



Exclusive CoolPersia.com Interview with Maz Jobrani

You were born in Iran but grew up in Marin County, the San Francisco Bay Area. Was this transition difficult for you as a kid in a different environment (growing up between two different cultures)?

I guess that at first it was. I was only 6 when we moved from Iran to the U.S. I played soccer so that helped me blend in. I also think that this was the time I started to get a sense of humor – which must have helped me blend in too. Another thing that I would do is I would go shopping with my mom for groceries and while she bought all the fruits and vegetables and good stuff, I would throw bags and bags of chocolate and candy into the cart. I would then take the candy to school and give it to my new friends. You could say I was bribing people into being my friends.

Did you always had a talent/passion for telling jokes or was it something you gradually got attracted to?

I think at a young age I just saw some of the silly things in life. A lot of my friends tended to be people who had a sense of humor. I like to laugh and that's been part of my personality for as long as I can remember.

When I watch your stand up shows I see influences of Eddy Murphy's earlier work like SNL, Raw, Delirious etc... Was he a source of inspiration for you?

Absolutely. I wanted to do standup when I was 17 years old because I'd heard that he'd started out young. Unfortunately, I didn't have the courage to go on stage for standup at that young of an age. I had been doing plays since I was 12, but standup was a whole other beast. It took me a few more years to try standup. I first did it at 22, then got serious with it at 26.

You have a B.A. in Political Science with a minor in Italian from U.C. Berkeley. Was this something you always wanted to do, a safety net, or more like what your parents wanted you to do ? (as most Iranian parents want their children to be a doctor / lawyer or mohandes and get a stroke when they find out their child wants to be an entertainer). How was this in your case and how did you handle it?

College seemed like the natural place for me to go after high school. I wanted to study acting in college, but as you say, my parents wanted me to be a lawyer or a doctor. I had absolutely no interest in being a doctor, so I studied political science in the hopes of going to law school and becoming a lawyer. My junior year at Berkeley I took a year and studied abroad in Italy. There I had this professor that I thought was amazing. I decided I wanted to emulate him and be a professor. So, when I came back to the States I applied for grad school in Political Science. I got into UCLA's Ph.D. program for poli. Sci., but at the same time I started auditioning for plays at the UCLA theatre department. I got into a few of their plays and realized that acting was my real passion. It had been a few years that I hadn't really done any because I had followed the path my parents had wanted me to follow. But by the time I started grad school at UCLA I was mature enough to realize I had to do what I wanted to do with my life and that meant acting. I dropped out of grad school and started auditioning for independent films in LA. I then got a job at an advertising agency to help pay the bills. I decided I would act as a hobby and I got into a play. It wasn't until I was 26 when I decided that I was going to pursue acting professionally.

What made you decide to pursue your passion?

I was 26. I was working in the ad agency and doing a play on the side. The play was called "The Blind Date and The Wedding." It was about an Iranian charlatan living in LA who goes on a date with an Iranian gold digger. It was the first play that I know of that was for the Iranian community but in English. Anyway, the play did very well and we were selling out to crowds of 1200 people in LA and New York. One day while I was at the ad agency, making a dub of the video tape of the play, an older gentleman who was a producer there, (Joe Rein), caught a glimpse of the play on the TV monitor where I was making the dub. Joe, being a very nice guy, came up to me and told me that I had good comedic timing and asked if I had ever thought about pursuing acting professionally. I told him that coming out of high school I had wanted to study it and then again I had dropped out of grad school to pursue it. I told him that my newest game plan was to work in the ad agency until I was 30, where I could save up some money and be a bit more secure and then I was going to try to pursue it. He took me into his office and told me that when he was in his 20s there were things he'd wanted to do. He said that he hadn't gotten to those things and now was in his 60s. He encouraged me that if I really wanted to do it that I should do it right away. That was a light bulb moment for me and I went into my boss's office and told him that acting was going to be my priority from that day on. I then enrolled in some sketch comedy classes at a place called the ACME theatre in LA. From there I got into standup comedy classes. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Are there big differences between telling (dirty) jokes for an American or an Iranian audience?

