

She's got a white schtick

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MAYSA ABOUZEID'S white cane falls to the ground and she reaches around to find it. I shuffle about, move out of the way, do all the things people think they should around blind people. I suppose I'm trying to help. But it's quickly apparent Abouzeid's coping fine and she might even use me as material in her next gig.

At 19, this blind, Egyptian-Italian stand-up comedian has already crammed quite a career into her teenage years. Impatient with waiting around for gigs in Melbourne, she went straight to the comedy stages of New York, honing her seven-minute routine in the toughest of towns.

Nervous but unfazed, she left them cheering. Perhaps it's because she's really still a kid, a round-faced teenager with emerging self-belief that lends her optimism and trust before an audience of strangers. Clearly she also has the comic chops, zeroing in on some blackly comic targets such as university lecturers who give her generous extensions on her essays. "Being blind can really work for you," she says, her smile dazzling, her punchline lethal.

Once, the laughs were hard to come by. Abouzeid was an isolated, unhappy teenager from a Muslim family in Melbourne's northern suburbs. She struggled with literacy and hated school. During a traditional Arabic dance class at school, she was noticed by a director Kate Gillick.

Gillick realised Abouzeid didn't have her heart in dance and thought spoken word might suit her better. "I said tell me about your life. She started talking, I started writing and we now co-write about experiences taken from Abouzeid's life. We needed to exaggerate to make comedy. Often something that's been painful and hurtful in her life can be turned around."

Abouzeid adds that her early material was a bit downbeat. "It had an 'I'm an anti-social bitch' feel. At school I struggled with isolation. I was avoided and I learned to read really late. All I have is sight in the corner of one eye. Even large print is difficult for me."

At 9-months-old Abouzeid was diagnosed with retinal damage. Studying with audio books, talking computer software and a magnifying glass tends to set a girl apart at school but Abouzeid shrugs at the memory. There's still something of the teenager in her

sullen acceptance of the painful years. Perhaps adolescence is never easy but for her, pimples were the least of it.

During year 8, the World Trade Centre in New York was attacked, and she remembers Afghan and Iraqi girls being insulted in the aftermath. "Other kids at school called them bloody terrorists and dirty refugees. I copped it as well. I remember one girl saying to me on the oval, 'Maysa, I want to protect you because you're blind but are you a Muslim?'"

"I just said, I'm not that religious, I'm more Italian really."

In time, Abouzeid found a stimulating outlet in performing with A.R.A.B. (Anti Racism Action Band) a 120-strong ensemble supported by Victorian Arabic Social Services. With Gillick as artistic co-director, A.R.A.B. encourages disadvantaged young people to create dance, theatre, hip-hop and rap music. Abouzeid has appeared in many of the group's productions but also performs solo and writes with Gillick. Yet she's often stuck at home with the internet. "My parents are very protective," she says.

While looking up overseas comedy festivals, she hit paydirt. The annual Arab-American Comedy Festival was planning its New York event in late 2006. A performance tape was sent and Abouzeid was soon invited to go to the US, accompanied by her mother and Gillick.

By all accounts, she blitzed them. "It wasn't the biggest audience I'd faced but it was the loudest. They were cheering before I even got on stage, cheering when the MC introduced me. They really liked that I'd come so far for the festival." The only Australian on the bill at the Gotham Comedy Club, squeezed on with headlining acts and nervous as hell, she delivered her seven-minute routine to an enthusiastic, packed house.

She even attracted some press. Associated Press noted the arrival of the Australian visitor "who is legally blind and came on stage using a walking stick and wearing dark sunglasses as she recounted going through security checks and enduring a 20-hour flight to New York. 'I'm a threat to national security?'" quipped the young comedian.

Given the festival's make-up, the politics of the day dominated the stand-up routines of performers trying to present positive images of Arabs in the US. And clearly discrimination, religion and the status of women are comedy staples for the more subversive. But Abouzeid steers away from the subject of Islam, preferring to shape gags from the absurdities of personal encounters.

“My home can be traditionally Muslim at times but my parents always had to think about business.”

Her Egyptian father and Italian mother own a halal pizza shop and they've kept up a frenetic pace running restaurants for as long as she can remember. It's an oddball childhood Abouzeid works into her routines. “My parents were nocturnal, we're like bats. The sun hurts us.” At least that's the line she can sell to the lecturers she's hassling for just one more extension.

With a broad grin, she explains her schtick with rapid-fire delivery: “I describe myself in my routine as a blind, Italian-Egyptian, Muslim, female comedian learning sign language who can also do salsa dancing.”

The apparently busy among us might be humbled by Abouzeid's appetite for the new, from theatre studies and Italian at university, to dancing and athletics. In her spare time, she also learns belly-dancing, and trains in discus, javelin and running.

But perhaps most inspirational of all is the delicate skill of tactile signing. Abouzeid explains it, without the niceties: “I have a blind, deaf friend and I always had to yell in her ear. After a while I thought, stuff this. So I went to see a liaison officer at university about doing a sign language course.”

She came across a tactile signing course, in which a deaf and blind person puts her hands over the hands of a signing “interpreter” and feels their movements. Abouzeid gently places her hands underneath mine and demonstrates a few words. It's intimate, relying on trust. Clearly Abouzeid is made of strong and compassionate stuff on and off the stage.

But she can still see the humour in the scene. “When we do this at uni it really looks funny to others. We have our elbows on the table, coffee is in the middle, and on we go, hands on hands. I say to myself, ‘OK Maysa, you have to forget the embarrassment shit.’ Also, my friend doesn't realise she has a loud voice and she jiggles about a lot when she's excited, so it can get very intense.”

Abouzeid and Gillick are working to expand her stage routine to 30 minutes and to attract professional paid work. They know the industry's hard to crack, with females making up a tiny proportion of most stand-up bills. Yet Abouzeid's faced bigger hurdles.

She's also hoping to get a guide dog soon to increase her independence and, she says, as she rises to leave, cane held firmly in hand, “I'll get lots of material out of that.”