



Diversity agendas in Australian stand-up comedy

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Abstract

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 Kopinyeri, 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.

The major cultural driver for stand-up is the Melbourne International Comedy Festival (MICF), Australia's largest cultural event, now over 30 years old, and an important site for dissecting constructs of democracy and nationhood. As John McCallum has observed, popular humour in post-World War II Australia drew on widespread feelings of "displacement, migration and otherness—resonant topics in a country of transplanted people and a dispossessed indigenous population arguing over a distinct Australian identity" (205–06). This essay considers the traditional comic strategies of first and second generation immigrant stand-ups in Australia and compares them with the new wave of post 9/11 Asian-Australian and Middle-Eastern-Australian stand-ups whose personas and interrogations are shifting the paradigm. Self-identifying Muslim stand-ups challenge myths of dominant Australian identity in ways which many still find confronting. Furthermore, the theories of incongruity, superiority, and psychological release re-rehearsed in traditional humour studies, by figures such as Palmer (1994) and Morreall (2009), are predicated on models of humour which do not always serve live performance, especially stand-up with its relational dependence on audience interaction.

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 idiot 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 increasingly problematic. It is a testament to the power of Do's stand-up that many did not perceive the toll of the loss of his birth country; the grinding poverty; and the pain of his father's alcoholism, violence, and survivor guilt until the publication of Do's ironically titled memoir *The Happiest Refugee*. In fact, the memoir draws on many of the trauma narratives that are still part of his set. One of Do's most legendary routines is the story of his family's sea journey to Australia, told here on ABC1's *Talking Heads*:

There were forty of us on a nine metre fishing boat. On day four of the journey we spot another boat. As the boat gets closer we realise it's a boatload of Thai pirates. Seven men with knives, machetes and guns get on our boat and they take everything. One of the pirates picks up the smallest child, he lifts up the baby and rips open the baby's nappy and dollars fall out. And the pirate decides to spare the kid's life. And that's a good thing cos that's my little brother Khoa Do who in 2005 became Young Australian of the Year. And we were saved on the fifth day by a big German merchant ship which took us to a refugee camp in Malaysia and we were there for around three months before Australia says, come to Australia. And we're very glad that happened. So often we heard Mum and Dad say—what a great country. How good is this place? And the other thing—kids, as you grow up, do as much as you can to give back to this great country and to give back to others less fortunate.

Do'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 crafting of himself as an "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 ridding 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-Malaysian 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 undercuts his story by saying he has recently realised that his suburban background, his numerical abilities, his love of black music, and his rejection of accountancy in favour of comedy, in fact prove conclusively that he has, all along, been white. He also confesses that this is a bruising disappointment. Jayemanne exposes the emptiness of the conceits of white, brown, and black and of invented 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.

Diana Nguyen, a second generation Vietnamese stand-up, was both traumatised and politicised by Pauline Hanson when she was a teenager. Hanson described Nguyen's community in Dandenong as "yellow Asian people" (Filmer). Nguyen's career as a community development worker combating racism relates directly to her activity as a stand-up: migrant stories are integral to Australian history and Nguyen hypothesises that the "Australian psyche of being invaded or taken over" has reignited over the question of Islamic fundamentalism and expresses her concern to Filmer about the Muslim youths under her care.

Nguyen's alarm about the elision of Islamic radicalism with Muslim culture drives an agenda that has led the new generation of self-identified Muslim stand-ups since 9/11. This post 9/11 world is described by Wajahat as gorged with "exaggerated fear, hatred, and hostility toward Islam and Muslim [. . .] and perpetuated by negative discrimination and the marginalisation and exclusion of Muslims from social, political, and civic life in western societies." In Australia, Aamer Rahman, Muhamed Elleissi, Khaled Khalafalla, and Nazeem Hussain typify this newer, more assertive form of second generation immigrant stand-up—they identify as Muslim (whether religious or not), as brown, and as Australian. They might be said to symbolise a logical response to Ghassan Hage's famous *White Nation* (1998), which argues that a white supremacy underlies the mindset of the white elite in Australia. Their positioning is more nuanced than previous generations of stand-up. Nazeem Hussain's routines mark a transformation in Australian stand-up, as Waleed Aly has argued:

