

It's beyond a joke: comics at the Edinburgh Fringe have been addressing difficult political issues – and getting lots of laughs in the process. JOHANN HARI celebrates

# The stand-up revolution

At the turn of the century, the last rites were delivered over the yellowing flesh of political comedy. Bill Hicks was gone, *Spitting Image's* puppets were melted into candles, and even Ben Elton's rabid rants about The Thatch rang hollow now that he was raking in millions writing lyrics to the tunes of the uber-Tory Andrew Lloyd Webber. The genre flat-lined throughout the noughties and the Edinburgh Fringe rocked – if at all – with strictly post-political laughter.

But a funny thing has crawled from the wreckage of the London bombings. A very funny thing, in fact: the resurrection of political comedy. Browsing through the Fringe brochure in London, I realised that the Edinburgh Festival is now – for the first time in decades – soaked, saturated and sodden with politics. You want gags about suicide-murders? Abu Ghraib? Live8? The *Daily Mail*? The IMF and macroeconomics? The CIA's toppling of the Iranian PM Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953? The consequences for industrial society of hitting peak oil-production? The grandchildren of Lenny Bruce are providing all this and more this summer.

I decided to belly-flop into this hyper-market of political comment for a long weekend to ask if our political comedians (and their armies of hecklers) can reveal something about Britain that gets lost in the rivers of newsprint and aeons of 24-hour news.

As I stumble towards my seat for Andy Zaltzman and John Oliver's stand-up show at the Pleasance – my first of twenty-three gigs – a voice-over announces, "This show will operate on a first-past-the-post basis. You only need to laugh at 35 percent of our jokes for this show to be declared a raging success." The audience cheers. My political nerd's heart soars. Can it be comedy about electoral reform?

Zaltzman walks onto the stage, a man as pale as a veal calf and with half a head of curly ginger hair. He is followed by Oliver, who has scruffy trainers and a sweet smile. They open by asking who voted in the General Election. There is a grudging raising of hands. Then they ask who didn't, and there is another smattering of hands. Oliver looks puzzled. "About 40 percent of you couldn't be bothered to vote about whether you voted. That's taking apathy to an almost admirable level." Zaltzman explains that talk about float-

ing voters is a bit misleading – "it doesn't mention they are floating face-down on a reservoir of disillusionment." At times, he says, it seems general elections are "only about how loudly you get to shout the word 'bastard!' at your TV screen." This captures the low, grief-stricken mood among most liberal people better than anyone else I've heard.

The show has dagger-sharp political points to make. Zaltzman suggests that we have got it the wrong way round when it comes to labelling Fair Trade products. "Surely behaving like a decent human being should be taken for granted, not some little treat, an ethical add-on. That's why, instead, we should label all the unfair trade products. I suggest this sign..." He holds up a silhouette of an obese businessman urinating on an emaciated African child.

They apologise that some of their material may seem flat, but they have outsourced their joke-writing to a 10-year-old boy in Indonesia to save cash. "Some of it's a bit specific to his own life. He wrote us the gag: 'What's up with a guy hitting me with a stick? What's it all about, eh?'" Whenever a joke fails, Oliver pleads, "Have a heart! He's only 10!" The two men are accompanied on stage by a Tony Benn doll, who offers increasingly rambling and bizarre responses. "Will I ever fall in love again, Tony?" Zaltzman asks. Mini-Benn snaps back. "Of course, the borders of Kuwait and Iraq were drawn by the British."

The gig has its longeurs – a lengthy skit outlining the future of Europe through the prism of a Doom-style adventure game doesn't work, and there's too much neurotic reliance on props and gimmicks. I found myself wishing they had greater confidence in their ability to hold an audience for an hour without these distractions. But the wordplay is always super-smart. Zaltzman suggests invading Iran next, "to save on printing costs." He frets that North Korea might be developing "a pensions time-bomb." And Britain has had a "history-ectomy", they explain: if that doesn't enter the language, it's a crime.

