Diversity agendas in Australian stand-up comedy

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Stand-up is a global phenomenon. It is Australia's most significant form of advocatorial theatre and a major platform for challenging stigma and prejudice. In the twenty-first century, Australian stand-up is transforming into a more culturally diverse form and extending the spectrum of material addressing human rights. Since the 1980s Australian stand-up routines have moved beyond the old colonial targets of England and America, and Indigenous comics such as Kevin Kipkinyeti, Andy Saunders, and Shiralee Hood have gained an established following. Additionally, the turn to Asia is evident not just in trade agreements and the higher education market but also in cultural exchange and in the billing of emerging Asian stand-ups at mainstream events.

Stand-ups who immigrated to Australia as children or whose parents immigrated and struggled against adversity are important symbols both of the Australian comedy industry and of a national self-understanding of migrant resilience and making good. Szubanski and Berger hail from earlier waves of European migrants in the 1950s and 1960s. Szubanski has written eloquently of her complex Irish-Polish heritage and documented how the "hand-me-down trinkets of family and trauma" and "the culture clash of competing responses to calamity" have been integral to the development of her comic success and the making of her Aussie characters (347). Rachel Berger, the child of Polish holocaust survivors, advertises and connects both identities on her LinkedIn page: "After 23 years as a stand-up comedian, growing up with Jewish guilt and refugee parents, Rachel Berger knows more about survival than any idol attending tribal council on reality TV."

Anh Do, among Australia's most famous immigrant stand-ups, identifies as one of the Vietnamese "boat people" and arrived as a toddler in 1976. Do's tale of his family's survival against the odds and his creation of a persona which constructs the grateful, happy immigrant clown is the staple of his very successful routine and a bruising disappointment. Jayemanne exposes the emptiness of the conceits of white, brown, and black and of invented identity markers and plays on his obsession with hip hop and black American culture. Jayemanne's strategy is to gently confound his audiences, leading them slowly up a blind alley. He builds up a supposed contradiction of his Sri Lankan-Malaysian heritage against his teenage years in the wealthy suburb of Malvern in Melbourne, his private schooling, and his survival with his father's alcoholism, violence, and survivor guilt until the publication of Do's ironically titled memoir White Nation (2006). This is not the official narrative that is retold even if it is how Do has endeared himself to Australians, and riddling himself of the happy refugee label may yet prove difficult.

Suren Jayemanne is well known for his subtle mockery of multiculturalist rhetoric. In his 2016 MICF show, Wu-Tang Clan Name Generator, Jayemanne played on the supposed contradiction of his Sri Lankan-Muslim heritage against his teenage years in the wealthy suburb of Malvern in Melbourne, his private schooling, and his obsession with hip hop and black American culture. Jayemanne's strategy is to gently confound his audiences, leading them slowly up a blind alley. He builds up a picture of how to identify Sri Lankan parents, supposedly Sri Lankan qualities such as an exceptional ability at maths, and Sri Lankan employment ambitions which he argues he fulfilled in becoming an accountant. He then undercut his story by saying he has recently realised that his suburban background, his numerical abilities, his love of black music, and his rejection of accountability in favour of comic, in fact prove conclusively that he has, all along, been white. He also confesses that this is a strategy. Jayemanne exposes the emptiness of the "rite of passage" of "ethnic" identity markers and plays on his audiences' preconceptions through an old storyteller's device, the shaggy dog story. The different constituencies in his audiences enjoy his trick equally, from quite different perspectives.

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Nguyen's strategy is apparently one of genuflection and gratitude, an adoption of what McCallum refers to as an Australian post-war tradition of the comedy of inadequacy and embarrassment (210–14). Journalists certainly like to bill Do as the happy clown, framing articles about him with headlines like Rosemary Neill's "Laughing through Adversity." In fact, Do is direct about his gallows humour and his propensity to darkness: his humour, he says, is a means of countering racism, of "being able to win people over who might have been averse to being friends with an Asian bloke," but Neill does not linger on this, nor on the revelation that Do felt stigmatised by his refugee origins and terrified and shamed by the crippling poverty of his childhood in Australia. In The Happiest Refugee, Do reveals that, for him, the credibility of his routines with predominantly white Australian audiences lies in the "Aussie comedian up there talking about his working-class childhood" (182). This is not the official narrative that is retold even if it is how Do has endeared himself to Australians, and riddling himself of the happy refugee label may yet prove difficult.

