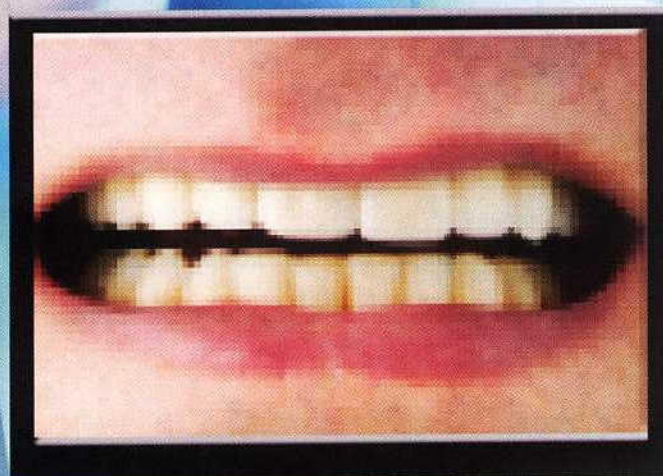
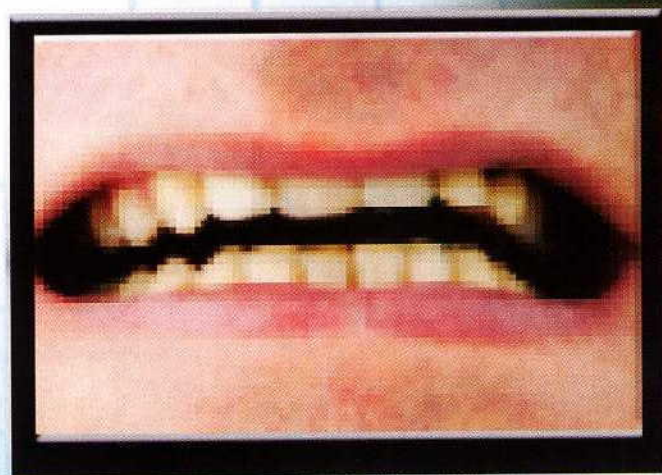


IN WITH THE GRIN CROWD



Where do savvy Americans go to get their smiles sorted? Incredibly, to a British dentist who promises “perfected imperfection”.

Jonathan Margolis braces himself for 12 hours of heavy-duty dentistry. Illustration by Richard Rockwood.

Smiling has never been a laughing matter for me. I was blessed with the world’s silliest teeth. Too small, like undeveloped peas in a dud pea pod, they gave me what some kindly described as a boyish smile, others as an imbecilic, gap-toothed gurn.

So from an early age, I unconsciously developed the art of toothless smiling. As a consequence, in decades of formal pictures

at family celebrations I appear not as the unfortunate hillbilly cousin, which is how I would have looked if I opened my mouth, but as the owner of a smug and annoying sealed-mouth smirk, the kind of beatific idiot beam that makes hairy men in nasty pubs want to punch you.

I was pretty much resigned to this unfortunate smile business until Tom Davies, the cult bespoke spectacle maker

who gave me a glasses makeover (which I reported on here a couple of years ago), suggested that, since I was doing more television work these days, I might do well to consult Tim Bradstock-Smith, a cosmetic dentist he had met.

Tim, he explained, is the most fashionable cosmetic dentist in London. Even dentally-wised-up Americans are actually coming to Britain these days to say

“Aaah” in his and his partners’ deluxe West End dentist’s chairs.

Now I know enough about dentistry to appreciate that this is a story. Is not Britain the home of the world’s worst dentistry? Did not the dentist in *The Simpsons* put the frighteners on his unflossed clients by showing them *The Big Book of British Smiles*? Sure, but that was then, Tom said. Now, apparently, Americans have fallen

out of love with the all-white Hollywood tombstone smile and appreciate for the first time the immutable rule whereby the stupidity of a US game show host is in direct proportion to the whiteness of his teeth. Instead, they are in increasing numbers seeking what they call “the European look” and even (for the more daring) coming to London specifically to acquire British teeth – what Tim Bradstock-Smith calls “perfected imperfection”.

