

# TED RADIO HOUR

GUY RAZ, HOST:

OK. So Maysoon was just saying that she's not a comedian and an activist, but you basically use comedy as like your form of activism.

NEGIN FARSAD: Yes. Comedy is like the best tool for that. It just opens people up, and what makes comedy so effective is that if you're making them laugh along the way, they're going to listen to the deeper cut stuff.

RAZ: This is Negin Farsad, also a stand-up comic. Negin is the daughter of Iranian immigrants. And as a kid, her parents would regale her with stories about life during the Iran-Iraq war, specifically the unusual way they go through bombing raids.

FARSAD: And they talked about how they would go into the basement and how they would turn on the candles and how they would block out all the windows, and they would be like, oh, and then we would play cards. We would play charades, and then we would tell stories. And then we'd hear a bomb, and then we'd worry that it was our neighbor. You know, and then we would play another game. You know, and so I think the human capacity, you know, the way humans get through these really terrible times is by flipping the script on themselves.

RAZ: Yeah.

FARSAD: Glee - it kind of lets you take the story back into your own hands.

RAZ: Negin's own turn in flipping the script happened when she was in college right after September 11 and the start of a wave of Islamophobia.

FARSAD: And it started becoming clearer and clearer that Islamophobia is one of those things that's not going away. I kept thinking like, oh, we'll be - we'll hate Muslims for like a few months and then we'll stop. Like, I just thought there was going to be a reasonable trajectory. And then it kind of never stopped, you know? And I felt like I could, you know - I had a voice in that my voice as an Iranian-American Muslim was not something that the average American has already heard.

RAZ: And so Negin decided that the best way to disarm the haters was to make them laugh.

FARSAD: And that's been the goal is just, you know, if you have never had a Muslim friend, maybe my stupid face can be your Muslim friend.

RAZ: Negin does this through what she calls social justice comedy and how it works - well, here's Negin's explanation from the TED stage.

(SOUNDBITE OF TED TALK)

FARSAD: Now, the American population can be broken up into three main categories. There's mostly wonderful people, haters and Florida. Now, the most troubling category here are the haters. As a social justice, comedian it's my goal to convert these haters because they hate a lot of things which lead to negative outcomes like racism, violence and Ted Nugent. The point is we have to reckon with the haters. But there's variance within this group, and it's not efficient to go after all of them, right?

So what I've done is I've created a highly scientific taxonomy of haters. I basically took all of the haters. I put them in a petri dish like a scientist, and this is what I found. First off, we have the trolls. They're the people who have quit their jobs, so that they can post on YouTube videos all day long. There's also the drive-by haters. Now, these people will be at a stoplight. They'll wait for the light to turn green, and when it does, they yell go back to your own country. But the group I'm most interested in is the swing hater.

They just can't decide because they don't have enough information, and this is the group I like to target with social justice comedy because, first off, it makes you laugh, right? And when you're laughing, you enter into a state of openness. And in that moment of openness, a good social justice comedian can stick in a whole bunch of information, and if they're really skilled, a rectal exam.

Now, here are some ground rules for social justice comedy. First off, it's not partisan, OK? This isn't political comedy. This is about justice, and no one is against justice. Two, it's inviting and warm. It makes you feel like you're sitting inside of a burrito. Three, it's funny, but sneaky. Like, you could be hearing a - like an interesting treaty on income inequality that's incased in a really sophisticated poop joke, right?

RAZ: OK. So she wanted to do something about Islamophobia and you wanted to look for the swing haters.

FARSAD: Yeah. So me and another comedian Dean Obeidallah decided to round up like a bunch of Muslim-American comedians as per usual and take him around the country - you know what I mean? - to places like Alabama and Tennessee and Mississippi and Arizona. You know what I mean? Just like places where you are accustomed to seeing, like, a bunch of friendly Muslims. And so we would do these street actions. We would set up like an ask-a-Muslim booth in the middle of a town square.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

FARSAD: No? Do you have any questions?

