

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?

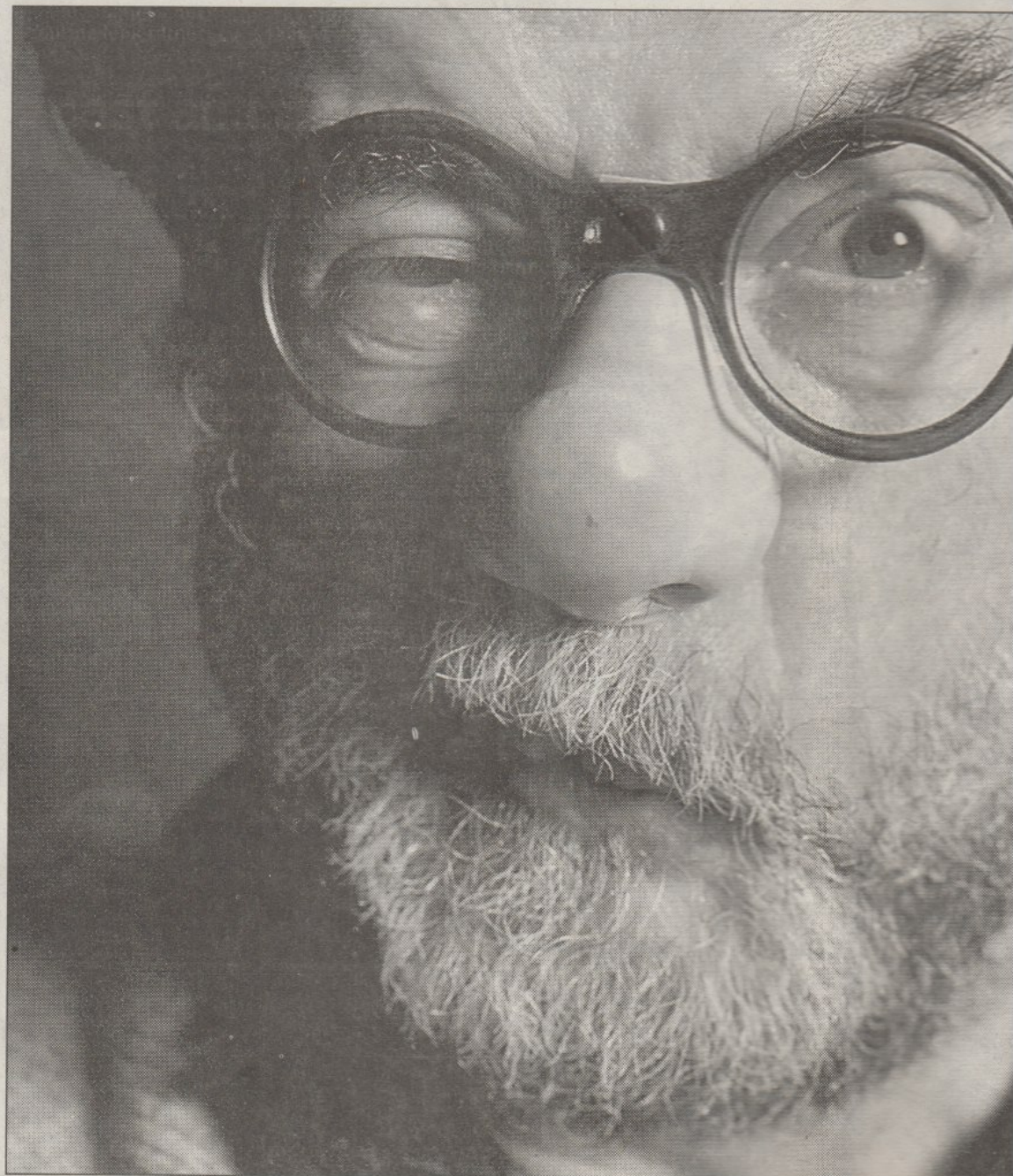
Talented though he knows he is, Baron Cohen admits that he owes much to someone very few fans of Ali G will have come across. The person Britain has to thank — at least in part — for the Ali G phenomenon is a 57-year-old French drama teacher called Philippe Gaulier, whom Baron Cohen studied under for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