I called in on Tim Bradstock-Smith to ask what kind of a Brit he calls himself. Doesn't he realise that we Englishmen no longer have anything unique to offer the world beyond our ironic humour and bad teeth? By the by, I asked if there was



At first, I wondered how Tim could charge so much. By the end, I wondered how he could do it at the price.

anything he could do for a 49-year-old man with really, really silly teeth.

Tim's surgery – last year's Private Dentistry Practice of the Year, no less – is smart. Ridiculously smart. It is the first dentist's I have ever attended which retains a PR company and whose associates, David Tharme Jones and Doris Huang, are not only young, accomplished and expensive, but also look like TV stars.

Tim turned out to be a handsome, quiet, intense chap, with gelled hair and a relentlessly steady stare that flicked unnervingly between my eyes and my mouth. My teeth, he pronounced between long gaps in which he said nothing but was clearly thinking hard, presented “a challenge”. The eyes

now focused full time on my teeth, the digital camera came out and he photographed my mouth in its various stages of gurning, transferring the images to a screen where, on the spot, he designed me a new smile.

Concentrating deeply as he manipulated the me on the screen into a new, grown-up me, he explained the challenge. My lower teeth, he said, were fine. The problem was my uppers, a jumble of my own battered, pointy natural teeth and miscellaneous crowns and bridges, some dating back 30 years. The result was not merely multicoloured and several millimetres too short for my mouth, but was also set at an alarming slope. Yet this

strange gradient, while accounting just as much as the too-short teeth for my weird smile, was also part of my personality. What Tim was striving to do, then, was to keep the essence of the trademark slope at the same time as giving me beautiful new teeth of the correct length.

As he sketched with the mouse, stood back, tutted and resketched until he liked what he saw, Tim explained how as a boy, he used to paint model soldiers right down to the tiniest detail. I found this enormously impressive, suggestive as it was of the kind of technical obsessiveness I am keen to see in a man about to rebuild part of my face – combined with artistic talent.

His pursuit of what is natural-looking rather than “Hollywood white” makes Tim an interesting blend of technocrat and artist. “Almost everyone says they want a natural look,” he

Above: Stefano Maggio mixed 12 shades in six layers which were each furnace baked.

said, “but when I go to conferences in the US and hear dentists saying, ‘This is my European look’, it's still often a bit extreme and white for my liking.”

“There is a lot more that can be done to make veneers and crowns really mimic natural teeth. You can actually work with imperfections and produce random imperfections to improve an unfavourable face. But this needs a complete understanding between the dentist and technician, which we achieve by having a dedicated lab in Italy, which works only for us and where I spend a lot of time sharing experience and new techniques with the technicians.”

The next day, Tim e-mailed his final design. It was pretty magnificent, retaining just a bit of slope and looking simultaneously US perfect and British imperfect. Tim's treatment plan required a month of intensive dental hygiene work, accompanied by a couple of hour-long appointments to take impressions and so on, then two mammoth four-hour sessions in the chair to prepare and fit 11 crown veneers. The total cost would be about £8,000.

At first, I wondered how it was possible to charge so much for some 12 hours of in-chair dentistry. By the end of the treatment, and I promise I am not exaggerating, I wondered how he could do it at the price.

At this level of dentistry, even hygienists operate on a different plane. For such a dental odyssey as I was starting out on, the gums must be in perfect condition and, my word, Sharron the hygienist was going to achieve it. Why had no other hygienist in history ever taught me the tricks Sharron knew? And why had I never been



introduced to a product called Glide, the floss of the gods? In dental hygiene – like everything else, I suppose – for a dollar extra, you can travel first class.

The impression-taking seemed fairly standard, although with more strange instruments than I had seen in previous treatments. Tim also spends a great deal of time just gazing at your mouth, stroking his chin and thinking in an artistic-looking way.

