Blazer, $2260, shirt, $815, trousers, $450, boots, $950, **Dunhill**
Opposite: Blazer, $505, **Theory** at Bloomingdales Dubai. Sweater, $240, **Inis Meáin** at Mr Porter

A Comedy of Eras

Years after leaving Egypt to pursue a new chapter in the States, Bassem Youssef is making a reset look really, really good

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Blazer, $1395, trousers, $625, **Emporio Armani**. Turtleneck, $445, **Paul Smith** at Mr Porter. Watch, price on request, **Audemars Piguet**
Opposite: Trousers, $545, **Emporio Armani**. Turtleneck, $310, **Altea** at Mr Porter. Watch, price on request, **Audemars Piguet**

Blazer, $2015, trousers, $450, bag, $1415,, **Dunhill**. Turtleneck, $155, **Mr P.** at Mr Porter. Watch, price on request, **Audemars Piguet**

Bassem Youssef didn't even realise he was constipated. Not a whisper. Not an inkling. He was walking through life blind, and kinda backed up. And, really, aren't we all?

Of the many metamorphoses the Egyptian surgeon-turned-satirist has undergone in the past six years, one of the quieter ones has been a move to a vegan lifestyle. Looking at him makes you want to be a vegan too.

Sitting in a Dubai restaurant that's been opened four hours early especially for him, Youssef looks like a celebrity version of himself. His skin glows. His eyes twinkle. His teeth are Getty-stock-image white. His chest is laughably huge and anchored by pecs that look like they could strangle you.

Forget you, meat. Get lost, eggs. Ciao, milk: take your pasteurisation and calcium talking points, and shove it. We'll have what he's having.

Not that Bassem Youssef needs it, but you're happy for him, vegan lifestyle and all.

"It's much better for your health: your sexual health, heart health, skin health, your being in general. I sleep deeper and longer, I have more energy, I don't feel as tired, my recovery time after working out is shorter. My skin is clear. My hair is better. My eyes don't have dark circles. And no more constipation!" he says.

Marvellous, no? Youssef quickly explains that he's on a sort of mission – maybe just a side hustle – to convince the Arab world at large to embrace, or at least consider, veganism. His strategy? Empathy.

"I get many kinds of resistance. I have the resistance that comes from a place where it's deeply rooted that, if you don't eat enough meat, you don't get enough protein, for instance," he says. "I respond differently to everyone, because the criticism comes in different forms."

For all of this effervescence, for all of this inside-out vegan'd glow, there's a feeling of overwhelming calm that comes with this iteration of Bassem Youssef. Not a tiredness, not a weariness, but a calm. That much wasn't totally expected.

It may be hard to remember – for Youssef, it's still immediate – but there was a time when just about the whole of Egypt, and masses across the Arab world, would wait; anxious, excited and expectant to see what he would do every week. He would perform. They would watch – usually tens of millions of them – and then reactions would follow: good, bad, ugly, aggressive, impassioned, and always, always overwhelming. It was a story that would play out much the same, week after week, as *Al Bernameg*, his legendary, long-running satirical comedy show, would go to air.

It was something wholly unseen in the Arab world: satire with bite, without fear, with the full-throated cheek displayed by the likes of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert in the West. For those years, Youssef was, indisputably, one of the most infamous figures in the Arab world – one that sparked joy and rage, if not necessarily in equal measure.

"The burden and the expectations were a nightmare from the get-go; from even doing the first YouTube videos. Once you are a public figure and you have a product, the expectations are deafening and paralysing," he says. "Even without the pressure, there were the expectations of making the show better the next week. Because everybody is a critic."

That pressure, those expectations, the long-hours, the celebrations, the highs and the lows would – as it happened, literally overnight – be extinguished into total nothingness.

"When the news came to me, saying, 'There's no more show,' I felt a mixture of sadness and relief. Because, thank God, that pressure is off."

