

State OF FEY

HER QUICK WIT TOOK TINA FEY FROM THE WRITING DESK TO THE TV SET. NOW AMERICA'S COMEDY QUEEN REIGNS ON THE BIG SCREEN, TOO

STORY TIFFANY BAKKER



When Tina Fey found out she had scored a job writing for iconic US TV comedy show *Saturday Night Live*, she threw up. "Friends took me out to lunch, and I excused myself from the table and vomited," she laughs. "It's the only time in my life I've ever vomited from nerves. It's never happened to me before or since."

These days, Fey is a big star. Where once she lambasted celebrities on *SNL*, she now finds herself one of them. "People let you know this fame wasn't supposed to happen," she says. "It's almost as if it's an aberration. They say, 'Are you sooo surprised by this?' But I think anyone this happens to should be very surprised. Except, maybe, for Justin Timberlake – that makes sense."

The writer/comedian has struck a cultural chord. She's risen from writing to starring in *SNL*, then navigated a seamless crossover into film (she wrote and featured in the 2004 hit *Mean Girls*), before going back to TV with the creation of *30 Rock*, her sharply satirical TV-show-within-a-TV-show (on which she both writes and stars).

Only a few months shy of turning 40, Fey has an ever increasing number of starring roles on the big screen to her credit. Most recently, there's been *Baby Mama*, alongside her old mate (and one-time *SNL* castmate) Amy Poehler, as well as *The Invention of Lying* opposite Ricky Gervais and Jennifer Garner.

This time around, in the comedy *Date Night*, where she's paired with Steve Carrell (*The Office*), Fey plays a bedraggled working mum attempting to spark up her tired marriage. The premise of the story is this: a harried New Jersey couple, Phil (Carrell) and Claire Foster (Fey), head out for a dinner date in Manhattan, where a case of mistaken identity ensues. Cue good cops, bad cops, a pair of attractive stoners (Mila Kunis and James Franco), a permanently shirtless 'security expert' (Mark Wahlberg) and a mobster played by *Goodfellas'* Ray Liotta, and, well, you get the gist.

It's a silly romp, but one made exponentially better with the names Fey and Carrell above the title. Fey says the two of them had long wanted to work together. "Doing a comedy about a couple appealed to me," she says. "Steve and I seem a believable couple."

Back in the early '90s, the pair attended The Second City, a famous Chicago improvisational theatre group, even though they didn't know each other at the time. "I was a student there and I'd go and watch the shows for free when Steve was on the main stage," Fey says. "He was like a rockstar, in my mind."

The Second City was also where she met her husband, composer Jeff Richmond (who

later wrote music for *SNL*, as well as the jaunty *30 Rock* theme). After dating for seven years, the couple married in 2001 and now have a four-year-old daughter, Alice. Of Richmond's take on her fame, Fey says: "His main thing is that we should be trying to get into more restaurants; strike now while the iron is hot."

When we meet up in midtown New York City, Fey is wearing a white cardigan, navy and white striped top ("from Target," she says), jeans and loafers. She looks casually chic, but also – for want of a better word – normal. Even her choice of neighbourhood is normal. She lives on Manhattan's sedate Upper West Side, an area not exactly teeming with bohemian culture.

"I tried living downtown when I first moved to New York," she deadpans. "But I'm just not cool enough. I know my limits."

In person, she's a little shy and much more

my mom and I share. My dad isn't as funny as mom, but he has his moments."

While Fey wasn't unpopular at school, she was an observer, writing an anonymous column in her school newspaper that poked fun at classmates. ("I don't think anyone read it, but my friend and I thought it was hilarious.")

"I was a good student," she says. "Sort of quietly sarcastic, but definitely not any kind of class clown. I had two years that were really fun and then two years that were less fun, and that's how it goes in high school – every other year seems pretty good. I was so square, innocent and naive, I think, in some way, it made it easier for me to have a good time."

At university, she studied drama, acting and playwriting ("I was still very square, still very naive, still had a good time"). But it was improvisational comedy that ultimately



(from left) Fey with *Date Night* co-star Steve Carrell; impersonating Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin on *Saturday Night Live* in 2008.

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contained than you might expect. Clutching a Starbucks coffee cup, from which she does not drink, she seems somewhat jittery at times. True, that sarcastic humour is never far from the surface, a punch-line often at the ready, but I half expected her to be more like Liz Lemon, the goofy, food-obsessed TV writer she portrays on *30 Rock*. "I may not have a lot of hope for her, but I have a lot of affection," says Fey of her alter ego. "I look at her and think, there, but for the grace of God..."