The main difference between the two audiences is that you might have to explain more to an American audience if you're talking about something that's part of the Persian culture. The same works the other way. If you have an older Iranian crowd you have to adjust your jokes. They probably don't know some of the pop cultural references you might make. That's the case with any audience though – you have to always adjust. As for being dirty. I'm not really that dirty. I do swear sometimes. It depends on the venue. If it's a comedy club or theatre show I'm pretty loose. If it's a black tie dinner then I make sure to watch my language and be respectful.

What is your process of making jokes? Do you have situations where, you kind of just wake up one morning and the joke is in your head or...?

Some comedians walk around with notebooks and write all the time. Since I've been a regular at the Comedy Store on Sunset Blvd. I've tended to try to write jokes on stage. What I do is take a premise up there with me and try to riff on it. Sometimes it works, many times it doesn't. I tape record my sets to see what worked and what didn't.

You're part of the Axis of Evil Comedy Tour cast along with Ahmed Ahmed and Aron Kader. Can you tell our visitors how you all decided to work together and how the Axis of Evil Comedy Tour got started...

We first came together because the owner of the Comedy Store, Mitzi Shore, who is Pauley Shore's mom wanted to do a Middle Eastern night at her club. In the past she'd done shows with her black comics and her Latino comics, etc. and she wanted to do one with Middle Easterners. The reason was that she had been watching a lot of news. She is Jewish, and she saw the latest intifada between the Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East. She felt that there was going to be a need for a positive Middle Eastern voice in the media. This was in 2000. She put a show together and she called it "The Arabian Knights." We did the show under that name for a few years, but I kept saying that Iranians aren't Arabs. Our audience would remind us of that too. Anyway, we played around with a bunch of names and we really liked this one. We felt that it made fun of George Bush's negative term by taking it and putting the word "comedy" at the end. We also felt that it was a bit irrelevant. On Nov. 11, 2005 me, Aron and Ahmed produced our first show under the new name at the Lisner Auditorium in DC. It was a huge hit at 1400 people came out. From there we continued to do packed shows and were able to get a production company on board in mid 2006 to help us shoot the special for Comedy Central in October of '06. It premiered in March of 2007 as the first all Middle Eastern cast on an American TV show in history. We added Dean Obeidallah, who was a friend of ours, as the 4th act.

Since 9/11 the media often portrays middle easterners as terrorist and focuses on one image. You talk about prejudice and stereotypes in your shows, Is this tour your way of educating people and breaking prejudices through laughter?

Absolutely. I think there's so much negativity out there, especially when dealing with the Middle East, that we felt we could help counter that by letting people see us laugh.

You've done a lot of shows with the Axis of Evil Comedy Tour in the past year. How would you describe the success of this tour and this particular period in your life?

It's been great. I feel like it's a building process. Some cities know us better than others. In the San Francisco Bay Area we had about 1900 people come out. That was like a rock concert. I think we are crossing over and you will see more and more white people and regular Americans in our audience. This is very important, because these are the people who need to see the good in our community. The Middle Eastern community has been very supportive as well – especially the Iranians. Every show we do has more Iranians present even though 3 of the 4 comics are Arab. Doo doo roo doo doo – IRAN!

Any chance the Axis of Evil Comedy tour will come to Europe?

Yes. We already are looking to book dates in London, Sweden, and Amsterdam. We may also do some dates in Switzerland, France, Finland and Norway. It will all depend on finding the right venue and the right date. People can go to mazjobrani.com and join my mailing list. I send out updates from time to time.

Although lots of our visitors know you from your comedy shows (especially the Axis of Evil Comedy Tour), you also had roles in several movies and television shows. What are your most memorable appearances?