DEAN OBEIDALLAH: Do you have any questions about Islam? Not to join, just about us. We're not trying to get you to join.

FARSAD: We plied them with pastries so that they could feel like, hey, someone who's going to give me pastries doesn't have it out for me.

RAZ: What would people get to ask?

FARSAD: Oh, my gosh. They could ask literally anything.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: Why do some Muslim woman look like you?

FARSAD: All right.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: Like some Muslim woman you can't tell who they are.

FARSAD: OK.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: If they rob a bank and you couldn't identify them.

FARSAD: And you wouldn't be able to identify them. That's a really good question.

You know, so we got questions like that all over the country, you know, because I don't wear the hijab, and I don't, you know, cover. So, you know, so like people could ask those questions.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED MAN #1: I don't understand. You're dressed like an American.

FARSAD: Yes. I am an American.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN #1: OK.

FARSAD: Yeah.

Another question that was frequent was why don't Muslims denounce terrorism?

UNIDENTIFIED MAN #2: Tell me why I haven't seen Muslims who are not extremists criticizing Muslims who are...

FARSAD: We got that everywhere, and I continue to get that on my travels all over the country. Why don't Muslims denounce terrorism? So there's like a huge PR misstep that happened where Americans think that Muslims don't denounce terrorism. I don't know how this happened because literally every Muslim I know does denounce terrorism, so I'm like did we not tweet it enough? Like, how did this happen?

RAZ: When we come back, Negin Farsad explains why it's important in social justice comedy to keep it delightful. On a show today Painfully Funny. I'm Guy Raz, and you're listening to the TED Radio Hour from NPR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

RAZ: It's the TED Radio Hour from NPR. I'm Guy Raz. And on the show today, Painfully Funny, ideas about humor and how it helps us deal with the chaos of life. So we were just hearing from comedian Negin Farsad. And she and a group of Muslim comedians traveled

around the country doing what they call social justice comedy. And they were trying to open up the conversation about Islamophobia, which at times required a little patience.

FARSAD: (Laughter) Yeah, I think one of the hallmarks of social justice comedy, as I call it, is that you remain delightful. And I - you know, I get angry, you know, behind the scenes. But when I'm in the middle of a situation, I got to keep it delightful because you're just - you're going to - you know, this is - you're going to attract more bees with honey. I mean, it's a cliché, but it's true.

RAZ: Yeah.

FARSAD: And what we need to do is remember that being around people and laughing with them is a joint shared experience, like a group mind that's engaged in something kind of, like, fun and the negativity kind of gets swept away.

RAZ: So that trip Negin took with the other comedians, they turned it into a movie called "The Muslims Are Coming." And not too long after it came out something happened back in New York, a place where Negin usually felt welcomed and accepted.

(SOUNDBITE OF TED TALK)

FARSAD: A known hate group spent \$300,000 on an anti-Muslim poster campaign with the MTA. That's the New York City subway system. Now, the posters were truly offensive, not to mention poorly designed. I mean, if you're going to be bigoted, you might as well use a better font. But...

(LAUGHTER)

FARSAD: We decided, why not launch her own poster campaign - right? - that says nice things about Muslims. So myself and fellow comedian Dean Obeidallah decided to launch The Fighting-Bigotry-With-Delightful-Posters Campaign. We raised the money, worked with the MTA for over five months, got the posters approved. And then two days after they were supposed to go up the MTA decided to ban the posters, citing political content. Let's take a look at a couple of those posters. Here's one. Fact - grownup Muslims can do more push-ups than baby Muslims.

(LAUGHTER)

FARSAD: Let's take a look at another one. The ugly truth about Muslims - they have great frittata recipes. Now, clearly, frittatas are considered political by the MTA. Either that or the mere mention of Muslims in a positive light was considered political. But it isn't. It's about justice. So we decided to change our Fighting-Bigotry-With-Delightful-Posters Campaign and turn it into the fighting-bigotry-with-a-delightful-lawsuit campaign.