Fey grew up in Philadelphia with her brother, Peter, who's eight years older, mother Jeanne, who has Greek heritage, and father Donald, of German and Scottish ancestry ("An interesting mix," she says). There was a lot of humour enjoyed in the Fey household. The family watched Monty Python, Marx Brothers movies, *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, *The Carol Burnett Show*, *Blazing Saddles*, *Young Frankenstein* and, of course, *SNL*.

"My brother and I were the kind of kids who'd re-enact what we saw on TV," she says. "My brother's really funny and my mother is very dry. There's a bit of grouchiness there that

appealed. "Improv was the first thing that made sense to me," she says. "It was similar to writing, yet it was performing – but not as if I were doing Stanislavski-trained acting, which I could never get a handle on. It clicked for me."

Date Night gave Fey the opportunity to return to those roots. "It was great to improvise with Steve and be reminded of how to do that. I hadn't done that in a long time, and Steve is so good, it reminds you there's no reason why anybody should ever be anything less."

Asked to describe the difference between male and female comics, she pauses. "Women enjoy the minutiae of human behaviour and personality. Men are likely to go bigger – they'll do a shark or a robot... or a masturbating bear."

While male comics have generally had a propensity to veer toward the dark side, Fey reckons the new generation of female comics are "good girls".

"The women I've encountered in comedy are much less self-destructive," she says. "A lot of times, they're girls who went to good colleges, they're nice daughters and comedy is their only wild part – their only outlet." >

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What then, would she say should her daughter one day decide to become a comedian or an actor? Fey grimaces. "I have a plan for this, I have a bag and a rope..." She smiles: "No, I'd insist she didn't do it professionally until she was older, and I'd try to encourage her to do plays. If you start in plays, you learn hard work. And I'd talk to her about writing and directing as other options."

It was while she was still at *SNL* that Fey wrote her first film, *Mean Girls* (which starred a pre-train wreck Lindsay Lohan). She may have been ensconced in television, but she says there was something special about seeing her cinematic creation up on the big screen. "My husband and I used to go into theatres to check up on it," she says. "We'd watch 10 minutes in one theatre and then, if I reached a part I thought was boring, we'd go into another theatre. It was exciting."

She says she'll go back to writing films when *30 Rock* is "done for good". Now in its fourth season, the show was originally a cult favourite in the US, loved by critics, although not widely watched by the mainstream (after one Emmy win, Fey thanked the show's "dozens and dozens of fans"). That is, not until the US Presidential election of 2008, when a strange thing happened to Fey. It turned out she shared a physical resemblance to one Sarah Palin, the Republican vice-presidential candidate and the greatest gift to American comedy since George W Bush. Soon, there was an ongoing national dialogue about not whether she'd portray Palin, but when.

"I felt mounting pressure to do it, which was this strange thing of people saying, 'You're gonna do it, right?', and I sort of figured, oh, I'll do it, I'll stink and everyone will write on the internet that it was

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a big disappointment and the whole thing will be over. So the reaction to all of that stuff was surprising."

Fey's perfect turn as the Republicans' poster girl made her a superstar overnight and, in its aftermath, boosted *30 Rock*'s ratings substantially. For America, it became something of a culturally defining moment. (Fey's *30 Rock* co-star Alec Baldwin concurred, commenting at the time, "The collective consciousness has said, 'Tina, darling, where have you been? Where on earth have you been?'"")

By the end of it, Fey felt as if she were running for office herself. "The Palin stuff happened as quickly to me as it did to Sarah Palin," she says. "It became stressful, because I'd been on TV long enough to know that if you say something in interviews, people might take it the wrong way. But even I was caught unaware of it and anything I said pertaining to [portraying Palin] ended up on the news."

Such was the monumental reaction, there was even talk that Fey's performance influenced the public in voting the Republicans out of office. Fey scoffs at the notion. "Americans are smarter than that. I do think, however, that was definitely a strange part of that election."

Next up, the comedian will lend her voice to the animated feature *MegaMind*, which also features the voices of Will Ferrell and Brad Pitt. Surely, given the cinematic company she now keeps, Fey must accept she's a moviestar. "Brad Pitt!" she laughs. "Come on, they keep those people at a safe distance from TV people like me. You go to the Golden Globes and there's almost an electric fence between the TV and movie sections. They don't let us get too close." **SM**

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