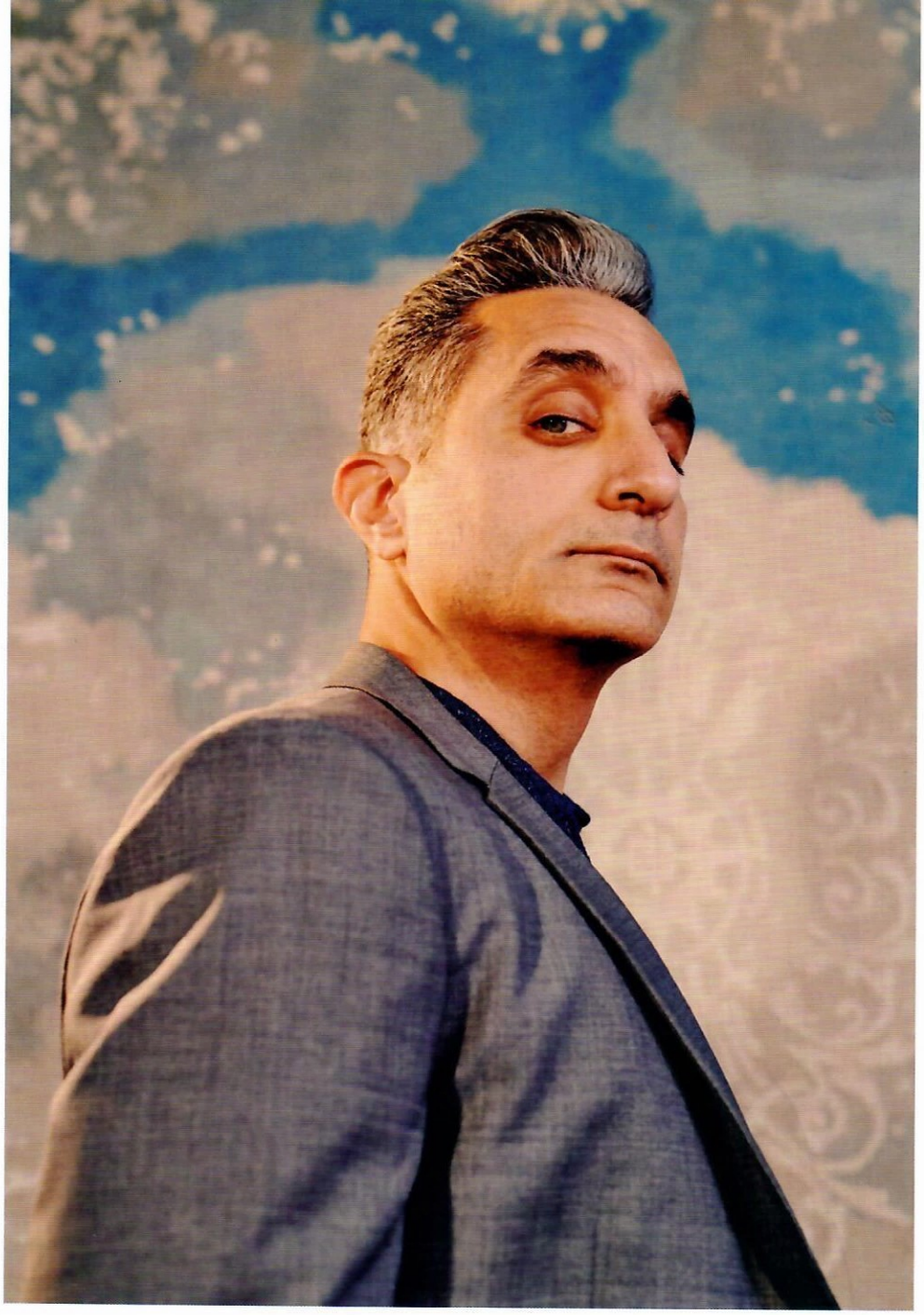
That decision was made when tensions between *Al Bernameg* and the powers that be heightened. No public order was ever made against Youssef, nor his show. But he sensed that it was time to move on. A call had to be made, so he made it.

A few sporadic voices say that he "bailed out" on his audience – as though continuing the show was a viable option. No, the ending had come. What awaited was the unknown.

A different kind of pressure greeted Youssef on the other side. Pressure of the existential kind.

"I had to figure out what I should do with my life. I had to change not just careers – but countries. I had to change trajectories. There was a whole month that passed by when I didn't know what to do. You ask me, how was the transition? I think I'm still in that transition."

There were temptations. Plenty of them. Temptations to come back to Egypt, to make some noise with a meaningless show – a game show maybe, one that paid him more money than he would ever need and have him play nice with those who couldn't stomach his breed of comedy. Then there were other kinds of offers: continue doing his weekly show, but from a studio in another country. The idea of the former disgusted him, but the latter simply broke his heart.



"Even without the pressure, there were the expectations of making the show better the next week."

"I thought that was selfish," he says. The money, he could do without. The show, he knew, was something of the past. He decided that the only way to move on was, well, to move on.

And so, the pivot. A pivot away from Egypt – first to Dubai, and then to the States. And then a different, equally as dramatic, pivot: from performing in Arabic to performing in English.

Youssef arrived in the States with a vision of himself as a one-man live stage show. He gave himself a fresh mountain to climb: the American comedy scene.

"I had to rewire my brain – to relearn what comedy looks and feels like. The pacing, the delivery, the speed, the pausing – everything. I felt that I needed to relearn English as a language as I was doing the comedy. Sometimes, it's scary," he says. "Here, I'm always an outsider, I'm always someone who's a novelty, and I still have to prove myself. I can't come in and say, 'Oh look at me, I was a big shot back in Egypt'. Nobody gives a damn. I have to be humble."

Youssef is still ironing out the kinks of his one-man show. But he does say that it draws on an entirely new side of his persona, as an immigrant. Not exactly America's most beloved demographic at this moment in time.

"I had to speak about that in a different way. In a way that would still make me relevant," he says. "But also in a way that I could draw from previous experience in satire back in my country."

Through this climb, this new hustle, Youssef is determined to keep his newly-bagless eyes trained forward.

"The first rule of making it is to not look back and see where you were – it's about where you are right now. I'm in a good place right now. Nothing that could be compared… I can't continue living on that. It's a new game."

One comedy nuance that he's found amusing, amidst all of this transition, is America's far more politically correct landscape – one that's especially heightened at the moment. Youssef believes that while political correctness is stifling some comedy in the US, as a minority he is unlikely be subject to its limitations. But the idea of that political correctness affecting speech, even if intended for good, still bothers him.

"I stopped judging people for what they say – but I want to understand why they say it. If you start judging people, and lose your head, that means that you are perfect, that you have reached nirvana, which is far from the truth. You need to listen to people and understand."

So, kind of like his approach to veganism, then?

"Kind of like that."

It checks out: comedy is nothing if not the ability to empathise with a viewpoint, put it into words, then spin it into a belly-deep laugh.

But let's forget the veganism and the one-man show for a moment (we ought to mention that there's a podcast, film, and imminent TV series, too). This much still matters above all: For a generation (at least) many in the Arab world will look to Youssef as a kind of symbol. That's true, whether that burden is fair or not. He will remain, to hundreds of thousands, if not millions, a polarising figure.

Some still look at him with a sense of awe. Some still want to know the method to the comedian's clever madness.

"I do not have a formula," he says, with a pause. "Do the right thing. Just do the right thing."

Remade in America *is streaming now on all podcast platforms.* Tickling Giants *is streaming now on Netflix*