Laughter and the 11 September Disaster

As I was growing up, my parents did every-thing to prevent me from being on stage. When I first told that I wanted to go to drama school, or dance lessons, my par-ents would say, ‘You’re Muslim, Muslim girls aren’t allowed to do that!’ and I could never understand why. My whole life has been spent breaking down barriers and fighting to try and get there. Yes, I am Muslim, that is my religion—and relationship with God. It has nothing to do with my time on stage. I can separate the two, being Muslim and being a comedian. I think a lot about this point and I miss the days when I was playing football and think, ‘he’s a quarter Jewish isn’t he?’ His football and reli-gion are totally unrelated.

I don’t suddenly stop being Muslim when I am on the stage. It comes naturally to me to be a performer.

I started doing stand-up in September 2000. I was a science teacher in London be-fore then, and the school where I worked was so rough, the only time the students lis-tened to me was when I was funny. When I made them laugh they would listen to me, and although they weren’t interested in chemistry and biology, at least they had a good lesson. Then I took that comedy to the stage. I see no difference between making the kids laugh in class and making people laugh in a comedy club. I did a comedy writing course, and my teacher suggested that my material was so funny and original that I should go out and perform it. So I started doing the London Comedy Circuit.

The circuit is a series of clubs in London that range from clubs in the basements of pubs, to purpose-built comedy clubs. The first time I did stand-up, I stood in the basement of a dingy bar in Brixton, London with no stage, no microphone, and the bar was filled with people on a night out, so it was very noisy. I stood there and spoke and people laughed. In fact they laughed so much I got an encore. Over the period from September 2000 to June 2002, I have done over 500 gigs, including the London Palladi-um, Edinburgh Playhouse, and Royal Albert Hall. I won the London Comedy Festival in June 2001 and this year in May 2002 I won comedian of the year at David Beckham’s World.

I did stand up for a year without my hijab. I would go to working men’s clubs and do my act and they would love it, it would interest people, and people would laugh. There are very few women in stand-up comedy any-where. Even when I go abroad to do gigs, there aren’t many women in stand-up comedy nor have I ever met another Muslim comedian. I do not wear the hijab nor have I ever met another Muslim woman. I do not wear the hijab normally in everyday life, so I thought ‘why should I wear it when I perform?’ When I started performing, I was the only woman on the bill. There were four other men, one of whom was Muslim.

The audience loved him even though he dressed up as the Asian version of the porn star Pamela Anderson. I went on stage, and with the first two lines of my act I was at-tacked by three Muslim men, who said I was a disgrace to my religion and my culture. They grabbed me by the neck and pushed me against the wall. I didn’t do any gigs for three weeks after that, then I thought ‘why should I stop doing what I am doing? I’m telling the truth and I’m only talking about myself.’

11 September

Before 11 September I was doing very well. People were enjoying my comedy and were fascinated about how a ‘Muslim woman’ could do stand-up comedy. Weren’t ‘Muslim women’ meant to be oppressed, depressed, repressed? ‘Now I mean to be covered from head to toe and locked in the house?’ These are just a few of the stereotypes that the white lady, working class men, who visited comedy clubs, had in their minds. Most of these men had never known a Muslim woman in their life, they never had an opportunity to meet one, and I, they know is what they have seen on TV, and their perceptions of Muslims were based on that. Most of that included Salman Rushdie, oppressed women, wars, bombing and ex-tremism. I feel that these perceptions were reinforced after 11 September. I started wearing the hijab, because I wanted people in comedy clubs to see the image that they are familiar with of ‘the Muslim woman’ and a lot of my jokes were funnier, because the au-dience could visualise it, like when I say, ‘the women in my family all use the same bus pass’.

When 11 September happened I remember watching the TV and being so deeply shocked and distressed. A few hours later I thought to myself, ‘that’s the end of my act’. I will never be able to do my act again, no one will want to listen to me now, not to mention laugh. I did no gigs for weeks because I thought that people were upset about what had happened and it would not be right for me to tell jokes at that point. I was also scared. There was al-ready Islamophobia before 11 September; afterwards there was even more. In London, a Muslim woman wearing a hijab was beaten on the head with a baseball bat as she walked down the street.

Three weeks later I heard white non-Muslim comedians in comedy clubs doing jokes about 11 September. Most of them were not funny. It was then that I thought, ‘if anyone should address this situation it should be me’. Another two weeks passed and I thought I’d try and see how people react. So I got on stage and did exactly the same act that I had done before 11 September. The reaction was very poor and people were scared to laugh. Fear was the main thing. Then I thought it was about time I address the issue.

In Afghanistan the women are not allowed to wear high heels because the click of the heels is meant to attract men... All goats have now been locked up.

I had a gig at a comedy club in Central London and I started with some of my material that I had already done before 11 September then in the middle I did some of my new material. I said, ‘hello my name is Shazia Mirza, at least that’s what it says on my Pilot’s Licence. The whole room erupt-d. The audience which was made up of 60 white English men roared with laughter. The ten-sion in the room had been broken, stereotypes had been broken. Just by stand-ing on that stage, a Muslim woman in come-dy, laughing at myself and allowing others to laugh with me, I had broken barriers all though I didn’t know it at the time. I was just doing what I love. The British public who come to watch me, thank me for giving them permission to laugh at things they normally wouldn’t be able to laugh at.

Islam has seriously surrounded it, and people think that all Muslims are extreme and dangerous. Nobody associates Islam with hu-mour. When I do my comedy, people laugh at the things they recognise. I believe educating people through comedy is a great way of uniting people. When people laugh they re-member why they laughed and the white lady of Britain that go getting drunk then go to comedy clubs to have a laugh, are more likely to listen to a comedian than to a politician.

I don’t know why Islam cannot be associated with humour. Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon Him) laughed many times in his life, and made many jokes, as did Usama Bin Laden. Muslims have a sense of humour too. If your faith is that strong you should be able to laugh at it. Now people of other faiths who come to watch me, ask me questions at the end of my act; they are interested in the life of a Muslim woman and their minds and percep-tions of Muslims. After 11 September are slowly changing, but only because they’ve met and seen me perform. If these people had carried on watching TV and only TV their perceptions would be differ-ent. Europe is multicultural, we live with different coloured people and faiths, yet know nothing about them. Most people are affected by the media, and driven by fear. There is also too much segregation. I went where no Muslim has been before and I hope generations after me will benefit. I hope that I have inspired some Muslim women to have courage too. As a comedian I believe laughter is the strongest tool for communicating with people who shut the door in my face, because I am Muslim. One day I hope we can all laugh together.

Upcoming gigs:
- 31 August 2002 – May Festival, The Hague, Netherlands
- 28 September 2002 – Brussels

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In Afghanistan Talibans mean Student, and they have a lot in common with students: They don’t shave, they both get stoned and talk rubbish, and their mothers walk in and say: ‘It looks like a bomb, has gone off in here!’

Features

Stand-up comedy and Muslim woman. The two sub-jects don’t really go do they? They are not often men-tioned together. Not till I became a stand-up comedi-an and the first Muslim woman in the history of stand-up comedy. I am a stand-up comedian who writes all my own material, most of it from personal experience, and most of it based on truth, because after all the truth is funny, we don’t need to make it up.