(LAUGHTER)

FARSAD: So basically what I'm saying is a couple of dirtbag comedians took on a major New York City agency and the comedians won.

(APPLAUSE)

FARSAD: Yeah. Yeah. Thank you. Victory was a very weird feeling. I was like, is this what blonde girls feel like all the time? 'Cause this is amazing.

(LAUGHTER)

FARSAD: All right, most of my work is meant to be fun. It's meant to generate a connection and laughter. But yes, sometimes I get mean tweets and hate mail. Sometimes I get voicemails saying that if I continue telling my jokes they'll kill me and they'll kill my family. And those death threats are definitely not funny. But despite the occasional danger, I still think that social justice comedy is one of our best weapons.

RAZ: So you talk a lot about using comedy as a tool. And there's a great moment in the film where I think you're in Birmingham, Ala., and, like, it was pretty successful.

FARSAD: Yeah. So, I mean, you know, one of our stops was in Birmingham, Ala., where we, like, set up a table called name that religion.

(SOUNDBITE OF DOCUMENTARY, "THE MUSLIMS ARE COMING!")

FARSAD: We're going to read a quote and you're going to tell us if it was Old Testament, New Testament or the Quran.

If you guessed right you got one of our, like, ridiculous prizes, like an outdated calendar.

(SOUNDBITE OF DOCUMENTARY, "THE MUSLIMS ARE COMING!")

FARSAD: I see you salivating already. And yes, these are salt and pepper shakers.

But also, like, chocolate and stuff like that.

(SOUNDBITE OF DOCUMENTARY, "THE MUSLIMS ARE COMING!")

FARSAD: Which holy book stipulates that a girl who does not bleed on her wedding night should be stoned to death?

UNIDENTIFIED MAN #1: The Quran.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN #2: I'll say Quran.

FARSAD: It is the Old Testament, Deuteronomy.

People guessed wrong because they just assumed everything that was violent came from the Quran (laughter).

(SOUNDBITE OF DOCUMENTARY, "THE MUSLIMS ARE COMING!")

FARSAD: Mary said, my Lord, how can I have a son when no man has touched me?

UNIDENTIFIED MAN #3: I'm going to say Old Testament.

FARSAD: Dude, it's the Quran.

And so we just were trying to make the point that all of these texts have crazy stuff in them. So why would we hold Islam to a separate standard?

RAZ: And were people surprised when they, like - when they found out what the truth was?

FARSAD: Yeah, yeah, people were really surprised. And you could see them having that moment of, like, oh, my God.

(SOUNDBITE OF DOCUMENTARY, "THE MUSLIMS ARE COMING!")

UNIDENTIFIED MAN #3: There's not a whole lot of difference between the three in some cases.

RAZ: That's incredible that - I mean, that you actually saw the wheels churning, like, people changing their minds even just slightly.

FARSAD: Absolutely. And I - and that's one of the things that - like, I have performed in red states and blue states. And one thing that I've found all over the country is that American people are not built to hate. You know what I mean? They actually want to be friendly. And they want to offer you a coffee. And they want to open the door for you. And they want to be good neighbors. And the one thing I've always found - and I've said this before and it's so dorky, but it's true - is that if you approach people with love, you're going to get love in return. And that's what I've found as a Muslim doing very publicly Muslim things, performing on stages throughout the country, that's what I found. Well, the way I like to look at it is you get one person to laugh and then a couple people laugh. And then over a lifetime, you might get like a million people chuckling. And those chuckles add up to some measure of a popular shift in perception. And that is social change. But it takes time. And it takes like millions of these chuckles.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

RAZ: Comedian Negin Farsad. She's the author of "How To Make White People Laugh." And she also hosts a podcast called "Fake The Nation." You can find her full talk at [ted.com](http://ted.com)

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