

Having a laugh

Outrageous Muslim comedienne **Shazia Mirza** can find humour in anything... even the fact that she lives in Muswell Hill

Picture by MARTIN TWOMEY

COMEDIENNE Shazia Mirza thought the joke was on her when she dismissed an invitation to the White House from Condoleezza Rice as a hoax. But she was mistaken.

The Muslim comic and one time science teacher, with a recognisable Brummy accent and a reputation for probing humour, deleted the American Secretary of State's mail and was surprised to find another hit her inbox weeks later.

"I had an email from Condoleezza Rice asking me to do a gig in the White House," she says. "I thought it was a joke, there's no way the Secretary of State is going to email. I deleted it because it was junk."

"About a week later I had an email saying you didn't reply to your last email. This time they said 'Shazia will you be joining us at the White House on September 7 for dinner'. I don't think I would have flown all the way to Washington to go to dinner."

Despite a recent sell-out Edinburgh show, a weekly *New Statesman* column and a formidable record of stand-up touring behind her – many might be surprised to hear the 31-year-old is hot stuff across the pond.

The politicians apparently spotted her on American NBC cable show *Last Comic Standing* – dubbed the American *Idol* of

the comedy world – where she was the only British woman competing.

Shazia made the semi-finals in Las Vegas, dodging the wardrobe team's attempts to dress her in high heels and crop tops along the way – because that's what Americans think British women wear, she jokes.

Perceived rifts between British and American humour did not stop audiences getting her jokes.

"They're not as thick as people think they are," she says. "Their style of comedy is different, their comedians are very loud and brash and out there. British comedians write better I think."

Ironically her brush with politics in the States, where Shazia performs mostly non-political material, follows a period at the start of her career where she was known as the Muslim female stand-up who hit the stage in a headscarf and joked about owning a pilot's licence in the post-9/11 haze.

She is keen to escape the stigma this created around her being a "one joke" comedian.

"Every time I did interviews people used to say you've got this joke about the pilot's licences like I only had one joke," she says. "I never got to live it down. That's ridiculous because I've got so much material."

Shazia is still regularly asked about terrorism by "hard core journalists like Jeremy Paxman"

she says. But while her humour remains observational and she keeps up a renegade spirit in tackling off centre material – once making a BBC3 documentary called *F*** Off I'm a Hairy Woman* where she grew all body hair for seven months – her inspiration is often closer to home these days.

The Edinburgh show, her third, sent up everything from middle class skiing trips to the *Ryan Air* flight magazine.

"My show was called a *Portrait of Shazia Mirza*," she says. "I tell a story in the beginning of my portrait being up in the portrait gallery with Nelson Mandela's. It was an exhibition of the top 10 people of the decade. I can understand Nelson being there but not me and Lily Cole and David Beckham. I told my mum about it and she didn't believe it."

It was her best show to date she says because she has learned to "relax and not give a toss".

Shazia's home in Muswell Hill, where she has lived for the last two and a half years in a two-bedroom house with a garden, also gets a mention.

"I did a whole routine in Edinburgh about Muswell Hill," she says. "It was about all the posh people. I was given the Muswell Hill magazine and it said it was the magazine for everyone, I said it's clearly not

for everyone, it's everyone that can't live in Hampstead."

Even her family do not escape her satirical gaze, she says, mentioning her parent's early dreams of her as a doctor, dentist or something respectable.

"My mum didn't really expect me to become a comedian," she says. "She really didn't expect me to be talking about my parents and taking the piss on stage. Now she's always saying don't use me on the stage. She doesn't realise that she's been making me a lot of money in Edinburgh!"

Shazia has some new projects up her sleeve and will appear in a BBC panel show called *Blame Game*, similar to the *Mock The Week* format, from October.

Publishers have also started courting her about book deals on the back of Shazia's *New Statesman* column which won her a prestigious columnist of the year award earlier this year.

While not giving away too much, she says any future book will be observational, funny and not Bridget Jones.

But stand-up is very clearly what makes Shazia tick and she has no plans to forsake the tour bus just yet.

"I gig every night and I gig all over the world," she says. "I will always be doing stand up every where and that's what I want to continue doing."

By EMMA YOULE