

Our “me first” culture is no match for Lolly Adefope, who skewers self-obsession with her shrewd character comedy. In her new film, *Seize Them!*, she plays things straighter – but we’re not off the hook yet, finds Jessica Prupas

PHOTOGRAPHS:

RUTH GINIKA OSSAI



*“Everyone has elements of
narcissism”*





Previous page:
Suit: Issey Miyake
Homme Plisse, CLTHD
Clogs: Penelope Chilvers
Jewellery: DÉVÉ

Above:
Suit & shirt: Vintage
Jewellery: DÉVÉ

Lolly Adefope isn't sold on influencers. "I think it's strange that we don't acknowledge how weird it is as a job," she tells me. "It's such a weird conflation of yourself as a person and what you're selling."

She goes on: "I just find it funny that when I was younger and I was working an office job and was slightly bratty like, 'I don't want to work in an office anymore. I want to make my own hours and do what I want to do,' I didn't really expect to get paid loads of money. Whereas with influencers they just sit in their rooms and sell stuff, and then they're like, 'But you also have to pay me loads of money.' It can't be anything but funny when someone writes a long passage about a childhood trauma and it ends with a product that they're selling."

It's this very modern impulse – to constantly be selling something – that interests Adefope in her comedy. Often, her characters are flogging a product – take an Instagram-based sketch she did with comedian Mae Martin during the pandemic, where Adefope plays a woman named Vanessa who continually interrupts her date with Martin to read out adverts. Or, if they're not forcing a face cream down your throat, they are selling themselves. On her Audible podcast, *Fanmail*, Adefope plays a self-involved version of herself who invites former co-stars on to ask them why they enjoyed working with her. Even her character Kitty on the recently concluded BBC sitcom *Ghosts* is obsessed with attention and tries to wrangle it from her poltergeist roommates whenever possible.



*Dress:
Common Hours
Shoes:
Penelope Chilvers
Earrings: By Alona*

LOLLY ADEFOPE

Maybe there's an irony to Adefope lamenting influencer culture in our current setting: her *Vera* cover shoot in a grand South Kensington townhouse, now dressed in a black sweatsuit after changing out of her final look, a silk vintage robe paired with a gigantic hat that looks as if it was made by skinning Elmo. But Adefope would be the first to point out the discord; it's all fodder for her comedy. Plus, she has rules for herself. "I try not to [self-promote on Instagram] too much just because I don't want to feel like it's my career. I was pretty tempted, like lots of people in the beginning of the influencer era, to just be, like, I want some free shoes so maybe I'll post about these shoes. I just had a word with myself early on to be, 'This isn't what you want to do.'

"So, I'll accept the free shoes, but I won't ever post about the free shoes," she says, laughing.

While these days Adefope is equally a comedian and actor (this year she'll appear in two highly anticipated British comedies: *Wicked Little Letters* and *Seize Them!*), she credits comedy with keeping her grounded and comfortable getting her hands dirty. "Being an actor, people are just picking you up and telling you where to go – you're just kind of a baby. Whereas comedy, you're doing everything and you have to motivate yourself to do it and get yourself to a gig and, like, direct yourself or source your props. So you're definitely working a different part of your brain."

Before Adefope broke into the comedy world, she was a teenager in Sutton, a suburb in that grey zone where London



Above: Trousers: H&M x Paco Rabanne
Top: Two Point Two
Earrings: DÉVÉ

sluices into the home counties. She says that, growing up on "the border of London and not London", she felt that she had to decide where she placed her allegiances, and so she became a dyed-in-the-wool Londoner. She tells me that she's grateful for the supportive, "community" feel of the British capital's comedy scene, which she thinks flows from the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. "A lot of people meet there and do shows together, and then go on to write TV together. [You] build a community that you can have from the early days of starting out to the end of your TV career."

It was at the Scottish capital's famous arts festival where Adefope was first discovered. She recalls that, after being rejected from both drama school and Cambridge – which she was motivated to apply to because of the university's famous comedy troupe, Footlights – she was forced to get an office job. Unhappily working a nine-to-five, she spent her off-hours "watching stuff" and cultivating her own comedy style. When she finally worked up the courage to start gigging and took a five-minute set to Edinburgh, an agent saw her perform and signed her. Since then, her ascent has been steady: longer comedy gigs led to British TV roles (she very memorably played Alan Partridge's nemesis, the reporter Ruth Duggan, on *This Time with Alan Partridge*), which led to parts in American series (*Miracle*

FUN TIMES

SEIZE THEM!
IS NOT THE
ONLY GREAT
PERIOD COMEDY
OUT THERE



Emma (2020)

Frilly, fancy and suffused with afternoon-tea sweetness, this luscious adaptation of Jane Austen's Regency romp is all about Anya Taylor-Joy's titular matchmaker.



The Favourite (2018)

Olivia Colman rules as 18th-century monarch Queen Anne, driven mad by gout and familial strife in this bonkers tragicomedy from Greek master Yorgos Lanthimos.



Pride and Prejudice and Zombies (2016)

Ever feel like once you've seen one convoluted romance with verbose flirting and heaving bosoms, you've seen them all? Think again.



Your Highness (2011)

Natalie Portman and James Franco lead this medieval stoner comedy. The plot? Belladonna – Zoey Deschanel – needs rescuing from a warlock hoping to breed a dragon.



