



THIRTY YEARS OF WORK Baddiel digested

1964 Born the second son of Colin and Sarah Baddiel, both of Jewish descent, in New York state. The family move back to England four months later, settling in northwest London.

1986 Graduates with a double first in English from King's College, Cambridge. Abandons a PhD in English at UCL to become a full-time comedian on the London cabaret circuit.

1989 Begins working on BBC sketch show *The Mary Whitehouse Experience* with fellow Cambridge graduates Steve Punt, Hugh Dennis and Rob Newman.

1993 As a double act, he and Rob Newman become the first comedians to perform at Wembley Arena: a sell-out gig.

1994 Hosts *Fantasy Football League* on ITV with Frank Skinner.

1996 Co-writes and sings Three Lions for the English football team during the Euro tournament – the only song in British pop history to reach No 1 three times. His first novel, *Time for Bed*, is published.

2000 An improvised Edinburgh fringe Q&A show becomes *Baddiel and Skinner Unplanned*, a live and unscripted comedy programme shown on ITV.

2001 Birth of Baddiel's first child, Dolly, with partner and fellow comedian Morwenna Banks.

2002 *Whatever Love Means*, his second novel, is published.

2004 His son Ezra is born.

2010 Writes the screenplay for *The Infidel*, a British comedy about Muslim and Jewish identity.

2012 Appears in BBC2's *World's Most Dangerous Roads*, driving through Ethiopia from Addis Ababa to Aksum with Hugh Dennis.

2013 Performs *Fame: Not the Musical*, his first standup show in 15 years.

2016 *My Family: Not the Sitcom* opens at Menier Chocolate Factory in London. **Harriet Marsden**

part a way of continuing to talk to his mother, to keep her with him, it is the very opposite of a hagiography. The parts that deal with her relationship with the suave, mustachioed David White – “he does look like a classic 70s cad” – are often hilarious, particularly as Baddiel describes the way his mother developed an obsession with golf and golfing memorabilia – and indeed a business based on it – to mirror her lover's interests. But she was, nonetheless, being unfaithful to his father, threatening the stability of the family unit, and bewildering her three sons. One of the most extraordinary moments comes when Baddiel tells the audience that despite his mother's openness – or, at least, lack of covertness – about her affair, his father never knew. Can that really be true, I ask him; isn't it just as likely that children don't always know what their parents know?

“Obviously it's all my refraction of it,” he says. “This was me swimming about in this strange circus of people. But I do think my dad didn't know about it.” He describes his father – the Welsh descendant of Lithuanian Jews fleeing the pogroms – as an angry man, an immediate man, a scientist with limited interest in the life of the emotions; his parents, he insists, were not well matched. “In fact the most emotionally articulate thing my mother ever said to me, which really took me aback at the time – I was in my 20s – she said to me, it's so tiring living without an emotional life. And I thought blimey, there's a whole other woman in there.”

This is the show's brilliance – and why, despite its specificity, it is so involving. For all his parents' oddities and dysfunction, you are never in doubt that Baddiel loves them; you feel that his compassion towards them encompasses all their frailties (even when they object to he and his partner, comedian and actor Morwenna Banks, naming their first child Dolly. What about Shenandoah, they suggest). Somehow, Baddiel gives his audience permission to feel infuriated, embarrassed, exasperated with our parents, living or dead; to see the long passage of time in which they were also children with imperfect parents. It is, among other things, one of the most humanising pieces of work I can remember seeing.

Much of this, I think, comes down to Baddiel's mother's childhood; to the fact that her father was interned for 18 months on the Isle of Man, that he spent the rest of his life in and out of mental hospitals. “Fair enough, I always think,” says Baddiel. “His family had been murdered and he had lost his livelihood. It was so unbelievably terrible that it was amazing he wasn't just howling on the heath every night.” In that context, why wouldn't his

mother resolve to live her life as she pleased? “She should be more nuts, or at least her nuts-ness should be much more dour, and awful, and it's not – it's kind of exuberant, life-affirming at some ridiculous level, and that's the narrative I'm trying to create.”

We begin to talk about Jewishness. Baddiel's Twitter biography is a single word, “Jew” – primarily, he says, because it's funny, but also because “I've also always been very interested that that's a swear word to some people.” He notes a preference for the phrase “Jewish people”, rather than “Jews”, which he thinks reflects a deep-seated feeling that to be a Jew is a bad thing. On the issue of antisemitism and the left, he thinks that some “buy the myth that Jews are powerful and privileged and moneyed and all the rest of it. As a result, they can't quite extend the protections that they extend to other minorities to Jews; at some level they think they don't really need them. And also, surely our job is to fight against the propertied and moneyed classes. All that is in there.”

In the show, he demonstrates how his tweets about his mother and grandparents elicit replies invoking Gaza; to one, he replied, “Just. Fuck. Off”, enraged by the constant demand that he state his position. (He elaborates a little for me: he thinks it's perfectly possible to think that the state of Israel shouldn't exist, but that as soon as you “attach to your tweet a meme of a Jewish-looking banker controlling the American economy, then it's antisemitic. That's the problem – it's the very mixed-up overlap between that political position and very ancient antisemitic tropes.”

Our trip to Starbucks is nearly over, and I realise I've asked him nothing about all the other stuff. It is, after all, 20 years since he, Frank Skinner and the Lightning Seeds released the football song Three Lions, with its refrain “30 years of hurt / never stopped me dreaming”. People are always saying they should re-release it, he says, but all they could have done was dub 50 over 30, and “that's a bit depressing”. He worries that the England team have a fear of failure that affects them at key moments, such as penalties; he's also enjoyed the resurgence of the Welsh national team. He looks forward to Antonio Conte taking over as manager of Chelsea; like every other football fan, he would like his team to sign Gareth Bale.

But if I'm truthful, my heart isn't in asking him these questions, and I don't think he's that interested either. I just want to sit and hear about Sarah, Colin and the extraordinary garden of stories that our parents' lives gift us.

My Family: Not the Sitcom runs at Vaudeville theatre, London from 12 Sept to 15 Oct