And yet, and yet... I watched the show with increasing nervousness. The reason is simple: their ideas are so good, I fear they will crop up in future Tory manifestos. Oliver suggests that asylum-seekers should be cryogenically frozen on their arrival in Britain until it is safe to

return them to their own countries – by firing them from an immense "humanitarian cannon". If David Davis had been in the audience, I suspect a small light-bulb would have pinged above his head. After all, in the real, non-satirical world, the Tories fought the last election on a promise to process all asylum-seekers on an island that doesn't exist. But then Zaltzman makes me realise why the Tories will never espouse this plan: "Nobody would want the freezer in their town."

This undertone of disgust at the British right – and the widespread ignorance of British history – runs through all the political gigs here. Chris Addison – a tall, skinny streak of human adrenaline playing at the Assembly Rooms – says, "This is a great time to be British. You sit at home and watch the news, and it will say that India is on the brink of war with Pakistan over Kashmir, Israelis and Palestinians are killing each other, Ian Paisley is refusing to let the IRA surrender – and you can say, 'we did that.'"

But some of the most disturbing comedy in town consists simply of reading out chunks of reality. Dave Fulton, an American comedian living in London, gets an easy but apt laugh when he says, "I'm sorry, I can't write jokes about George Bush while he's still talking for himself." He recites some genuine Bush lines, to roars and applause: "I am honoured to shake the hand of the brave Iraqi citizen who had his hand cut off by Saddam Hussein"; "space is still a high priority for NASA"; "it isn't pollution that is harming our atmosphere, it is the impurities in our air and water that are doing it."

Stewart Lee, in his show *Nineties Comedian*, reads out some of the Abu Ghraib trial transcripts. "The attorney for Charles Graner, the soldier who was leading an Iraqi out a cell on a dog leash, actually said the man was 'not being dragged but crawling of his own free will'. This makes me think – what defences did they consider but reject? And, more importantly, what exactly was he crawling towards? I like to think it was the Western ideal of democracy."

By the second day, I am beginning to see patterns emerging in the comedy. Fulton delivers his act in front of two massive Stars and Stripes, and says, "I know, I know, it's kinda funny seeing them when they aren't burning." Robert Newman – whose honed, densely-written anarchist act is like Noam Chomsky with a ukelele

Steve Maisey/Rex Features



Shazia Mirza: 'I always wanted to be like my white friends, who had abortions and herpes. My mother would say, 'Wait until you are married: your husband will give you all that'

— recalls telling an American, "The rest of the world has a flag too. It's the same as yours, but on fire." Similarly, a thousand jokes are splattered over the idea of suicide-bombers receiving 72 virgins. Scott Capurro says, "I don't get it. Wouldn't they rather just have three slags?" Andre Vincent asks, "Do the female suicide bombers get 72 male virgins? How crap would that be? She would just take out one breast and the whole lot of them would be done."

But the stars of this year's festival are a trio of Muslim comedians, bringing us gags from the front line against both Islamophobia and jihadism. Paul Chowdry is a second-generation Brit — although he adds, "When I was growing up in north London, I didn't know what second generation meant. For years, I thought I was an extra on *Star Trek*." He plays deftly with the prejudices rising against Asian-looking men: "I never used to be able to get a seat on the train. Now I get the whole carriage. Sometimes the whole network." He nervously approaches the only other Asian guy in the audience and says: "Is that your bag?" He explains his experience of the London bombings: "I was speaking to a friend on 7 July and he was really upset, just shaking and crying for hours. So I called the police. He was Muslim, you can't be too sure." He is just as deft at ridiculing the clichés of an age of terror. He points to an empty row of seats, shakes his head sadly, and sighs, "They let the terrorists win."

Omar Marzouk is an Egyptian-Danish comedian (not, this is not the start of a joke) who opens his gig at the Pleasance Dome by saying the Government should help Muslims take on the suicide-bombers. "They should issue us all with fake suicide-bombs, so if one of them gets on the bus we can say, 'don't worry. I got

this one'." He believes the figures showing a rise in attacks on Muslims are misleading: "It's not that there's more prejudice. It's just that after the shooting, Muslims aren't running away. They're saying, 'is it a thug or is it the police? If I run, do I get shot?' If they are grabbed by a BNP thug, they think, 'Oh! Thank god! I'm only going to get my ass kicked!'"

