

Comedy

SHAZIA MIRZA

Stand-up comedy and Muslim woman. The two subjects don't really go do they? They are not often mentioned together. Not till I became a stand-up comedian and the media rapidly descended upon me, labelling me as '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.

As I was growing up, my parents did everything to prevent me from being on stage. Whenever I suggested that I wanted to go to drama school, or dance lessons, my parents would say, 'You're Muslim, Muslim girls aren't allowed to do that' and I could never understand it. My whole life has been about breaking down barriers and fighting to try and get there. Yes, I am Muslim, that is my religion and my 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 don't look at David Beckham when he is playing football and think, 'he's a quarter Jewish he is!' His football and religion 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 before then, and the school where I taught was so rough, the only time the students listened 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.

► Shazia Mirza

In Afghanistan Taliban means 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!'

The circuit is a series of clubs in London that range from clubs in the basements of pubs, to big 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 Palladium, 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.

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 anyway. Even when I go abroad to do gigs, for example, I never meet Asian women in comedy 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 on stage?' Then I slowly started doing Asian gigs. In March 2001 I did a gig in Brick Lane, East London. It is a heavily populated Muslim Bengali area. I did the gig for charity, where 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

Laughter and the 11 September Disaster



PHOTO: CLARE KENDALL, 2001

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 attacked 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? Wasn't I meant to be covered from head to toe and locked in the house? These are just a few of the stereotypes that the white laddy, 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, all 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 extremism. 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 audience could visualize 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 already Islamophobia before 11 September; afterwards there was even more. In London, a Muslim girl 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 off 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 License.' The whole room erupted. The audience which was made up of 60 white English men roared with laughter. The tension in the room had been broken, stereotypes had been broken. Just by standing on that stage, a Muslim woman in comedy, laughing at myself and allowing others to laugh with me, I had broken barriers although 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 seriousness surrounding it, and people think that all Muslims are extreme and

dangerous. Nobody associates Islam with humour. When I do my comedy, people laugh at the things they recognize. I believe educating people through comedy is a great way of uniting people. When people laugh they remember why they laughed and the white lads 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 perceptions 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 different. 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.

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Upcoming gigs:

- 31 August 2002 - Mep Festival, The Hague, The Netherlands
- 28 September 2002 - Brussels

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