The big one, of course, was the first four-hour session in which Tim prepared the 11 teeth for their new crowns and fitted a set of temporaries for the month it would take for my new teeth to be manufactured. This was an afternoon to remember: dozens of anaesthetic injections in succession, followed by three hours of non-stop cutting, sawing, drilling and pulling to reduce the teeth to living stumps. I felt like a grotty old kitchen being ripped out by the builders in preparation for new Bulthaup units. Halfway through, I went to the loo and caught sight of myself in the mirror. The man staring back at me was a toothless old melon farmer from Turkmenistan. It was only at this point that I appreciated the extent to which there was truly no going back.

Yet a funny thing occurred to me back in the chair. I am usually terrified of large-scale dentistry following a bad incident when I was a teenager, and I have a big warning on my regular dentist's notes indicating "nervous patient". But what should have been a living nightmare of *Marathon Man* proportions for me was, in Tim's steady hands – and this is an authentic,



Top: Tim Bradstock-Smith hadn't realised Jonathan wanted a sex change as well...

non-ironic observation I scribbled in my notes mid-treatment – less unpleasant than being in the same room as somebody watching *EastEnders*.

This is partly because Tim is an astonishingly skilful dentist and partly because he is a gadget freak after my own heart. His brilliant patient-calming device is a pair of Olympus 3D video goggles on which patients can watch DVDs while being treated. Thus, while undergoing some of the heaviest-duty dentistry known to man, this nervous patient was chuckling away at the entire first series of *Fawlty Towers*, and was actually quite cross when Tim finished fitting the temporaries halfway through the "Gourmet Night" episode.

On the first day with the temporaries, it felt like I'd tried to take a bite out of a car, later, that I'd had one inserted into my mouth. I made the slight mistake of drinking a quadruple Scotch when I got home, which

turned them green, but thereafter, the drama level was low.

I went to see my new teeth being manufactured at the lab south of Rome by Stefano Maggio, my personal toothsmith. The material for the crowns' inner core is zirconia, a slightly transparent porcelain harder than titanium, based on zirconium, a metal found in meteorites. Dentists at a recent convention were invited to smash a zirconia crown with a hammer. The prize for cracking the new German material

was a Mercedes. Nobody won it.

Stefano's art is both as tooth designer and ceramicist. He handmakes each tooth and adjusts the colour using dozens of shades of Japanese pigments from an artist's palette to produce a natural, polychromic effect. I needed 12 shades in six layers, a furnace bake between each layer. Stefano's appreciation of tooth colour and texture is like a wine buff's love of imperceptible nuances of flavour. "For you I will create a layer of transparency, another of greyish opalescence, a spot of orange on the occlusal surface of the molars to give a look of depth, different whites on the cusp tips, some blues and olives on the margins, some vanillas."

I watched Stefano spend a whole day making one molar and had time to muse on the fact that what he was creating on a winter Tuesday should be in my mouth for 15-20 years and may well outsurvive me. Furthermore, Stefano was not only determining the way I'll look into old age but

also how my mouth will feel 24 hours a day, working, eating, speaking, sleeping, even kissing. The inside of the mouth, I learned, takes up 20 per cent of our conscious feeling, so his work will be a substantial amount of my identity from now on, both as others perceive it, and as I feel it.

Back in London, I managed to watch the second series of *Fawlty Towers* during the still less gruelling second four-hour stint with Tim. He makes a real production number of the first sight the patient gets of his new smile, and mine was no more or less shocking than I'd hoped for. I just felt I looked unaccustomedly, well, grown-up.

At the time of writing, I've owned my new smile for three months. The first month, the teeth were slightly uncomfortable, speaking and eating not impossible, but occasionally a bit odd. Now, apart from the inside of my mouth feeling wonderfully smooth and flawless, I am unaware of the new work. Trying not to sound too girl's blousish, I feel vastly more confident about speaking, smiling, laughing and being photographed. It all seems worth several times over the occasional discomfort and the money.

One thing in particular makes me laugh a lot. I only realised late on that, long after I'm dead, the one bit remaining of me will be a perfect, indestructible smile, like the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland*. Let archaeologists millennia hence try to work out why this 21st century man's smile lasted, and why, more bafflingly, it was made from a material normally found in meteorites. ♦ *Tim Bradstock-Smith, The London Smile Clinic, 40-44 Clipstone Street, London W1 (020-7255 2559; www.londonsmile.co.uk).*

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