Understandably, a prevalent theme among the new wave of Muslim comics, and not just in Australia, is the focus on the reading of Muslims as manifestly linked with terrorism in America. Egyptian-American Ahmed Ahmed acquired prominence for telling audiences in the infamous Axis of Evil Comedy Tour in the wake of 9/11 by introducing her routine with the words: "My name's Shazia Mirza. At least that's what it says on my pilot's licence" (Bedell). Stand-ups Negin Farsad, Ahmed Ahmed, and Dean Obeidalla are all also activists challenging prevailing myths about Islam, skin colour and anti-Americanism. Egyptian-American Ahmed Ahmed acquired prominence for telling audiences in the infamous Axis of Evil Comedy Tour in the wake of 9/11 by introducing her routine with the words: "My name's Shazia Mirza. At least that's what it says on my pilot's licence" (Bedell). Stand-ups Negin Farsad, Ahmed Ahmed, and Dean Obeidalla are all also activists challenging prevailing myths about Islam, skin colour and anti-Americanism. Egyptian-American Ahmed Ahmed acquired prominence for telling audiences in the infamous Axis of Evil Comedy Tour in the wake of 9/11 by introducing her routine with the words: "My name's Shazia Mirza. At least that's what it says on my pilot's licence" (Bedell). Stand-ups Negin Farsad, Ahmed Ahmed, and Dean Obeidalla are all also activists challenging prevailing myths about Islam, skin colour and anti-Americanism. Egyptian-American Ahmed Ahmed acquired prominence for telling audiences in the infamous Axis of Evil Comedy Tour in the wake of 9/11 by introducing her routine with the words: "My name's Shazia Mirza. At least that's what it says on my pilot's licence" (Bedell). Stand-ups Negin Farsad, Ahmed Ahmed, and Dean Obeidalla are all also activists challenging prevailing myths about Islam, skin colour and anti-Americanism. Egyptian-American Ahmed Ahmed acquired prominence for telling audiences in the infamous Axis of Evil Comedy Tour in the wake of 9/11 by introducing her routine with the words: "My name's Shazia Mirza. At least that's what it says on my pilot's licence" (Bedell). Stand-ups Negin Farsad, Ahmed Ahmed, and Dean Obeidalla are all also activists challenging prevailing myths about Islam, skin colour and anti-Americanism. Egyptian-American Ahmed Ahmed acquired prominence for telling audiences in the infamous Axis of Evil Comedy Tour in the wake of 9/11 by introducing her routine with the words: "My name's Shazia Mirza. At least that's what it says on my pilot's licence" (Bedell). Stand-ups Negin Farsad, Ahmed Ahmed, and Dean Obeidalla are all also activists challenging prevailing myths about Islam, skin colour and anti-Americanism. Egyptian-American Ahmed Ahmed acquired prominence for telling audiences in the infamous Axis of Evil Comedy Tour in the wake of 9/11 by introducing her routine with the words: "My name's Shazia Mirza. At least that's what it says on my pilot's licence" (Bedell). Stand-ups Negin Farsad, Ahmed Ahmed, and Dean Obeidalla are all also activists challenging prevailing myths about Islam, skin colour and anti-Americanism. Egyptian-American Ahmed Ahmed acquired prominence for telling audiences in the infamous Axis of Evil Comedy Tour in the wake of 9/11 by introducing her routine with the words: "My name's Shazia Mirza. At least that's what it says on my pilot's licence" (Bedell). Stand-ups Negin Farsad, Ahmed Ahmed, and Dean Obeidalla are all also activists challenging prevailing myths about Islam, skin colour and anti-Americanism. Egyptian-American Ahmed Ahmed acquired prominence for telling audiences in the infamous Axis of Evil Comedy Tour in the wake of 9/11 by introducing her routine with the words: "My name's Shazia Mirza. At least that's what it says on my pilot's licence" (Bedell). Stand-ups Negin Farsad, Ahmed Ahmed, and Dean Obeidalla are all also activists challenging prevailing myths about Islam, skin colour and anti-Americanism. Egyptian-American Ahmed Ahmed acquired prominence for telling audiences in the infamous Axis of Evil Comedy Tour in the wake of 9/11 by introducing her routine with the words: "My name's Shazia Mirza. At least that's what it says on my pilot's licence" (Bedell). Stand-ups Negin Farsad, Ahmed Ahmed, and Dean Obeidalla are all also activists challenges...
tension officials doing security checks (he was once incarcerated) and with the FBI who were certain that the comedian was among their most wanted terrorists. Similarly, Obeidallah, an Italian-Palestinian-Muslim, notes in his TEDx talk that “If you have a Muslim name, you are probably immune to identity theft.” His narration of a very sudden experience of becoming a terrorist and of perceiving it is a combination of a shared understanding of a post 9/11 world among many Muslim comics: “On September 10th 2001 I went to bed as a white American and I woke up an Arab,” says Obeidallah, still dazzled from the seismic shift in his life.

