



Omid Djallil
Picture: SARAH
LUCY BROWN

Danielle Lett chats to the comedian to find out how he's loving life in the region, and what audiences can expect on his latest tour

OMID DJALILI: *'There's something magical about East Anglia'*

The past couple of years have given us all time to reflect. Whether it's changing jobs, ending relationships, or moving somewhere new, lockdown has made most of us reassess our priorities.

And that's exactly what happened to Omid Djalili.

One of the country's most beloved comedians and actors, Omid had been residing in West London for years. But the stresses and strains that came with the pandemic inspired the comic and his family to up and leave the bright lights of the big city for calmer pastures.

But why Suffolk, of all places?

"I'd been thinking about moving for a while anyway, and there's something about Suffolk I've always liked," he explains.

"Then when the pandemic happened, our area became a real Covid hotspot, and it felt like the perfect time to leave. We have friends here in Suffolk, and there's just something almost magical about this place."

Working as a touring comedian, Omid has pretty much seen all that the UK has to offer - but the tranquillity and serene beauty of the East Anglian county is what drew him in.

"I'm a big fan of art, and just a few miles outside of Ipswich you can see where Constable painted the Hay Wain. Suffolk is full of these secret pockets of rural and rugged beauty, and as you get older, you want to be nearer the sea.

"And I think the traffic in London was killing me. It's only half an hour longer to travel from Suffolk to Central London from where I was in West London. It would take me an hour and a bit, and I think when I once did that journey in two hours, that's when I snapped. I thought 'I can't do this anymore, it's ridiculous. It's time to move'. And I'm very happy I've done it."

Feeling happier and rejuvenated, Omid would agree that life in Suffolk has been nothing but good to him - especially during lockdown.

"When you come from the big city, having been raised there all my life, stress is something you learn to live with. But I've found I've been less stressed since living here - there's no vibe of stress in the air. There's even something about the parks here, they're very tranquil. Whereas the parks in London, when you're going for walks, you're surrounded by people who are still stressed. There are so many people in London on their phones, and you see them shouting into their wireless headsets. You just get used to living with mad people talking to themselves, even in restaurants.

"I do think being here during lockdown made everything a bit easier. There's a great sense of community in Suffolk, and we got to know some of the neighbours very quickly. And I found that people adhered to the rules a bit

more - everyone tended to keep their distance and were a bit more respectful. I think that just comes with country life."

And once restrictions began to lift, Omid soon took full advantage of his surroundings and began to explore the county and all that it has to offer.

"I'm a big fan of Felixstowe and the beach. I like Nacton too, there's a big stretch of river that's great to walk along. And there's so many wonderful places to eat in Suffolk as well. I can't even tell you the names but you can just go on a walk anywhere and come across these wonderful little restaurants and pubs that serve amazing food."

But perhaps one of Omid's favourite things about living here is Ipswich Town Football Club - and as a lifelong Chelsea fan, he's managed to find love in his footballing heart for another bunch of boys in blue.

"Chelsea has been my club since I was five, but as a football fan, anyone who knows Ipswich from the late 70s and early 80s remember when they became everyone's second team. They had great players, a lot of their players played for England, like Terry Butcher, Paul Mariner, and Kevin Beattie. And of course we had Sir Alf Ramsey and Sir Bobby Robson who became England managers."

And it's not just the legacy of Ipswich Town that Omid loves - but it's the buzz of a home day match game that keeps him returning, time and time again.

"I'd been there a few times to see Chelsea away games, and there's a magic about Portman Road and the club itself," he says.

After having made friends with a group of fans, Omid heads to the blue's home turf whenever he can.

"The first three games I went to, Ipswich drew 2-2. So for the fourth game, I showed up wearing a tutu. I thought it was a great gag, but the fans didn't see the satirical nature of it," he chuckles.

"I made this prediction, I said 'the manager is going to go by Christmas' and he did. And now we've got a younger manager who's doing well at the moment. It's a League One team, but Ipswich definitely belong in the Premier League."

The beautiful game aside, comedy is of course Omid's number one passion.

Having been a touring comedian since the 1990s, the stage is undoubtedly his second home.

So imagine how it felt when the comedy circuit came to an abrupt halt following the coronavirus pandemic.

Like everyone else in the arts and entertainment sector, Omid and his fellow funnymen took to the likes of Zoom and social app Clubhouse to adapt to the sudden, seismic shift.

Continued on page 14

Continued from page 13

“Between February and April, I found myself on Clubhouse with a lot of other comedians. We’d host workshops, where British and American comedians would club together and work on material, and there were some pretty high-profile comedians on there. Lockdown did give us these new and exciting opportunities which we’d never had before,” he says.