Both Chowdry and Marzouk use conventional racist humour — the kind Bernard Manning still spews out — to invert prejudice rather than reinforce it. Chowdry talks about becoming so enraged by being put through to call centres in India that he decides to join the BNP. He phones to sign up and... gets put through to a call centre in India. Marzouk tells a Scottish heckler in the audience, "Sorry, you need to add vowels or I cannot understand you. I'm making the effort to speak English; you should too. Integration is a two-way street." More provocatively, he tells the audience the (true) story of how the Danes let an Iraqi warlord escape from their prisons just before the war. "They must have figured, 'he's a Paki, he'll never leave the country willingly.'" It's a strange moment, and the mostly white audience doesn't quite know how to react.

But the best Muslim stand-up — and perhaps the best stand-up on the fringe — is Shazia Mirza. A tinder-dry woman from Birmingham, she lives trapped in a pincer movement between two prejudices: those of the wider society against Muslims, and those of many Muslim men against an independent, brilliant woman who earns her living by daring to stand in front of clumps of white men, unveiled and laughing. Her breakthrough set last year toyed with the first set of prejudices. She would introduce herself with the words, "My name is Shazia Mirza. At

least, that's what it says on my pilot's license." Later, she would ask, "Does my bomb look big in this?" But this year — in an even more powerful show — she delivers a long comedic howl against the way Muslim women are treated as second-class citizens, both within their own community and by many well-meaning liberals deferring to what they think of as a fixed and unchanging Muslim culture.

She explains how, as a girl, she was taught by her parents to fear and dread sex. "My mother would constantly say, 'Don't go out after 4pm — you will be raped.' Do all rapists come out at 4.01pm? Do they say, 'Oy, Ahmed, let's get her before *Countdown*'? And she would say, 'Don't have a parting in your hair.' As if men go, 'Phwoar, look at the parting on that.' I always wanted to be like my white friends, who had abortions, herpes and chlamydia. And my mother would say, 'Wait until you are married, your husband will give you all of that.'" Mirza tells us about scores of disastrous "arranged dates", in which educated Muslim men who have always lived in the West express their contempt for a woman who fails to show them "respect". One man says simply, "do you realise if we were still in Pakistan, you would be beheaded?" Another writes to her father saying, "in a lesser family, she would be killed." But Mirza refuses to submit to this militant misogyny. "If men are the ones with no self-control, why do we have to be covered head to toe?" she demands. "Surely it's them who should be covered up — or, better yet, chained."

Mirza takes her audience on a tour of the sexual dysfunctions that are thrown up by her community's conservative morality. One joke runs: "My dad has sex with prostitutes. It's OK — my mum pays. She hates sex." She has a Turkish friend

who has been told constantly that she must have her hymen intact on her wedding night, so she only has anal sex on dates. "I'll be a virgin on my honeymoon," she says. Yeah, a virgin with haemorrhoids." She was constantly being told that any hint of a nipple through a woman's top can "bring a devout Muslim man crumbling into a state of total moral collapse." "So," she says, "these tough suicide-bombers can strike fear into the heart of London — so long as nobody opens a copy of the Sun newspaper." She explains softly, "I'm terrified I'll die a virgin. Not because I'm obsessed with sex. I'm not, I don't think it's that big a deal. But I don't want to get to Paradise and have to sleep with one of the suicide bombers."

If I could pay for every Muslim girl in Britain to see this show — to realise they can rebel and survive — then I would.

Who would have thought, just a year ago, that the Edinburgh Fringe would become a front in the fight against jihadism? But, in a small way, it is now. One of the reasons Christianity has (thankfully) lost much of its potency in Britain is because it has been so thoroughly fileted and poached by comedians. All three Muslim stand-ups show that one of the best ways to undermine their own fundamentalists is to ridicule their preposterous superstitious delusions. Laughter is the antithesis of the turgid puritanism of the religious fundamentalist, an acid that dissolves their self-importance.

We will know the fight against Islamic fundamentalism has been won when Chowdry, Marzouk and Mirza can bring a show called *The Life of Ahmed*, ridiculing the life of the prophet Mohammed, to the Edinburgh Fringe. This year's amazing rebirth of political comedy brings that day a little bit closer.