

The courage to change

Award-winning columnist Shazia Mirza on the trials and tribulations of entering the bear pit of comedy

Birmingham born Shazia Mirza is the UK's most prolific and, as yet, only female Muslim stand-up comedian. She started her professional stand-up career in September 2000. Prior to that she studied Biochemistry at university. She eventually became a science teacher at a comprehensive school in London's East End but gave up her teaching in order to become a comedian full time. Shazia has got her own radio show in London on ClubAsia AM. After appearing on BBC1's *Have I Got News for You*, she became a regular commentator on BBC Radio Five Live. Shazia has also landed her first publishing deal and is currently writing a book.

I am a stand-up comedian. Sometimes people ask me, "What is your real job?"

This is my real job. I am not a part time brain surgeon, lawyer, or veterinarian who fits in a few jokes in the evenings. This is it, I'm a clown.

My parents' plans for my life did not include comedy. They had it all planned out. Science A-levels, Oxbridge, Medicine, marriage to the Prime Minister, children, mansion, so meticulously planned they would have even set a date for a heart attack and then death.

I always wanted to perform. I remember my Aunt Vicious – (we used to call her that, because if anyone of us came out with a wrong answer, a wooden stick wouldn't be far away) asking me what I wanted to be when I grew up? "I want to be on stage," I replied. I was seven. "You can't do that," she shouted.

I couldn't understand her reaction; I only wanted to be a comedian – not work at Spearmint Rhino.

Nothing is insuperable. I met Boy George at a party when I was 21. He asked me what I did, at the time I was a student but I told him I really wanted to be on stage. He said "If you want something badly enough you can have it, you'll have to suffer, but you can definitely have it." I used to spend every night in bed thinking "How can I achieve my dreams?" I was prepared to do anything.

None of the people I admire have been exempt from the challenges and stereotypes thrust upon us by family or society: Nelson Mandela, Richard Pryor, Joan Rivers, Kelly Holmes and Gandhi. I admire them all. People who inspire don't set out to inspire, their inspiration is a by-product of their achievement. They consequently plant the seed of ambition into others and provide us with the fuel of hope, without which there is no progress.

I always wanted to be a comedian but I never thought it would be possible. My parents would never allow me, the comedy world would never understand and accept me, I would never make a living, and what if I failed? But I believed in myself.

Self-belief is the revenge on all doubters.

In comedy I have struggled against people who wish me badly, I have been bullied, I have experienced racism and sexism, I have had tomatoes in my face, I have been sad and lonely, unsupported, I have cried many times and wondered what the heck I am doing.

The comedy world can be a bear pit. I am an outsider in a world of outsiders, but I am motivated by ambition, and the desire to do something with my life, something that I love, but as an Asian woman I know there is a price to pay.

Asian women feel the need to fulfil a role. Modern stereotypes are promoted and re-enforced from childhood and we can be easily pigeon-holed into the way others think of us, but I'm sure the make-up of all mankind involves having some expectations. Asian culture is success-driven. My mum always says, "I don't care what you do, just be the best at it"

It takes audacity and courage to make a change but the self-confidence one builds from achieving difficult things and accomplishing goals is the best achievement of all.

Shazia Mirza

- 1 Re-read the text to find whether the following ideas are true or false. Justify each answer with evidence from the passage.
- Shazia's parents always fully supported her ambition to be a comic.
 - Shazia's Aunt Vicious never understood her.
 - Shazia's desire to become a comic first developed when she was a university student.
 - Shazia always believed that she would become a comic.
 - Her audiences have always been really supportive.
 - Shazia's relationship with her parents is now very good.
- 2 Answer the following questions.
- What were Shazia's parents' hopes and expectations for her?
 - What do you think was stereotypical about her parents' choice of career for her?
 - What was Aunt Vicious' reaction to her niece's career choice?
 - What advice did Boy George give to Shazia?
 - From what kinds of people did she face hostility in the first few years of her career as a comic?
 - What personal quality gave Shazia the will to succeed despite the obstacles she faced?
 - What specific problems has she faced as a female Muslim British Asian comic?
 - What does she consider to be her most important achievement in her professional and personal life?
- 3 To what do these words and phrases refer in the text?
- 'This is it' (line 33)
 - 'it' (line 37)
 - 'that' (line 53)
 - 'there is a price to pay' (line 115)
 - 'it' (line 127)
- 4 Choose the correct answer from A, B, or C to replace each word or phrase below.
- | | |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| a meticulously (line 41) | e bear pit (line 109) |
| A in great detail | A difficult challenge |
| B calculatingly | B a nasty fight |
| C approximately | C an ugly scene |
| b insuperable (line 59) | f promoted (line 118) |
| A undefeated | A encouraged |
| B easy | B developed |
| C impossible | C given a better position |
| c be exempt (line 73) | g pigeon-holed (line 120) |
| A ignore | A sorted |
| B excused | B categorized |
| C free | C stereotyped |
| d by-product (line 81) | h audacity (line 128) |
| A consequence | A boldness |
| B side effect | B cheekiness |
| C derivative | C overconfidence |