*Kimono: Paper
Dress Vintage
Hat: Hat N Spicy
Earrings: Vintage*

Workers opposite Daniel Radcliffe and Steve Buscemi; *Shrill* as Aidy Bryant's wise, uber-confident best friend), and then films on both sides of the Atlantic (she had a small but very funny role in zeitgeisty *Saltburn* last year).

But through it all, she's consistent in taking the piss out of people who have gotten a bit too high on their horse. Her first solo Edinburgh hour, *Lolly*, revolved partially around a delusionally self-involved comic from Preston named Gemma, who spends most of her set bragging about how funny her friends think she is. Adefope tells me that she created the character as a sort of shield, since she thought going onstage as herself would be too exposing. "Surely everyone just wants to be liked, and if you put yourself out there and say things that are controversial or whatever, you risk people not liking you, which as a 22-year-old is the worst thing in the world," she explains. "I chose traits like narcissism [in my characters] because I was like, 'We're all going to be on the same side and all going to be laughing at this character, and nobody's going to be judging me.'

"There's something kind of fun about someone who just believes in themselves so much, it's fun to watch and it's fun to say, 'Oh, that's not me, that's definitely not me. That's nothing that I would do,'" she says, throwing her hands up, then laughs: "Maybe that's what it is, it's just making myself feel better."

"Comedies can be a cult hit or a slow burn, and it's a lot of pressure now, in the first episode, to impress loads of people and get loads of views"

When millennials were entering the workforce around a decade ago, they got a lot of flack for being lazy, entitled narcissists (*Time* called them the "me me me generation"). Maybe it was because they were simply the first to have smartphones and social media as young adults; irregardless, Adefope tells me she was inspired by the self-involved impulse she spotted in her peers at the time, but she's quick to point out that you can see similar traits in boomers as well. "Everyone has elements of narcissism," she tells me. What about Gen Z – does she have her comedic eye trained on them? No, she says – she finds them too intimidating to take the mick out of. "Gen Z just don't care. Whereas millennials are trying to make each other laugh, and trying really hard."

Like many millennials, Adefope may be slightly terrified by Gen Z's cool self-assuredness, but she still wants them to succeed. She fears that the state of commissioning in British television means not enough emerging talent is given the chance to break through. "I don't know if, in my adult life, there's been a time where I've been like, 'Wow, loads of amazing stuff is being commissioned,'" she tells me, particularly when compared to a period of her teenage years where it felt as if "everyone was given a show when they left Cambridge" (such as Footlights alumni Richard Ayoade of *The IT Crowd*, or *The Inbetweeners'* Joe Thomas and Simon Bird). "It's not because there's less funny people

SEIZE THE DAY!

LOLLY ADEFOPE'S CV



BORN

Ololade "Lolly" Adefope was born to Nigerian parents in Sutton, South London.

EDUCATION

She attended Nonsuch High School for Girls, a – by her own admission – "posh" academy school in Surrey. She then went on to read English literature at Longborough University, where she performed with a sketch comedy troupe.

FUN FACT

Before she performed at the Edinburgh Fringe, she took a job handing out flyers at the festival. She hated it so much she quit after one day.

KEY WORK

Lolly (2015)

Adefope's one-woman show, performed at the Edinburgh Fringe, turned her into a rising star on the British comedy scene. She followed it up with *Lolly 2* the very next year, which showcased more of her stitch-inducing characters.

Shrill (2019–21)

This Hulu-produced TV show, based on Lindy West's nonfiction book of the same name, stars *SNL* alum Aidy Bryant and takes on fatphobia in a very smart, very millennial way. Adefope plays Bryant's best friend, Fran.

Ghosts (2019–23)

Adefope says playing the spirit of Georgian noblewoman Kitty on this beloved BBC sitcom, created by and starring some of her closest friends, is "probably the best thing I'll ever do".

Above: Lolly Adefope as Katherine "Kitty" Higham in *Ghosts*
Below: With Aimee Lou Wood and Nick Frost in *Seize Them!*



LOLLY ADEFOPE

around. All the best comedies weren't like, 'Oh this is definitely a brilliant comedy everyone is going to love,' a lot of them were risks.

"With comedies, they can be a cult hit or a slow burn, and it's kind of a lot of pressure now, in the first episode, to impress loads of people and get loads of views."

In the attention economy, the received wisdom is that you need to make a big splash to hook audiences. But Adefope wants there to be space for smaller, less conventional stories. "Take more risks, commission more stuff so that you inspire more people and then you get more interesting stories off the back of [that]."

These days, even big names have trouble getting things made. Pitching to networks can famously feel like shooting in the dark. But Lolly doesn't want to feel dispirited and hopes to get her own ideas out there. "Sometimes I think it's easier to be like, 'It would've been great,' than to actually make the thing and then maybe it would fail."

For now, she's happy sailing along her current trajectory: balancing comedy and acting; making TV with her friends and British comedy greats (after our interview, she'll go into filming a new Armando Iannucci show about a production company



Above & left:
Dress: Banke Kuku

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that makes superhero films); and dipping her toes into film. Is there anything missing? "I dunno, I feel like saying more big roles," she says. "Even though that sounds narcissistic."

Seize Them! is the first time she was top of the call sheet on a film set. It's also the first time she plays the comedy "straight man" to Aimee Lou Wood's arrogant queen, dethroned after a mini-revolution in Dark Ages Britain. I ask her how she got her head around playing the foil. She thinks for a moment, then says, her eyes sparkling mischievously, "Learning it's not all about me."

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