

Ali G says he owes his success to a deadpan French drama guru. Dominic Cave

From the sublime to the

This Friday, millions will stop everything to watch Posh and Becks being salaciously ridiculed by Ali G in aid of Comic Relief. Those who have followed G's extraordinary progress from five-minute divertissement on *The 11 O'clock Show* to funny-man of the moment, and those who've only just caught up with the joke, will marvel alike at his shrewdly idiotic line of questioning, all the while wondering how Sacha Baron Cohen, the young man behind the character, has the nerve.

Is there something in his genes that makes him don the loudest streetwear money can buy, adopt an ersatz ethnic patois and make a laughing stock of both himself and those he meets? Or has he taken lessons in effrontery?

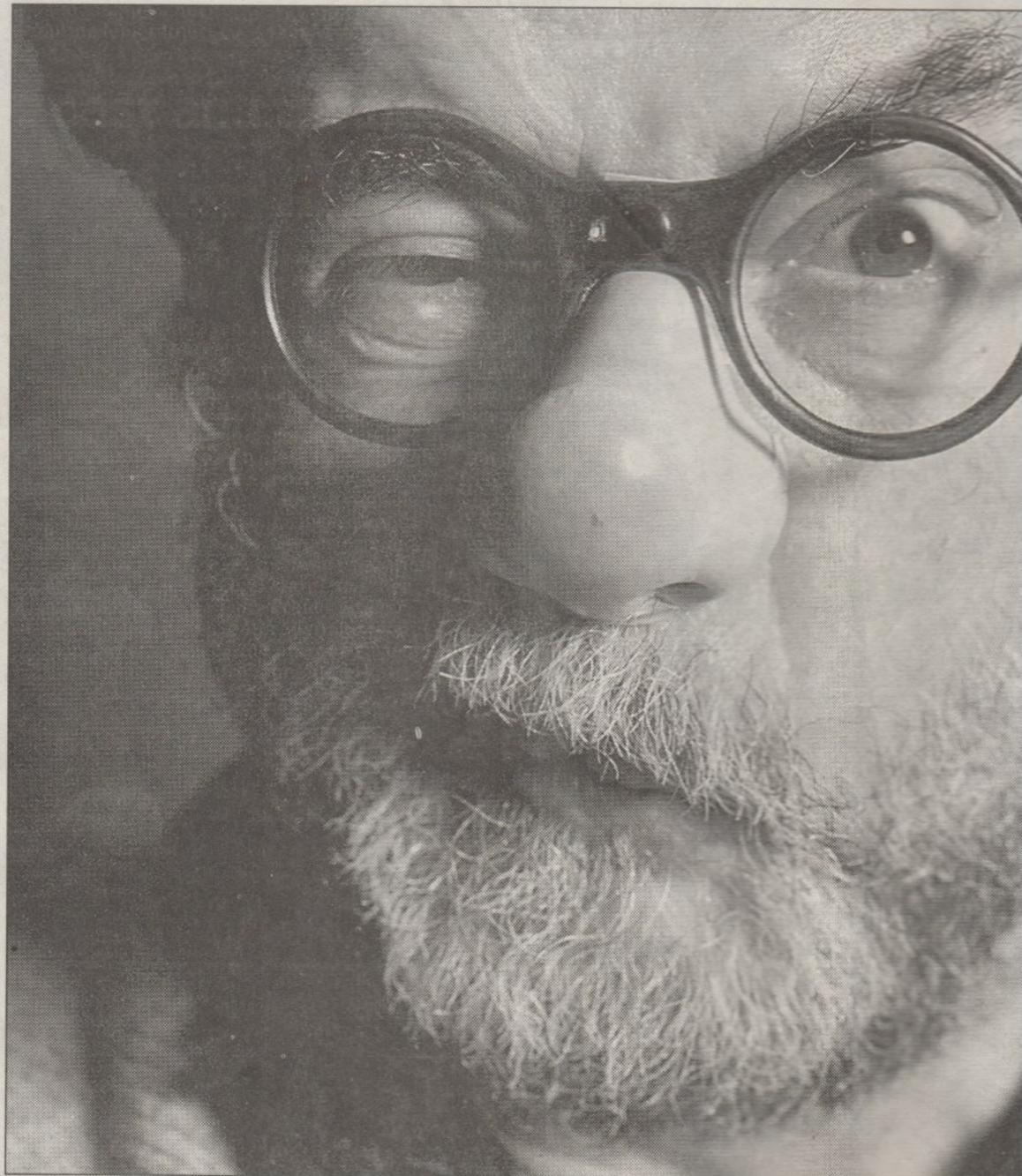
Talented though he knows he is, Baron Cohen admits that he owes much to someone very few fans of Ali G will have come across. The person Britain has to thank — at least in part — for the Ali G phenomenon is a 57-year-old French drama teacher called Philippe Gaulier, whom Baron Cohen studied under for a year shortly after leaving Cambridge.