Hussain and Khalafalla demonstrate a new sophistication and directness in their stand-up, and tackle their majority white audiences head-on. There is no hint of the apologetic or deferential stance performed by Anh Do. Many of the jokes in their routines target controversial or taboo issues, which up until recently were shunned in Australian political debate, or are absent or misrepresented in mainstream media. An Egyptian-Australian born in Saudi Arabia, Khaled Khalafalla arrived on the comedy scene in 2011, was runner-up in RAW, Australia’s most prestigious open mic competition, and in 2013 won the best of the Melbourne International Comedy Festival. In his stand-up, Khalafalla’s jokes focus on racist stereotypes and identity and he uses a range of Middle Eastern and Indian accents to broach IS recruitment, Muslim cousin marriages, and plane crashes. His 2016 MICF show, Jerk, was a confident and abrasive routine exploring relationships, drug use, the extreme racism of Reclaim Australia rallies, controversial visa checks by Border Force’s Operation Fortitude, and Islamophobia. Within the first minute of his routine, he criticises white people for their woeful refusal to master Middle Eastern names, calling out to the “brown woman” in the audience for support, before lining up a series of jokes about the (mis)pronunciation of his name.

Khalafalla derives his power on stage by what Oliver Double calls “uncovering.” Double contends that “one of the most subservive things stand-up can do is to uncover the unmentionable,” subjects which are difficult or impossible to discuss in everyday conversation or the broadcast media (292). For instance, in Jerk Khalafalla discusses the “whole hating halal movement” in Australia as a metaphor for exposing brutal prejudices:

Let me break it down for you. Halal is not voodoo. It’s just a blessing that Muslims do for some things, food amongst other things. But, it’s also a magical spell that turns fuckers when you see it. Sometimes people think it’s a thing that can get stuck to your t-shirt… like “Oh fuck, I got halal on me!” (Australian accent). I saw a guy the other day and he was like Fuck halal, it funds terrorism. And he was like, let me show you the true meaning of Islam. I took a lamb chop out of my pocket and threw it in his face. And he was like, Ah, what was that? A lamb chop. Oh, I fucking love lamb chops. And, I say you fool, it’s halal and he burst into flames.

In effect, Khalafalla delivers a contemptuous attack on the white members of his audience, but at the same time his joke relies on those same audience members presuming that they are morally and intellectually superior to the individual who is the butt of the joke. Khalafalla’s considerable charm is a help in this tricky send-up. In 2013 the Australian Department of Defence recognised his symbolic power and invited him to join the Australian Task Force to entertain the troops by providing what Doran describes as “home-grown Australian laughs” (7). On stage in Australia, Khalafalla constructs a persona which is an outsider to the dominant majority and challenges the persecution of Muslim communities. Ironically, on the NATO base, Khalafalla’s act was perceived as representing a diverse but united Australia. McCallum has pointed to such contradictions, moments where white Australia has shown itself to be a culture “at first authenticates emigrant experience and later abrogates it in times of defiant nationalism” (207).

Nazeem Hussain, born in Australia to Sri Lankan parents, is even more confrontational. His stand-up is born of his belief that “comedy protects us from the world around us.” He says his comedy is an evolutionary defensive comedy career is embedded in his work as an anti-racism activist and asylum seeker supporter and shaped by his second-generation migrant experiences, law studies, community youth work, and early mentorship by American Muslim comic trio Allah Made Me Funny. He is well-known for his pioneering television successes Legally Brown and Slamal Cafe. In his stand-up, Hussain often dwells witheringly on the failings of the asylum seekers and the racism of white people’s reaction to the newest arrivals, his searing attack on the “Fear of the Brown Planet,” performed with Aamer Rahman from 2004–2008, explored casual, pathological racism. Hussain deliberately over-uses the term “white people” in his routines as a provocation and deploys a reverse racism logic, and his major theme is showing that, at times, many whites will be squirming. “White people ask me how can Muslims have fun if they don’t drink? Muslims have fun! Of course we have fun! You’ve seen us on the news.”

For Hussain stand-up is “fundamentally an art of protest,” to be used as “a tool by communities and people with ideas that challenge and provoke the status quo with a spirit of counterculture” (Low 1–3). His larger project is to humanise Muslims to white Australians so that “they see us first as human beings” (1–3). Hussain’s Douglasian, white American audience associates him with the “New Black” movement and expects him to perform inordinately offensive material to be cute and salacious,

As Waleed Aly sees it, the Australian cultural majority is still “unused to hearing minorities talk with such assertiveness.” Hussain exposes “a binary world where there’s whiteness, and then others. Where white people are individuals and non-white people (a singular group) are not” (Aly). Hussain certainly speaks as an insider and goes so far as recognising his coloniser’s guilt in relation to indigenous Australians (Aly). Waheed remembers the hate mail he and Hussain received when they worked on Slamal Cafe: “The message was clear. We were outsiders and should behave as such. We were not real Australians. We should know our place, as supplicants, celebrating the nation’s unblemished virtue.” Khalafalla, Rahman, Eileisi, and Hussain make clear that the new wave of comics identify as Muslim and Australian (which they would argue many in the audiences receive as a provocation). They have zero tolerance of racism, their comedy is intimately connected with whiteness, and then otherness. Where white people are individuals and non-white people (a singular group) are not” (Aly).

References


