



A pair of British comedians head across the Atlantic to make it big in America... sound familiar?

It's the route of almost every comic once they've cracked the UK's stand-up circuit, and the conceit of this new mockumentary podcast from Alex Owen and Ben Ashenden (sketch duo The Pin).

The show mixes sketch routines with faux reportage, as a journalist follows the pair to document their disappointing journey.

Expect Brexit gags and send-ups of both British and American culture, as well as some familiar and very funny special guests including Jamie Demetriou, Lolly Adefope, Sally Phillips, Cecily Strong, Fred Armisen, Janine Harouni and John Reynolds.

Sarah Carson



'You can't place black within a box'

Kwame Kwei-Armah's *Young Vic* theatre is, like the rest of Britain's arts sector, facing a crisis. But, he tells **Marianka Swain**, as a 'hard-wired optimist' he's thinking positively about the future

For Kwame Kwei-Armah, artistic director of the Young Vic theatre, lockdown has been all about "scenario planning and scenario planning, followed by politicking and more planning. It's been nail-biting." The Government's eventual announcement of a £1.57bn arts rescue package "allowed us to breathe a sigh of relief, although the devil is in the detail". Indeed, at time of writing, we have yet to learn crucial details like how, when or to whom the funds will be allocated.

It's an anxious wait for cultural institutions like London's Young Vic, which Kwei-Armah has led since 2018. "You're looking at reserves, at your non-existent income, working out how long you can survive on what you've got, or what happens if X amount comes through," he explains.

It's "nerve-racking", he continues, "trying to look after your internal team, as well as being really cognisant of the freelance community having nothing and

falling through the cracks. If we don't look after them now, then we won't have them to call on when we reopen and the work will suffer." Government funding will, he hopes, allow the theatre "to plan until April 2021, but then we've got to figure out what happens after April."

As well as facing an uncertain future, Kwei-Armah has been looking back, thanks to a new BBC *Imagine* documentary that explores his astonishing journey from working-class Southall boy to successful actor, singer, playwright, director and artistic director, both here and in the US. He became a popular figure thanks to a role in *Casualty*, and was only the second black Briton to have a play staged in the

West End when *Elmina's Kitchen* opened at the Garrick in 2005.

Is he naturally reflective? "No, I never look back. For instance, I don't know the storyline of any play that I've written – once it's been performed, it's almost like I need to create new space in my brain, so I eject it."

But, watching a preview of *Imagine: My Name is Kwame*, Kwei-Armah says he was "humbled and surprised. There were some wonderful shots of my home town when I was 12 or 13. Seeing Southall High Street, Woolworth's and all of the stores, and the narratives that were attached to them, was really touching." He was also struck by footage of the 1979 Southall riots, which inspired his debut play *A Bitter Herb* – "seeing it as it happened, not through the sepia lens of memory".

Perhaps the most evocative material in the documentary came from an unlikely source. "They kept asking if I had any videos of my life, and I kept saying 'No, not

I'm asked, 'What will the art look like on the other side [of Covid]?' I think, 'Energised'





Main image: speaking to Alan Yentob for 'Imagine: My Name is Kwame', which Kwei-Armah says left him 'humbled and surprised'. Below: the Young Vic's production of Jackie Sibbles Drury's play 'Fairview' LUKE FINN/MARC BRENNER

Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey and Aristotle, who all "spoke clearly about self-determination – not waiting on 'the man' to give you something. That's been a through-line in my career. When I was an actor, I was bored of waiting for people to write plays not just that I wanted to be in, but that I wanted to watch, so I wrote. Then I was bored of waiting for white directors to interpret my work, so I directed. And then I was bored of waiting for white ADs to programme work, so I became an AD."

This September, his theatre is marking its 50th anniversary in strange circumstances. "It was going to be a huge block party, with DJs and live bands, and 50 stages spilling from the building into the streets. Of course, it'll have to be a quieter version." Its theatrical season has also been interrupted, though Kwei-Armah promises that Cush Jumbo's much-anticipated *Hamlet* will run at a later date.

really'. Then I found a box I hadn't looked at for 20 years, and there was an old tape of when I first landed in Ghana. That trip was the culmination of researching his family history, through the slave trade back to his ancestral roots in Ghana. It was transformative: aged 19, he changed his name from Ian Roberts to Kwame Kwei-Armah, and the plays he later wrote were characterised by political fire.

"It was remarkable to hear how I spoke then," he says, "because we all morph, don't we, depending on our environment, and to see myself in that context. I can't wait for my children to see it."

This process has made Kwei-Armah think more about "the road travelled. I looked at myself differently at the end of it." He was certainly aware, growing up, that his was a tougher route into the arts, with his mother working three jobs "and all the hours God sent" to send him to the Barbara Speake Stage School. But he missed out on professional training: "I beat the hard path in. There were things I learned on stage over five years that I might have learned in one afternoon with a good tutor. What if I'd had those tools, rather than relying on my own instinct?"

He's now a mentor and role model to many – "I'm of that grand age where people call me Uncle Kwame!" – and the *Imagine* experience clarifying his own journey will, he believes, help him guide others.

Kwei-Armah has no truck with the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" philosophy but, growing up, he was inspired by

For now, he wants to "use the building to engage in the debates that are important for our country". British theatre, he thinks, is primed for that with our state-of-the-nation plays. "We're going to get so many versions of that state of our nation: who we were, who we want to be. I'm sometimes asked, 'What will the art look like on the other side?' I think, 'Energised'. I saw it in the US after the first Black Lives Matter protests and Trump being elected – the art that came out of the American playwrights is what is holding the streamers up right now. I think we'll see a similar explosion here post-Covid."

