

# Comedy

## Detention deficit disorder

When our intern, **Pete Davey**, informed us he had fond memories of being taught science at Langdon Park School, E14, by Shazia Mirza—who has since swapped the blackboard for stand-up—we sent him to meet her for a quick catch-up

**At school, we couldn't get our heads round you becoming a comedian.**

'Well, I always liked comedy and I'd done it before at drama school, so I didn't see any reason why I shouldn't perform it.'

**Did your teaching experiences provide inspiration for your routine?**

'God, yes! I used to use you lot as material all the time.'

**You don't miss Langdon Park School, then?**

'No! The kids I taught never wanted to learn anyway. I went back there to film "Fuck Off: I'm a Hairy Woman" for the BBC and spoke to the headmaster. He seemed like he was having a very bad day. I thought: I'm glad I don't have to do this any more. So no, I don't miss it.'

**'Being a comic is like teaching, except your audience is usually marginally better behaved'**

**Would you have missed teaching if you'd taught at school in a privileged area, rather than at a school where the pupils can be quite challenging?**

'Maybe. It must be amazing to teach at a nice school, but I don't think there are any left in London, or the country, for that matter. Hearing about teenagers now—the violence and the guns and kids beating people up—why would I miss that?'

**Teens are in the news a lot for committing crimes—what can be done about bad behaviour?**  
'There's only so much anyone can do. A lot of it's to do with parents who



*Mirza pity Shazia feels sorry for teacher colleagues she left behind*

don't care about their kids. Those kids then repeat what their parents have done, and they don't work, they get pregnant really young... Do you still see anyone from class? Do they still live in Bow—and prison?'

**Not many, but the ones I have seen have kids. One of them went to prison for beating up a man in the park.**

'God, why've they gone like that? They were bad in school but I'd thought they'd grow up.'

**Does it make you sad to hear stuff like that about your former pupils?**

'I just thought they were naughty kids from disruptive families. They didn't have much money and their parents weren't around a lot, but I thought maybe when they integrated into society... Like Dizzee: Dizzzee

Rascal, he went to the same school and worked his way out. I thought they'd all try. When I hear on the news that another youngster has been stabbed, sometimes I do think: Could that be one of the kids who I used to teach?'

**What did you do after you left Langdon?**

'I taught in a few other schools, then went part-time and did some supply teaching. I started going to a comedy-writing class and my teacher suggested that I start performing. I haven't taught for about five years.'

**How did you feel before your first gig?**

'It was in a bar in Brixton, with no microphone. I'll let that speak for itself. It was good, though. I did loads of underground gigs, which were terrifying but always exhilarating. I still do them now.'

**What's it like on stage?**

'It's like being in a classroom except, of course, there's a subtle difference—when you're on stage your audience is marginally better behaved. Nobody tries to jump out the window to escape. Nobody stands up and says, "Fucking hell, Miss, this is really shit!" When you've been a teacher, comedy is the easiest thing ever. You're trained to keep someone's attention for an entire hour. In the classroom I'd try to demonstrate a chemical experiment, but couldn't turn my back because one of the kids would try to set a table on fire. When you've faced that, you can face anything on stage.'

**Did you realise that wearing the burqa when you became a comic would court so much interest?**

'I wore it as an experiment, but the hype surrounding it was ridiculous. It wasn't really me. I didn't wear a burqa when I was teaching. I wore it for five months to see how it'd go. I didn't know that a couple of guys would fly planes into the World Trade Center and people would associate the two things. To this day I still get people asking me if I knew the guys who blew the towers up.'

**You've moved on from ridiculing post-9/11 Islamophobia, haven't you?**

'Yes, you've got to evolve. I used to tell silly one-liners about being a Muslim, but now my comedy is more about me. You have to be a strong person to go on stage and talk honestly about what you think and feel, which is a scary thought if you don't know yourself that well. That's why my material has changed.'

**What's coming up?**

'I'm going to be performing my new show, 'A Portrait of Shazia Mirza', at the Edinburgh Festival. It was inspired by a visit to the National Portrait Gallery. Friends had been telling me that my portrait was on the wall there. I went along and there was Nelson Mandela, David Beckham and so on... and a picture of me right next to them. I made a routine out of how ridiculous it felt. I mean, I just tell jokes—how did I wangle myself a spot in the National Portrait Gallery next to Nelson Mandela?'  
*Shazia will be performing at The Funny Side... Of Covent Garden on Saturday and at Brou HaHa Comedy on Wednesday. See listings for details.*

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