I was very proud to be a part of Sydney Pollack's "The Interpreter" with Nicole Kidman and Sean Penn. It was a real pleasure to meet and work with Penn. He is one of the best actors of our time and he was a really nice guy too. I also enjoyed working on Ice Cube's "Friday After Next." That one was just silly fun. My role on Larry David's "Curb Your Enthusiasm" as the Indian sikh was really fun too. We got to improvise our dialogue on that one which was really cool.

Do you enjoy more performing live on stage with your stand up shows, or acting in Hollywood movies?

I love both. It all depends on the quality of the show. If you're doing a live show and you're exhausted and just not that excited about the material then it can be a sucky experience. I would say that happens maybe a handful of times a year. Usually I love being on stage. The same goes for any film or TV work. If I'm on a set and I don't like the material then it can be bad. However, these days I try my best to weed those roles out so that whenever I'm on set I'm excited to be there.

You've worked with many Hollywood stars and had roles in different productions. What image do they have of Iranians in Hollywood? Is it hard to get a role that is not the typical stereotype character?

The actors themselves have been very supportive. I think most actors are smart and curious people (at least the ones I've worked with.) Many of the people I've worked with can be categorized as artists. They have a political take on the world and like to hear about my Iranian background. As for getting cast in stereotypical parts. When you're good at playing a certain role people are going to think of you instantly when such a role comes up. Whenever there's a part for a Middle Eastern guy I tend to go out on it. However, I don't mind playing the Middle Eastern guy as long as I get to play a variety of part. I'd like to play the Middle Eastern guy who robs the bank and then play the Middle Eastern guy who is a secret service agent (like my character in The Interpreter.) The one part I don't even audition for anymore is the part of terrorists. I think that there's a very skewed vision of Middle Easterners in this world and a big reason for it is our depiction as terrorists in film and TV.

How do you pick your roles and decide whether you'll accept a part or not?

If it's an interesting part of a good cast or director then I usually want to do it. If it's a stereotype that I don't feel comfortable playing then I turn it down.

You're also working on the 'Jimmy Vestwood ' project and 'Equal Opportunity '. Could you tell our visitors more about these projects?

Jimmy Vestwood is a script I've written with Amir Ohebsion. It is kind of like a Persian Pink Panther meets Bend it Like Beckham. We are in the process of getting the project produced. We hope to have Jimmy Vestwood be one of the first Middle Eastern heroes in American cinema. People can check out his site at www.jimmyvestwood.com.

"Equal Opportunity" was just a short film that I donated a little money to. It was written by a young writer I know in LA named Sameer Asad Gardezi. It's a funny short and I'm happy he made it. I always encourage young writers/directors/actors to create their own opportunities – either by writing a short film or producing a play or doing a one man show or whatever. No one is going to come up to you and just put you in something. You have to create it yourself.

What are your plans for the future?

Going to shoot a TV pilot for Comedy Central called "The Watch List". It's like the Chappelle Show, but with Middle Easterners. Dean Obeidallah and Max Brooks (Mel Brooks' son) created it. People can watch clips of the online version that led to the pilot by going to comedycentral.com and entering "The Watch List" in the search box. I'm also getting ready to pitch a TV show with one of the Seinfeld writers, Spike Feresten. (He's the guy who wrote the famous "Soup Nazi" episode for Seinfeld.) We're pitching a show about an Iranian living in LA with his family. It's kind of like "Everybody Loves Raymond" meets "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" meets "All in the Family." Also looking to find a production company for Jimmy Vestwood the movie.

It must have been very hard for you lately to get some rest and I'm sure that you like to sleep in on Sundays like all guys. But, is there something or someone you like so much that you'll wake up for at the middle of the night?

I can wake up pretty fast man. I love to sleep though. I've woken up in the middle of the night to watch Iran play soccer on satellite TV. Doo doo roo doo doo – IRAN!

Maziar Jan thank you very much for taking time of your busy schedule to answer our questions and making this interview possible. You're truly a Persian to be proud of, we wish you all the best in the future and hope to see more of you.

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