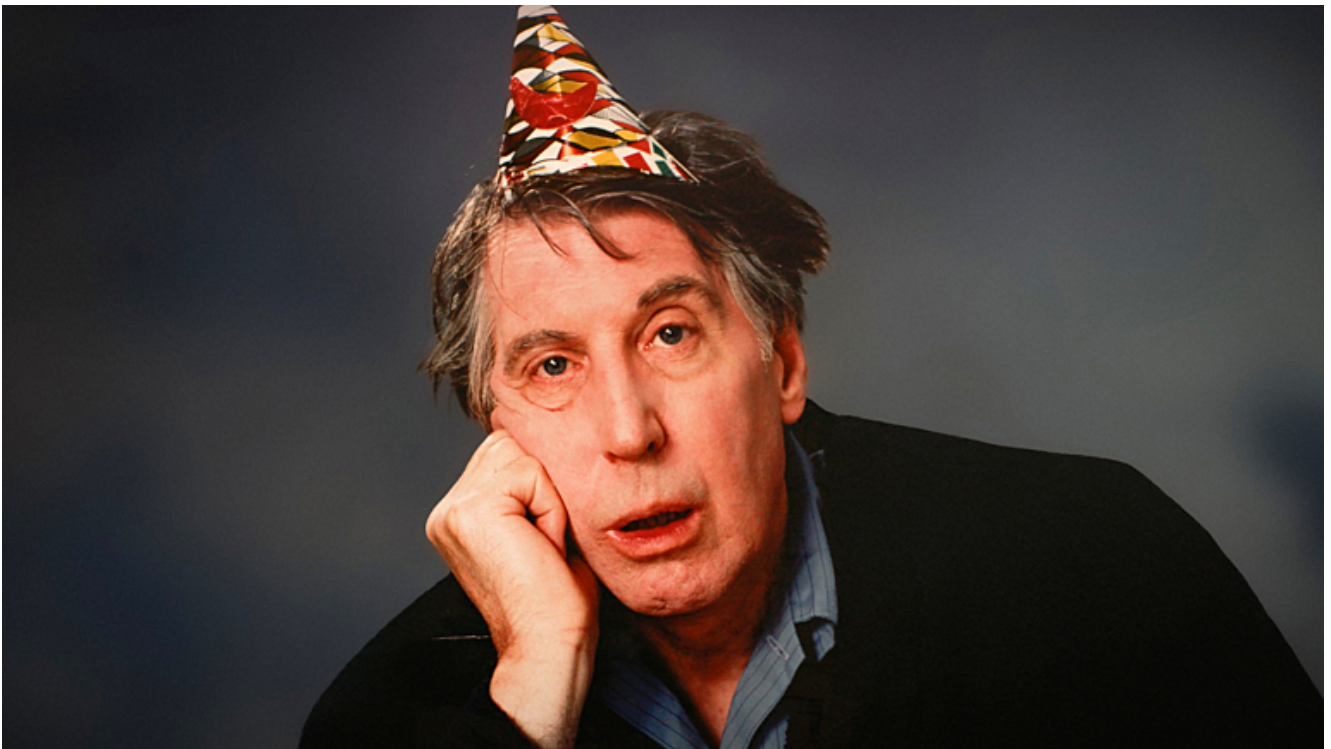
Speaking on BBC Scotland documentary, Rikki, to be shown on Hogmanay [TUES DEC 31] Rev Symington says: "It was in the

church the first time I met him.

"I saw him sat in the pew and of course I saw I. M. Jolly sat there. It's slightly unnerving.

"It was the beginning of this great sustained friendship we had. We talked about all sorts of things to do with faith, to do with life, to do with family and to do with dogs."

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Rikki Fulton, Photo courtesy of BBC Comedy