

Dress by Victoria
Beckham, £1,650

who's LAUGHING NOW...

...Tina Fey, for one – as not only is she the most successful comedian in the world, she's leading the way for a whole band of hilarious, sexy and powerful women who are commandeering our screens. But, she tells *Annabel Brog*, there's no time to rest on her laurels, there's still Hollywood to conquer

*Photography by Sebastian Kim
Fashion editor Tracy Taylor*



Last year will be remembered for many reasons, but in the global entertainment industry, one in particular stands out: it was the year that women finally had the last laugh. Literally. Funny women made the most noise in popular culture, and made the most money at the comedy box office. Funny women don't just act funny anymore, they also write funny, they direct funny – they have become the business of funny. Where male satirical commentators such as Jon Stewart were once the mouthpieces for veracity – calling out hypocrisy and foolishness in artful sound bites – their female peers (Amy Schumer, Kristen Wiig and Amy Poehler, among others) have now become the truth-tellers at the center of every zeitgeist moment. Which made former Disney CEO Michael Eisner's comment last year (“the hardest artist to find is a beautiful, funny woman”) seem all the more anachronistic. These women epitomize a modern, sharp-focused beauty, not the passive, big-eyed allure of yesteryear. And the legacy of their increasing audience appeal is a sharpening of the collective, female comic mind.

Presiding over them all is writer and actress Tina Fey, 45, arguably the most gifted and influential of today's comedians – male or female. Fey's *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) turn as Sarah Palin (during the 2008 US election run-up, with Amy Poehler as Hillary Clinton) got more global attention than the election itself, and her three stints co-hosting the Golden Globes (with Poehler) drew record viewers. Fey's influence began before she made it in front of the camera, when she occupied SNL's

hallowed head-writer chair from 1999 to 2006. *Rolling Stone* ran a story last year rating every SNL cast member in history in order of influence; Fey came third after John Belushi and Eddie Murphy. “She slapped SNL out of its late-1990s coma,” it declared. “Suddenly the skits were full of ass-kicking women.”

In person, Fey is pretty and petite, and her every statement has an undercurrent of warmth. You need only revisit the glorious Fey/Poehler Golden Globes turns – where the whole audience enjoyed being roasted by them – to admire Fey's gift for being simultaneously eye-wateringly harsh and sincerely likable. Because it's impossible not to like Fey. When

asked how she would parody herself, she says: “Rapidly aging. Sour. Sort of hunched. A lot of eye rolling.” She is also unexpectedly earnest: “If you chat with me at the airport, it's not going to be so funny.” Emotionally, however, she is made of tough stuff – you don't rule the SNL writers' room for nine years, nor survive the Chicago improvisation circuit (where Fey cut her comedy teeth alongside Poehler) without robust levels of self-confidence.

SNL was Fey's launchpad – she moved front of camera in 2000, presenting SNL's *Weekend Update* first with Jimmy Fallon and then with Poehler. In 2004 she wrote and starred in the biting accurate high-school comedy *Mean Girls*, and after leaving SNL in 2006, she created, scripted and starred in seven seasons of the sitcom *30 Rock*, which won six Golden Globes and 16 Emmys. Her 2008 memoir *Bossypants* topped the *New York Times* bestseller list for five weeks and her latest sitcom creation *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (which she writes and guest-starred in) is back for a second series next month.

Fey attributes her gift for comedy to an upbringing that balanced laughs with tough love. “Comedy was a family sport. My family watched any comedy we could get our hands on.” She also learned the importance of hard work. “There wasn't blind encouragement. I was told: if you fall short, there will be disappointments. I remember my dad going to a school night where our projects were on display and I'd spelled Indiana wrong. He was pissed I hadn't checked my work.”

Another contributing factor to her success was the lack of sexual distraction – no boy went near her, probably because she mocked them mercilessly. “I had no dating confidence,” she says, “but you can retreat into academic confidence. I was a good student and I was running [the school] newspaper with a friend, so I had that sort of confidence. I assumed everyone

else's experience was just as desperate. I would joke about it, ‘Can't give it away.’”

