



Babatunde Aléshé

Babatúndé Aléshé has a few people he needs to thank for his success as a comedian. Those who helped him become one of the most in demand comedy stars in the UK right now, a star of couch (that's Gogglebox, celebrity editions), screen (Live at The Apollo, coming this Christmas plus Guessable, Comedians giving Lectures, The Stand Up Sketch Show, Jonathan Ross Stand Up Club and Don't Hate the Playaz to name a few) stage (book now for Babahood, his upcoming first national tour) and a couple of top secret gigs you'll die laughing about when they're revealed.

Step forward, his schoolmates in Tottenham, north London, who provided the teenage Aléshé with his first audience. And his auntie, who let him stay up late to watch his first stand-up special.

"Delirious by Eddie Murphy! I was like: what the hell is this?" he says, eyes and grin both wide at the memory. "I just loved the feeling of laughing. You know when your stomach hurts, that feeling where it says, stop making me laugh for just five seconds? I love that. I crave that."

Who else? For this keen comedy watcher, there were influences – and laughs – to be found everywhere: The Brittas Empire, Red Dwarf, Keeping Up Appearances. "I was obsessed. I watched it all. From Cilla Black to Saturday night variety shows, if you had a bit that was laughter, I was hooked."

With his 10,000 hours (of telly watching) under his belt before he was technically an adult, Aléshé also wants to thank the promoters and punters on the Black comedy circuit, who provided early support and crucial gigs. Shout out to anyone who was in the audience in the library at Croydon Clocktower on 26th November 2003 to witness a nervous 17-year-old newcomer.

"I did OK, I didn't bomb!" he laughs. "But you can tell, number one, that all my material was hacked. And, number two, you can tell I was 100 percent fresh. I did jokes about Africans seeing a volcano for the first time and thinking it was a giant bowl of pepper soup."

Then there's his fellow students on the drama course at Central School of Speech and Drama, where he studied alongside Kit Harington. But whereas the future Jon Snow smashed it as an actor, Aléshé was ultimately less psyched about his small roles in New Tricks, Waking the Dead

and EastEnders. But everything's a learning, right? Realising that playing a nurse in Albert Square wasn't really for him made Aléshé understand the opposite about comedy: it was 100% for him.

Then there's Mo Gilligan. They met on the Black comedy circuit, a crucial network of clubs and a proving ground that's "the most important to me because it allowed me to find my voice and be myself. When our elders couldn't get into mainstream clubs, they had to go elsewhere. So we went to go to Hackney Empire, which is the Black comedy circuit hub."

Gilligan was a rung or so further up the ladder, but there's honour amongst stand-ups, especially if they're both ardent Arsenal fans. Gilligan met Aléshé on the black comedy circuit and a firm friendship was forged. Soon the Gooner love-in had extended to Gilligan inviting his fellow Londoner to support him on some shows. But before those shows began, two things happened: lockdown and Celebrity Gogglebox.

When Gilligan asked him to be his sofa-surfing wingman on the show, Aléshé actually still had a day-job: Customer Service Advisor at Transport for London. Technically, though, in those intense early months of 2020, he was furloughed, and he eventually took redundancy, in part to help a colleague save their job. But the capital's tubes' and buses' loss was the nation's gain. The Mo'n Baba scenes were the hit of the reality show, itself a beam of revivifying light and entertainment in those dark days of the pandemic.

"Honest to God, we were just being ourselves. We didn't think, let's turn up the funny – we were literally just being ourselves. Most of the time we forgot that the cameras were there – which they always say, but it's true. And there's a lot that got cut out! We had the crew dying with laughter. And working with Mo is just the easiest thing."

Aléshé's profile as a comedian skyrocketed, and when the pair toured together in the months after lockdown, Aléshé had lift-off. A second tour together, autumn 2021's *There's Mo To Life*, which included 10 nights at the 3000-capacity Hammersmith Apollo, only sealed the deal.

"I wouldn't be sitting here now if it wasn't for Mo and for Gogglebox," he acknowledges. "It wasn't just the fact of doing the show together, it was the fans' reactions to me and Mo. They *really* took to us as a duo, and they were like: 'Who's that guy with Mo on the couch?' Then when I went on tour with him, it was a rap. I felt really blessed because Mo's already Mo. But for me to launch my career off the back of that was incredible."

Which brings us to the final people Aléshé needs to thank. Not God, although his faith is fundamentally important to him. "I'm human and sometimes you may hear the wrong thing

come out of my mouth," he smiles. "But my faith is what keeps me grounded. It's shaped the way I work and my path for a long time."

No, he needs to thank the people who "hated" him.

"My teachers, because I used to work hard to have everyone in class laughing all the time. And my managers at TFL, especially one of them. Well, she loved me, but whilst we were on the workforce she was like, please just keep silent!"

Launching in 2023, *Babahood* is his first headline tour, and as such, he wants to go that bit further. Not give audiences just belly laughs but heartfelt feels, too.

"It focuses on me as someone who is now a dad, but who grew up without a dad. Now I'm having to navigate this whole new world and having to learn on the job. And also I'm learning as a husband, having had a single parent and never having that hands-on example of how a couple live as a family. Getting to grips with that responsibility: that's what my tour is about."

He's not gonna lie: it's been a toughie to write, and to make funny. He has to honour his wife, his son, his own mum – and himself, both as a grown-up family man and as a little kid on the estate in Tottenham. Of course he wants fans to laugh hard. But, the rigorous performer that he is, he also wants the material to hit hard.

"The more I started exploring the topic of fatherhood, it suddenly dawned on me that I need to go down this route. As much as people want me to be like that explosive, energetic, *funny funny funny* guy, actually: *I need a message as well*. I'm scared to see how it goes, honest to God!"

He understands that his audiences don't necessarily know him as a comic who's trying to relay a message. "But maturity is growth, and it's somewhere that I need to explore."

Forever grateful and aware of the need to pay it back, he circles back to the importance of the Black comedy circuit.

"It gave me the confidence to be myself and discover my voice. But what I call mainstream comedy was important, too. It taught me the importance of structure to your material. It's nice to have that raw voice, but sometimes structure is needed. So people can tell you've worked out your craft."

TV producers, of course, have spotted Aléshé, and there are tempting offers on the table. But he doesn't want to get ahead of himself.

"I know that I have a lot to learn. So while I have ideas for shows, I want to get to that point where I'm trusted that I can draw a crowd" But really the type of person I am, I'm more interested in learning and getting to that place where my mind can think along the professional lines of a Rock or a Chappelle. I would love that money!" he laughs of the bazillion dollar deals paid by streamers for the top stand-up talents. "But first, I would love to learn more. And then I'll get there."

Even his old teachers, or his TFL managers, wouldn't bet against that.

The Babahood Tour 2023 kicks off January 26th, 2023 in Brighton

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