"ethnic comedy" has hitherto been about the parading of stereotypes for comfortable, mainstream consumption, about "minstrel characters" [. . .] but Hussain interrogates his audiences in every direction—and aggravates Muslims too. Hussain's is the world of post 9/11 Australian Muslims. It's about more than ethnic stereotyping. It's about being a consistent target of political opportunism, where everyone from the Prime Minister to the Foreign Minister to an otherwise washed-up backbencher with a view on burqas has you in their sights, where bombs detonate in Western capitals and unrelated nations are invaded.

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 Islamic State (IS). Jokes about mistaken identity, plane crashes, suicide bombing, and the Koran feature prominently. English-Pakistani Muslim, Shazia Mirza, gained comedy notoriety in the UK 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 terrorism in America. Egyptian-American Ahmed Ahmed acquired prominence for telling audiences in the infamous *Axis of Evil Comedy Tour* about how his life had changed much for the worse since 9/11. Ahmed Ahmed was the alias used by one of Osama Bin Laden's devotees and his life became an ongoing struggle with anti-

terrorism 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, Obeidalla, 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 an object of persecution and of others' paranoia is symptomatic 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 Obeidalla, still dazed 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 for *Devious*. Khalafalla's shows 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 MIFC 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 in the audience 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 subversive 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 prejudice:

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 some people into fuckwits when they 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 I 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 2015 the Australian Department of Defence recognised his symbolic power and invited him to join the Afghanistan 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 which 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" and is "an evolutionary defence mechanism" (8–9). His ground-breaking 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 *Salam Café*. In his stand-up, Hussain often dwells wittingly on the failings and peculiarities of white people's attempts to interact with him. Like all his routines, his sell-out show *Fear of the Brown Planet*, performed with Aamer Rahman from 2004–2008, explored casual, pathologised racism. Hussain deliberately over-uses the term "white people" in his routines as a provocation and deploys a reverse racism against his majority white audiences, knowing that many 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 firstly as human beings" (1–3). Hussain's 2016 MIFC show, *Hussain in the Membrane*, both satirised media hype and hysterical racism and pushed for a better understanding of the complex problems Muslim communities face in Australia. His show also connected issues to older colonial traditions of racism. In a memorable and beautifully crafted tirade, Hussain inveighed against the 2015 Bendigo riots which occurred after local Muslims lodged an application to Bendigo council to build a mosque in the sleepy Victorian town.

[YELLING in an exaggerated Australian accent] *No we don't want Muslims! NO we don't want Muslims—to come invade Bendigo by application to the local council!* That is the most bureaucratic invasion of all times. No place in history has been invaded by lodging an application to a local council. Can you see ISIS running around chasing town planners? Of course not, Muslims like to wait 6–8 months to invade! That's a polite way to invade. What if white people invaded that way? What a better world we'd be living in. If white people invaded Australia that way, we'd be able to celebrate Australia Day on the same day without so much blood on our hands. What if Captain Cook came to Australia and said [in a British accent] *Awe we would like to apply to invade this great land and here is our application*. [In an Australian accent] *Awe sorry, mate, rejected, but we'll give you Bendigo*.

As Waleed Aly sees it, the Australian cultural majority is still "unused to hearing minorities speak with such assertiveness." Hussain exposes "a binary world where there's whiteness, and then otherness. 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 (Tan). Aly well remembers the hate mail he and Hussain received when they worked on *Salam Café*: "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, Elleissi, 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 their political activism, and they have an unapologetically Australian identity. No longer is it a question of whether the white cultural majority in Australia will anoint them as worthy and acceptable citizens, it is a question of whether the audiences can rise to the moral standards of the stand-ups. The power has been switched. For Hussain laughter is about connection: "that person laughs because they appreciate the point and whether or not they accept what was said was valid isn't important. What matters is, they've understood" (Low 5).

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