Fey married her first love, Jeff Richmond, a composer

REBEL WILSON

“It's not the glamorous, beautiful people that are great at comedy. They're either quite tall and lanky or shorter and fatter or have a big nose. They have something physically about them that makes them into a comic stereotype.”

who live-scored her improvisation in Chicago. The couple live in New York with their daughters Alice, 10, and Penelope, four. As parents they try to model a strongwork ethic, a good sense of humor and a healthy body image. “But inevitably, two weeks before the Emmys, Alice will say, ‘Why are you not having ice cream?’ and I will say, ‘I'm just trying to be very healthy.’ I never don't eat. That's not my thing.”

Between work, school drop-offs, Little League and *Real Housewives* reruns (a cautionary tale: “Botox is the enemy of funny”), there is little time for socializing, although she is a loyal friend (“I'm a mother bear – if anyone goes after any of my friends, I'm very on the attack”).

There is no evidence of the satirical mean girl she was in high school, but she's still lurking in there somewhere, “something to be managed”, says Fey. “When Amy and I worked on the Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton stuff, it was carefully thought through: ‘Let's not talk about how they look. How far is it okay to go on about their children?’ You wouldn't want to go after a woman and sexualize her, desexualize her or make jokes about her appearance,

although it's more okay to do that with men because they're not judged in the same way. But if someone's gone insane with lip implants, I'm like, ‘Let's talk about this.’”

MELISSA MCCARTHY

“Funny is funny, and it can come in eight billion different shades and flavors, so I think it's silly to kind of limit it.”

experience on the set of *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* when the director complained that a female guest star was making him nervous. “So I went in to talk to her and I said to the director afterwards, ‘She listens like a man.’ Women are supposedly more likely to give visual and verbal approval cues when you tell them something. They nod. They say, ‘Uh-huh, okay, yes, I get it,’ and men don't. This woman didn't and because of that she was scaring everyone.”

While there may still be distinctions in the way men and women perform, there is a convergence in what they want as an audience. Last year's biggest-grossing

comedies were the female-led *Pitch Perfect 2* and *Spy*, starring Melissa McCarthy. And in November, Sony Pictures chairman Tom Rothman confirmed that men no longer drive ticket sales: “Maybe a decade ago that was true, but I actually think women drive the box office now.”

Fey still feels there is a long way to go before films starring female comedians are given equal funding. “People say it's a good time for women in Hollywood? It's *not!* TV has always been kinder to women. It's a tricky business. But the more women you can filter up the pipeline, the more women producing, the more women up the chain of deciders, the more independently financed movies will get made.” Fey's own production company, Little Stranger, optioned *The Taliban Shuffle*, US journalist Kim Barker's 2011 memoir about her experiences reporting in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and turned it into last month's *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*. Fey stars as Barker, and among the obvious laughs, there is a serious

subtext, indicating opportunities for comedy to further set the agenda.

In the meantime, at least the stars of her comedies have freed themselves from the Hollywood aesthetic. “When you perform comedy you can't be afraid to look ugly,” says Fey. “But my nephew, when he met Alec Baldwin and said, ‘I want to be an actor, do you have any advice?’, Alec said, ‘Work out. That's all that counts now.’ Even someone like Alec, one of the most handsome actors ever, sees these guys get jacked up, get new teeth and they don't really learn acting.”

Which leads back to the single most likable thing about Tina Fey: it's not her slightly dirty smile, the wince-inducing accuracy of her social observations or the sweetness with which she delivers them. It's that she has studied hard and worked even harder for everything she has achieved, and she's got no plans to stop trying now that she's made it. Even without the

awards, the numbers, the plaudits, that's surely what makes her an icon.

The second series of Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt is out on Netflix on April 15

MINDY KALING

“I never want to be called the funniest Indian female comedian that exists. I feel like I can go head-to-head with the best white, male comedy writers that are out there. Why would I want to self-categorize myself into a smaller group than I'm able to compete in?”

AMY SCHUMER

“I just say what I think is the funniest thing I could say. I'm not trying to make headlines. I'm just trying to say the stuff that I think is funny and will make people laugh.”

SCAN & WATCH

Tina Fey's masterclass on how to be funny on the NET-A-PORTER APP

Hair: Ted Gibson at Jed Root. Makeup: Gita Bass at Starworks. Nails: Gina Eppolito. Prop stylist: Juliet Jernigan at CLM. Production: No Wheelies Inc. With thanks to The Plaza Hotel, NYC. Photographs: Getty Images; Reuters; Rex Features; Comedy Central

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