

BIG BROTHER HOUSE, THIS IS AJ



GRAZIA **INTERVIEW**

AJ Odudu has gone from sleeping on the floor of her dad's flat to presenting the TV reboot of the decade. But, she tells *Josh Smith*, it's been a long, hard slog to the top



PHOTOGRAPHS ELLIOTT WILCOX
STYLING JUSTIN HAMILTON

AJ

Odudu has spent the day on her *Grazia* cover shoot posing on top of old school TV sets, which is apt as this autumn the presenter will host the TV reboot of the decade – the return of *Big Brother* (this time on ITV) – alongside her former 4Music co-host, Will Best.

The 35-year-old has been keeping news of her biggest hosting role to date under wraps since last year, when she finally landed the gig after a series of top secret meetings.

‘When my agent called to tell me the news, I was on another job. I went outside with rollers in my hair, one eyelash on, one eyelash off, looking bonkers in a dressing gown and slippers.’ Chic.

AJ says of this incarnation of the iconic reality show, ‘It’s a show that I love. It will definitely have a nod to the past but we also want to bring it forward and put our own stamp on it too.’

When *Big Brother* first launched in the UK in 2000, long before the tsunami of copycat shows that came in its wake, it felt like a game-changing social experiment and, in its heyday, pulled in audiences of five million. ‘I remember watching Brian Dowling and he was the first openly gay man I’d ever seen – what a joy!’ says AJ. ‘And Nadia Almada was the first trans person on the show, which was so insightful because growing up in Blackburn, I didn’t see that diversity in my day-to-day life.’

So why is the time right for a *Big Brother* comeback? After all, when it was cancelled five years ago, following 19 series, the feeling was that the show had very much run its course. ‘It’s had a really good rest,’ she says with her trademark cackle. ‘People are craving realness. People are craving authenticity. It’s so hard to be yourself nowadays. There are so many reference points of people telling you who you are

meant to be. This is going to be a snapshot of real people who don’t have to do anything or be anything but themselves. You don’t have to be young, single, able bodied, or be completely at peace with your gender identity or your sexuality. You just need to be interested, be interesting: that is the criteria.’

Has the original *Big Brother* presenter Davina McCall been in touch with any advice? ‘The Queen herself has given me her blessing,’ AJ says. ‘She sent me an amazing video when she found out that I got the gig, saying, “You are going to smash it.”’

This isn’t AJ’s first foray into the *Big Brother* universe, though. In 2013, she presented one series of the spin-off show, *Bit On The Side*, with Rylan Clark. She was axed from the show in what was termed a ‘mutually agreed decision’ but AJ has since hinted it was on the grounds of her accent and appearance. When I bring this up, the interview takes an emotional turn.

‘It definitely makes me feel super-proud that I can be in a really dark place and come back. I was so broken when they didn’t ask me to come back. For really pushing through, bouncing back from so much rejection and then coming back on top, I can’t help but feel like I deserve a massive pat on the back,’ she continues, wiping away tears. ‘I’ve clawed my way back without being horrible, just by working hard and being myself. Back then I didn’t even want to get out of bed.’

AJ dug herself out of bed with the support of her parents and her seven siblings – ‘It’s taken a village to get me mentally prepared for this industry.’

It was her friend Chris who made her set up a YouTube fitness channel when TV work dried up. ‘Some people still think to this day that fitness blogging was the first thing I did. But no, fitness blogging is what I did when I fell into a deep depression because TV wasn’t going my way.’

During this time, AJ honed the art of ▶

From top: With *Big Brother* co-host Will Best; AJ made it to the *Strictly* finals in 2021 with Kai Widdrington



RIGHT Jacket and skirt, price on request, both **Versace**; bra, £1,200, **Dior**; shoes, £577, **Piferi**; ear cuff, £4,250, necklace, £14,900, rings (left hand), £1,860, £2,270, and £1,200, (right hand) £5,500 and £3,750, watch, £24,900, and bracelet £7,650, all **Cartier**

PREVIOUS PAGE Catsuit, £732, **Pucci**; shoes, £430, **Paris Texas**; earrings, £15,600, **Ananya**; ring, price on request, and bracelets, £297 and £217, all **Alexis Bittar**



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THE REJECTION
IS NONSTOP.
IT'S BEEN A REAL
ROCKY ROAD



HAIR: STEFAN BERTIN AT THE WALL GROUP USING HAIR BY SAM MCKNIGHT; MAKE-UP: NOHELIA REYES USING VICTORIA BECKHAM BEAUTY; NAILS: ROBBIE TOMKINS AT LMC USING DIOR MANICURE COLLECTION AND MISS DIOR HAND CREAM; LIGHTING: JARED PRICE; FASHION ASSISTANTS: GAVI WEISS, LORNA LANE, ANNA MENSHYKOVA; PROPS: LONDON PROP HIRE

‘fake it till you make it’. ‘I used to feel so nervous going to events because people would be like, “What are you up to?” And the truth was I was up to nothing. Five years ago I was living on my dad’s bedroom floor in a council flat, working in a call centre, and I was just like, “I don’t live where you guys think I live and I’m not doing what you guys think.” I felt like a real fraud.’

As a Black woman in the entertainment industry, she has faced prejudice, too. ‘I’ve definitely been in interviews for a more mainstream role where I’ve arrived with my hair in an Afro, or with a natural hairstyle – twists or braids – and the directors and producers have said, “We just see you as someone who’s like more suited to a more urban channel. Or people have said, “We’ll give you elocution lessons to get rid of that Blackburn accent, ‘cause it doesn’t really match how you look.”’

The resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement marked a turning point for AJ. ‘All of the traumas that I’d buried were pushed to the forefront of my mind. It was pouring out of every single wound. You don’t realise how much you’ve had to control your image to make it palatable for everyone to engage with you,’ she says. ‘But I feel more empowered to talk about the injustices that I faced – so that hopefully no one else has to face them in the future.’

Professionally, things picked up for AJ when she made it to the finals of *Strictly Come Dancing* in 2021, which led to new presenting gigs: from the revival of *The Big Breakfast* to *The Big Interiors Battle* and *The Greatest Auction*. It wasn’t an easy ride from there on out, though.

‘Being a TV presenter is being rejected professionally for a living. You have to learn to not be jealous of your own friends,’ she admits. ‘The rejection is nonstop. It’s been a real rocky road. But all of those rejections and knock-backs have taught me to enjoy every single thing. Like when I was reading out the Eurovision scores [in 2022], it was only 30 seconds but I wanted to make it the best 30 seconds of telly you have ever seen.’

AJ says she has learned to fully embrace who she is ‘without being completely lost in what other people say’. She’s not only survived the rocky road that led her here, she is thriving. ‘I’m just so glad that I’ve managed to find my way back to me.’ *‘Big Brother’ will be on ITV2 and ITVX this autumn*



THIS PAGE Top, £290, Emporio Armani; trousers, price on request, MM6 Maison Margiela; shoes, £1,023, Balmain; bracelet, £84, Dinosaur Designs

OPPOSITE Dress, £1,180, 16Arlington; shoes, price on request, Atlein X Christian Louboutin; bracelet, £4,800, Van Cleef & Arpels; ring, £15,800, Tasaki