Alumni

Leave Them Laughing

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Negin Farsad (Ryan Lash)

"They say a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down," says comedian Negin Farsad '02GSAS, '04SIPA. "For me, the medicine is challenging stereotypes. And the sugar is a really sophisticated poop joke."

Farsad admits that scatological humor is the last thing that people expect from her — a relentlessly cheerful, Iranian-American, Muslim comedian with two master's degrees. But she thinks that means she's doing something right.

"There's always an assumption that I'm going to be clean or safe, because I'm an ethnic woman," she says. "So there's a particular moment in every show when people realize that I'm different. That's what I'm after."

Farsad is what she likes to call a “social-justice comedian,” which means that she wants to start a larger conversation about social issues, but in a way that “doesn’t feel like an afterschool special.” This dialogue takes many forms: in addition to performing stand-up, she is a filmmaker, a TED fellow, and, most recently, the author of a memoir, *How to Make White People Laugh.*

“If you’re trying to take on the dominant culture about how they treat outsiders, you have to speak to that culture directly,” Farsad says. “I’m not interested in preaching to the choir. I’m interested in changing minds.”

Farsad is intimately familiar with being treated differently. Growing up, she felt like the only Muslim kid in Palm Springs, California (“one of the top five gay cities and one of the top five retirement communities — so it’s basically people listening to Lady Gaga while adjusting their catheters”). After studying theater at Cornell, she wanted to explore the sense of otherness that she experienced as an ethnic minority, so she enrolled at Columbia for a master’s in African-American studies. “I knew that the Black struggle wasn’t my struggle, but I wanted to fight it anyway. It felt Iranian-adjacent,” she says.

But in the post-9/11 world, the rhetoric around Muslims in America was changing, dangerously. “I thought, how could people associate this kind of violence with a whole religion and an entire region — that’s just crazy. That’s like stereotyping 1.6 billion people. Who does that? Americans.”

Farsad was particularly frustrated with the lack of Muslims in pop culture. The less visible Muslims were, she felt, the more feared and misunderstood they became. After leaving a public-policy job in 2008, she organized a group of fellow Muslim comics to tour the country. (Film from the tour became Farsad’s 2013 documentary *The Muslims Are Coming!*)

Now, Farsad also hosts a podcast called *Fake the Nation*, a political roundtable with a rotating cast of comedians. And she stars in the new movie *3rd Street Blackout*, a romantic comedy that takes place in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. “That one isn’t so political,” Farsad says. “Though when you’re Iranian, people seem to think everything is political.”

Some of the reactions to Farsad’s work have been heartbreaking: “I’ve heard every racist, sexist, hate-filled slur you can imagine.” She’s also had pushback from some fellow Muslims, who have objected to her unorthodox methods. But she says that

there are certainly enough positive reactions to keep propelling her forward.

“I always think about the ex-Marine who had been stationed in Afghanistan,” she says. “He came in angry and left laughing.”



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