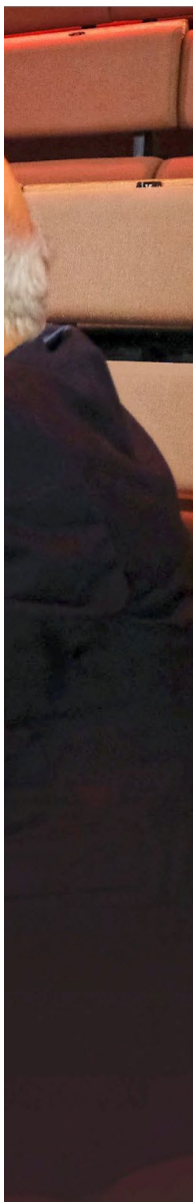
Kwei-Armah is eager to get back to programming work, following up electrifying Young Vic productions like *Death of a Salesman* featuring an African-American Loman family, and Jackie Sibbles Drury's racial identity-challenging *Fairview*. "It's not the job of an AD to tell the audience what the season theme is, but one of my major drivers was black postmodernism: how we can create in any area, in any form. You can't place black within a box."

Might this be a moment of change for the arts? "I work from hope – I'm an absolute hard-wired optimist – so I'm always going to say, 'Yes'. But it won't come easily. People aren't just going to go, 'Let's put on this brave new work, where the audience may not understand the form, while we're also reducing our staff count'. We're going to have to show what benefits there can be from allowing sections of your population to feel free to invent."

Conversely, there are concerns that this financial crisis will make the arts even more middle-class. Kwei-Armah admits he's worried, though notes that the Young Vic has taken steps like opening up jobs to those without degrees, and shaping recruiting practices to reflect "London now, not London in the 1940s. Very few of us came into the arts to play to the 1 per cent. We came to democratise it, to welcome new audiences and new artists."

How can we encourage audiences into theatres? "I don't think there's anything you can say to anyone about returning to a space post-pandemic. What we can hope is that the programming supersedes any fear. I can't wait to invite people back into our home, and to use it as a crucible for ideas and entertainment. I can't wait to have a staff meeting, and hear freelancers talk about their art. I can't wait for us all to reconnect."

'Imagine: My Name is Kwame' is on BBC1 tonight at 10.45pm (11.15pm in Northern Ireland). For more about the Young Vic, visit youngvic.org



Last night's television

RUPERT HAWKSLEY



How to lose 'lockdown belly': not your usual fat shaming

» **Lose a Stone in 21 Days with Michael Mosley**

Channel 4, 9pm ★★★★★

» **Surviving the Virus: My Brother and Me** BBC1, 9pm ★★★★★

One in three British people is clinically obese. "Not me," I thought, popping a Maltoser into my mouth. "Clinically obese people need the fire brigade to winch them out of bed." Maltoser. "I've never had to do that." Maltoser. Maltoser. Maltoser. But then we were introduced to some of these clinically obese people and they looked... rather like me. And you, I suspect.

Lose a Stone in 21 Days with Michael Mosley is not from the same store cupboard as, say, *Fat Club* or *The Biggest Loser*, which focused on those at the extreme end of the scales. This three-part series is simply about shifting what Mosley calls "lockdown belly".

And it really matters. Not only can being overweight increase the risk of heart disease and diabetes, it also increases by 37 per cent your chances of dying from Covid-19. Boris Johnson has been banging on about this since concluding that his own near-death experience of the virus was down, in part, to being "too fat".

Mosley strikes me as a good candidate to lead the fight against flab. He doesn't have much time for self-pity. "There are some nasty numbers in here, some bad news," he told the five volunteers. "But the good news is we can change it." In short, let's get cracking.

Mosley put the volunteers

Our lives, I think we can all agree, are more important than our feelings

on a diet of 800 calories a day, explaining that the body needs to switch from burning sugar to burning fat. As we saw from the volunteers' video diaries, this isn't easy. "I've had a couple of dizzy spells," explained 34-year-old Katie.

There will always be people who claim these sorts of programmes set out to humiliate fat people; that being happy in yourself is what matters. Normally I'd agree. Eating should never be framed as a shameful act (I was quite cross with Mosley when he talked about rummaging through the volunteers' cupboards to discover their "deepest, darkest secrets").

But Covid-19 has changed all that. The data is clear: Our lives, I think we can all agree, are more important than our feelings.



Dr Michael Mosley does not have much time for self-pity CHANNEL 4

You only had to switch to BBC One and **Surviving the Virus: My Brother and Me**, a brilliant film by twin doctors Chris and Xand van Tulleken, to see how devastating Covid-19 can be when it takes hold.

Chris, an infectious diseases doctor, has returned to front-line medicine for the first time in a decade. We followed him as he chatted to patients and staff at University College Hospital London. The amount of footage from hospitals we have seen in recent months, as well as all the numbers, sometimes threatens to desensitise us. But this film was so intimate, it almost felt invasive.

Chris dabbed a man's cracked, blood-encrusted mouth with water. His condition was so bad he was unable to swallow. Perhaps, as lockdown eases, we needed to see this to remind us what is at stake.

Xand didn't have to be on the frontline to experience the impact of Covid-19. After catching the virus, he has been beset by an arrhythmic heartbeat. Doctors gave him an electric shock to stop the volunteers' video diaries, this isn't easy. "I've had a couple of dizzy spells," explained 34-year-old Katie. "There will always be people who claim these sorts of programmes set out to humiliate fat people; that being happy in yourself is what matters. Normally I'd agree. Eating should never be framed as a shameful act (I was quite cross with Mosley when he talked about rummaging through the volunteers' cupboards to discover their "deepest, darkest secrets")."

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