"He's the man," says Baron Cohen. "Without him, I really do doubt whether I would have had any success in my field."

Baron Cohen is not the first former pupil of Gaulier's to go far. The list includes the founder members of Theatre de Complicité — Simon McBurney, Annabel Arden and Marcello Magni — as well as Emma Thompson and Roberto Benigni (who won a Best Actor Oscar for his self-directed Holocaust comedy *Life is Beautiful*). Helena Bonham Carter spent six months training with Gaulier in the early 1990s, when she was already famous, which is as good a testament as any to the kind of esteem in which he is held by actors.

Every year, about 200 hopefuls from around the world flock to his school, currently a converted church hall in the drab North London suburb of Cricklewood. Recently, Gaulier's services have even been called on by corporations seeking to embolden their management teams.

What is his secret? Only when you meet the man do you understand why he remains so unknown. Deadpan in a manner



Hard-nosed: the methods used by Gaulier, who taught Ali G, above right, are like 'open-heart surgery'

that is as intimidating as it is comical, he does not court approval or recognition. Two sleepy, unimpressed brown eyes gaze out from behind a pair of heavily rimmed round spectacles. With his beret, blue-jean jacket, bushy moustache and beard, as well as his heavily accented and highly wayward English, the only thing missing to complete the typically Gal-

lic picture is a string of onions slung round his neck.

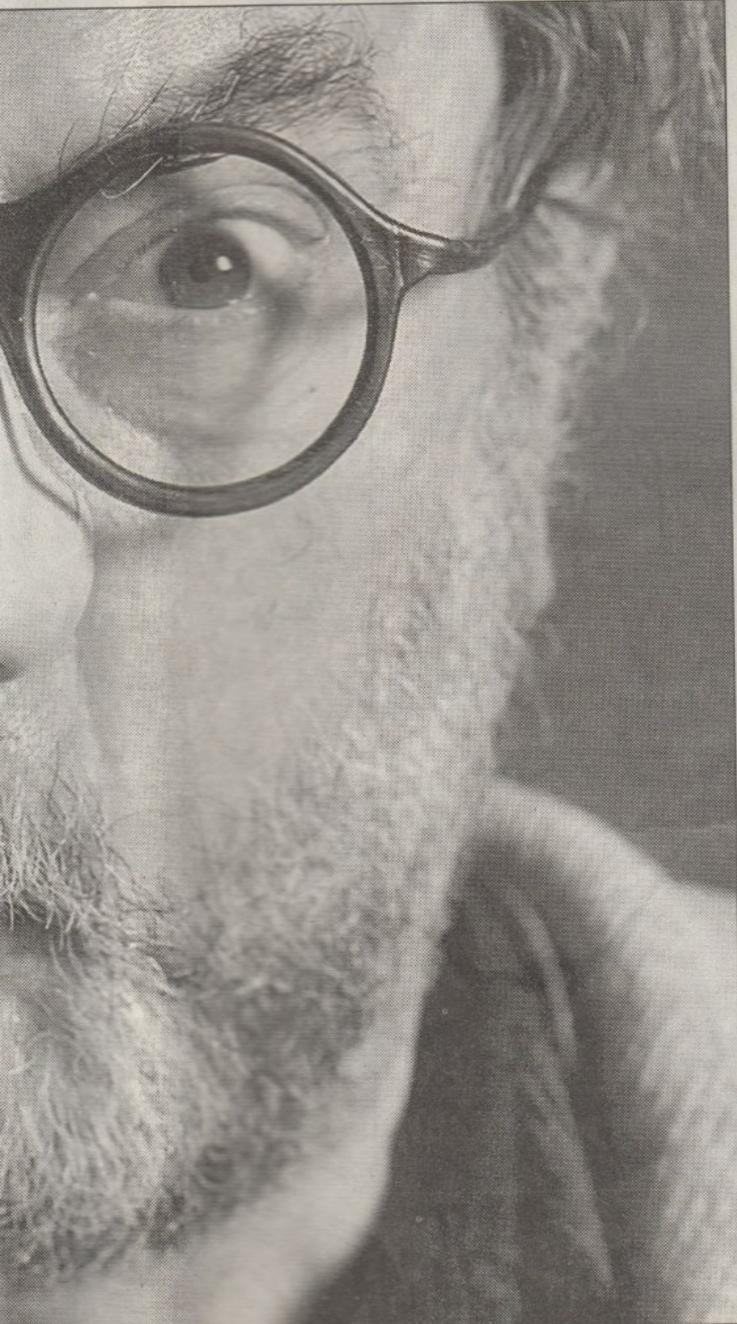
Gaulier remembers Baron Cohen well: "He was a good clown, full of spirit", but he refuses to take credit for the achievements of his protégés. "I don't feel any responsibility for their success," he says. This isn't self-depreciation, it is a statement of pride. His way of teaching is

