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As he turns crusading lawyer on ITV this week, Ross Kemp reveals the TV project closest to his heart...

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'It's gritty stuff and it does affect you'

His new role as a barrister has got Ross Kemp thinking about social injustice. The question is, what the Dickens can he do about it?

As he saunters into his dressing room with his muscular frame straining his T-shirt, Ross Kemp looks every inch the bruiser 'Grunt' Mitchell we loved to deride for his aggression and minimal vocabulary. But two minutes into our chat, it's clear that the similarities are only skin deep. He's here to talk about

In Defence, his latest TV drama, in which he plays a morally driven lawyer trying to overturn unjust verdicts.

It's clear that his dedication to the role goes far beyond turning up and reading his lines. The four-part drama, starting on Monday, has seen him burning the midnight oil to get it right. 'This is a serious subject,' he says. 'I met Ewen Smith, who has had more cases of rough justice overturned than any other criminal lawyer, and spent days sitting in with him.'

Ross took notes as Ewen met clients on remand for crimes including murder; he attended court, and he met folks in prison. It was the time of the Gary Glitter case, and later I met the barrister and lawyer who defended him. I was fascinated, I kept asking the same question: "How do you live with defending someone you believe to be guilty?" Especially if you're defending someone who has done something awful - you get them off, and two years later they go and do it again.

'I think we have a very good judicial system - this programme is not out to knock it - but we should have more access and be able to understand it more. I think legal documents are written to confuse.'

Ross, who lives with *News of The*

World editor Rebekah Wade, admits the intensity of the filming schedule and gravity of the subject made it hard for him to switch off. 'I enjoyed it immensely but I wasn't an easy person to be around. I'd be getting home at 11pm, staying up until 1.30am learning lines for the next day, then getting up at 5.30am to go into work. And I woke up miserable - it's gritty stuff and the character you play does affect you.'

Ross's co-star and love interest is played by Sophie Okonedo. 'Sophie's role was never written as a black character, and I'm very proud Granada cast Sophie. When was the last time a black and white actor worked together in a romantic liaison on a major TV programme? I don't think it's happening. It's about time it was and it's a tribute to Simon Lewis, Controller of Drama at Granada, that they did.'

Currently filming *Without Motive*, in which he plays a detective, Ross has also lined up another project. It's this work, his own creation, which gives the most clues yet to the publicity-shy actor behind Walford's most famous 'Neanderthal man', as he likes to call him.

Far from being an all-action drama, the project closest to Ross's heart is a gallery modern re-telling of a 19th-century parable of poverty and morality - Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*.

Ross, who will star as a money lender living on a council estate in his version of a 21st century Scrooge, says: 'We filmed yesterday in a housing estate that I can't tell you... and his voice trails off as he struggles to put into words the passionate motivation behind the project. It was so dreadful, falling apart, holes in the ceiling, carpets soaking wet, damp everywhere. That people are still living like this these days is just appalling.'

'If we can do something that's entertaining and draws attention to

poverty - which was Dickens's original intention - then I'll be pleased. I tried to get the BBC to make it years ago, but LWT have commissioned it now and I'm thrilled. It's one of my favourite stories and I think it should be told.'

Ross, who wrote the synopsis and storyline but won't be writing the script, recognises that by re-telling such a well-loved classic, he may well be setting himself up to be shot down. 'I'm onto a bit of a loser in a way by tackling the subject because if it's a success, everyone will say, "Oh well, he just plagiarised *A Christmas Carol*," and if it does badly and people knock it, they'll say, "He plagiarised Dickens and still couldn't get it right!"'

A member of the Labour Party, a friend of the Blairs and Rector of Glasgow University, Ross has a strong social conscience. 'I'm a member of the Labour Party, yes, but I'm not a politician. I think any party with a huge majority that tries to change things will put backs up. I think even though this is a Labour government, we're still a conservative country. People don't like change. We need to learn to adapt better.'

As he prepares to make the nation sit up and take notice with his own version of Dickens's Christmas ghosts, he remains untroubled by the ghost of Grant Mitchell.

The interesting thing about playing a character in a soap is that for the people who watch it, you'll always be aligned to that character. But I'm not unduly concerned about that,' he says. 'I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the soap world, and it's a world I'll always be indebted to.' **Jane Diamond**