Lockdown also gave Omid the chance to explore his Iranian heritage, which he is incredibly thankful for. “I also worked on my own pet project, which was to get closer to my Iranian culture. Because Clubhouse connected me with swathes of people in Iran and the Iranian diaspora, I was able to workshop jokes in Persian. Through that, I’ve now got some very exciting opportunities which I will be pursuing in two languages.”

Like many, Omid adapted and made the most of the situation that lockdown brought - but online comedy didn’t come without its struggles.

“One of the things I liked about Zoom was seeing everyone. During one Zoom gig, there were about 639 people on, and I didn’t know everyone should be muted. Around 15 people were on, and there was just so much noise going on. I was confused and I wasn’t aware of the chat function. At one point, everyone clubbed together and muted me, and they thought it was hilarious to see me talking but unable to hear me. I could see them suddenly laughing, so I rang up my promoter who said ‘they’ve muted you’.

“So when I finished the gig, I took the computer into the toilet and said ‘I’d like to finish with the sound of my career’, and I flushed the toilet. That became such a brilliant way to end my shows, and I kind of miss that big finish as you can’t replicate it in a live show.

“Comedy in lockdown had its good and bad points, but I’m so excited to come back to the live arena. One thing is comedians have really realised is that if anyone took this job for granted, we certainly don’t anymore - it’s the best job in the world.”

After nearly two years of on-and-off lockdown restrictions, theatres and venues across the county have reopened, much to the comedy circuit’s delight.

But Omid has noticed there is still a sense of hesitancy to go back out.

“There’s definitely still nervousness around coming to shows, and it’s been a challenge to get people to the theatres. We just have to be as funny as possible, so word of mouth gets out, and so that people know it’s an unmissable show.

“You can stream things, but having a shared experience has a physiological effect on the body and brain that can’t be replicated. But once people do come out and have seen a show, they realise how much they needed a laugh in a communal setting.

“We can’t really meet people after shows anymore, but the feedback on social media has

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been tremendously overwhelming. You really have to up your game as a comedian, and this is definitely the best show I've ever done. The level of content has to be higher as everyone's watched everything in lockdown. You're now competing with the best comedians in the world and their Youtube clips. I was happy I did some warm-up gigs before the tour though, because if you don't have it, they will heckle you, so I feel it's been a very creatively exciting time."

So what can audiences expect on Omid's latest tour, The Good Times Tour?

"The first half is about the shared experience and what we've all been through lately, and the second half is about how to move forwards. A lot has happened in the last two years, such as Black Lives Matter and the Me Too movement, but we've only really talked about it online or on TV, so to make sense of it from a comedic standpoint has been a challenge. The most exciting part of the show is the ending though, to see how much we've learned."

The second half of the show features a controversial routine that Omid performed on the comedy circuit back in the early days of his career - and has produced some varying results at

ABOVE AND LEFT:
Omid's The Good Times Tour will be in the region this spring and summer

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each gig.

"I did a routine at a press launch at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in the late 90s in front of 300 members of the press and the industry. I thought it was funny but it went down like a lead balloon, and it got me cancelled. I was asking people to represent me and they said 'no', and how I 'should be ashamed of myself,'" he recalls.

"I think the reason why I got cancelled though - I don't think I was the problem - it was institutional racism. They didn't get what I was trying to do, because I often make fun of my culture. And the routine involved Middle Easterners being the hero, and I don't think people in 1995 got it in a comedy setting - they thought there was something wrong with me. But I believe and hope society has changed since then, so I've put that routine at the end of my show on this tour as a test to see if the audience finds it funny. Sometimes it's worked, and sometimes it hasn't. But I've stuck with it, because it's high risk."

Not one to shy away from a comedic challenge, Omid is also hoping to win Suffolk audiences over now he calls this county home.

"I have to tell you, Suffolk is a place I've struggled as a comedian, and it's another reason

why I moved here. I've always thought they've never really liked me here. I've never had a problem in Norwich, but I've always struggled here and I don't know why, so I feel Suffolk is the place I have to crack.

"I remember one time I performed in Ipswich on a Saturday night after the football and they started taking it out on me, saying I was the worst comedian. But I realised the team got hammered 4-0, and they weren't in the best of moods anyway. So it'll be interesting to see if I can turn a corner with this routine and win those Suffolk audiences over."

To find out more about Omid's tour or to book tickets, visit omidnoagenda.com

Omid's The Good Times Tour will be in the region on the following dates:
Thursday March 3, Charter Hall, Colchester Tuesday 15 and Wednesday 16 March, The Apex, Bury St Edmunds Friday March 11, Marina Theatre, Lowestoft Thursday July 21, Norwich Theatre Royal, Norwich