designed to leave only the subtlest traces of his involvement. There are certain principles involved, but no method. "I hate the idea of lots of little Gauliers going out into the world," he declares.

In this, his approach differs from that of the late Jacques Lecoq, the guru of modern movement-based theatre, with whom he studied in 1968 and subse-

u. Dominic Cavendish meets Philippe Gaulier, master of the put-down e to the ridicule

Picture: PHILIP HOLLIS



.....
‘Gaulier was brutally honest, constantly reminding me when I was rubbish’

Sacha Baron Cohen

special style; what I teach more is a wonderful spirit. People have to find a way of being beautiful and surprising.” By beauty he means “anyone in the grip of pleasure or freedom”.

Not everyone can be beautiful and surprising. Gaulier presses students to look for that magic something: if they keep coming back empty-handed, there is no point carrying on. “I have to tell them they shouldn’t be actors.”

Gaulier’s refusal to mince words is one of the most notorious aspects of his teaching style. One former pupil, John Wright, who runs the theatre company Told by An Idiot, has described his tuition as “open-heart surgery without anaesthetic”. Others will testify to tears, dejection and uncontrollable butterflies.

Baron Cohen recalls: “During the time I studied with him he was brutally honest, constantly reminding me of when my performance was rubbish and very occasionally telling me when it was not so bad.” Far from being discouraged, he found the put-downs enlivening. “Gaulier was so lacking in pretension that he made act-

ing what it should be, which is fun. He is also probably the funniest man I have ever met.”

There are certainly plenty of laughs during the two-hour “melodrama” workshop I sit in on, all of them at the students’ expense. The first half consists of a game of musical chairs. Whoever’s left standing when the music stops has to deliver a tear-jerking ballad. The trick is to make it sound heartfelt and yet sing with a conspiratorial twinkle in the eye. Most find themselves cut short with a “That was truly ‘orrible. Adios immediately.” A few survive. “Not too boring,” mutters the figure in the corner.

Later, volunteers walk towards a chair and address it in plaintive tones (“Ah chair, oh chair, for you my sister sold her body”). Every time Gaulier strikes a tambour, they have to raise their gaze to the “people of Paris”, imagined dozing away in the gods. “Me feel you ‘ave a problem to breathe, me think you got a sickness in Africa,” he tells a participant, adding: “You sound like a hairdresser.” Of the reject’s replacement, he soon demands to know: “Who wants to torture her?”

The odd trembling lip aside, there are no tears. This is the second term; the students are past the shock of the early encounters. You can see resilience in their faces. For those who persevere, the chair ceases to be just a chair and becomes an object of passion.

Those feeling bruised by the morning could console themselves that even the man who became Ali G had his off days, and recently, too. A few months ago, Baron Cohen joined his mentor in a week of clown workshops to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Ecole Philippe Gaulier. “Oh, he was so boring,” Gaulier chuckles. “And I told him so.” He pauses: “But being boring is normal. Sometimes you have to be boring before you can discover something new.”

It’s a pity that Ali G, among his exhortations for the Beckhams to strip for charity, will not be relaying that sentiment to them during his Comic Relief skit. If they had any sense, the king and queen of bland would enrol with Monsieur Gaulier immediately. Public humiliation doesn’t have to diminish the victim; in the right surroundings, it can be well life-changing.

right, are like ‘open-heart surgery without anaesthetic’

designed to leave only the subtlest traces of his involvement. There are certain principles involved, but no method. “I hate the idea of lots of little Gauliers going out into the world,” he declares.

In this, his approach differs from that of the late Jacques Lecoq, the guru of modern movement-based theatre, with whom he studied in 1968 and subse-

quently taught, before setting up on his own, first in Paris, then, in 1991, in London. “You can always tell a Lecoq student,” he sniffs. “Too much emphasis on image.”

His own, unprepossessing aim is to help the individual student find his or her strengths. “I look at the person and say, ‘This way is good for you, this place is full of possibilities’. I don’t teach a