

Shaun Majumder talks parenting, prejudice and his New West show

It's the kind of milestone you have to interrupt a conversation for. Shaun Majumder, on the phone from his home in L.A., breaks into his own train of thought about race and politics and parenting to share a moment from the world of the infant daughter he's settling down for a nap.

"I held out a little toy and she reached out and picked it out of my hand," he says, and you can practically see the beaming Dad smile through the phone line. "She's never done that before."

"She," by the way, is Mattis Maple Majumder, who's coming up on 12 weeks old and whose small baby squawks instruct her father to put the phone on speaker so he can pick her up. It's clear she and her mother (actor Shelby Fenner, who's been married to Majumder since 2012) are everything to the Canadian comedy star.

Majumder is just winding up a summer and fall hiatus, having interrupted the cross-country tour of his new show, HATE, to be at home for the birth of his daughter.

"I'm very, very thankful to be here. There's no more important time in my life and in hers," Majumder says.

For Majumder, becoming a father at 47 was perfect timing (and not just because, as he jokes, "My prostate's amazing.")

"I just feel like I've got a great foundation right now," he says. "I'm grounded. I feel good, my mind is really good; it's perfect. I'm past all the bullshit."

He's about to hit the road again, with B.C. tour dates – including a Nov. 23 show at the Massey Theatre – coming up quickly. Yes, it will be his first time leaving wee Mattis behind (and yes, it's killing him, thanks for asking).

For Majumder, the arrival of Mattis gives him all the more reason to take to the road with HATE. The show combines stand-up, multimedia, video and even song to start a conversation about intolerance and prejudice.

"I've been so focused on having a baby and taking care of this beautiful child, so she is not raised in a world that's filled with hate," he says.

For those who know Majumder best from his long stint on CBC's This Hour Has 22 Minutes, he has a warning: This isn't all benign, CBC-style humour.

"Oh no," he says emphatically. "This is raw. This is me saying some things that'll make people feel a little uncomfortable at times. I believe that's the purpose of comedy. We've got to say the things that people don't want to talk about."

But no, he says, he's not talking about the worst things humanity does to each other; this isn't about violence or bloodshed or war.

"The minutiae that I get into in the show is more what I consider to be, it's ridiculous, it really is," he says. "When we talk about hate, it's people who think they hate someone else. It's not about hate, it's about protection of their own tribe."

"What is hate? Hate is kind of spawned by a fear of the other, because they feel threatened by the other. They lash out in a way that would be perceived as hate: 'You're not welcome here.' 'Build a wall.' 'Immigration is bad.' These kind of things, they're loosely based on hate – they're not genocidal," he says.

He's not talking about the worst of humanity – the tyrants who have justified the extermination of “others” – but rather, about the more everyday occurrences of racism in Canadian society.

“The stuff that I'm getting to is more ignorance,” he says, citing the example of an Abbotsford man caught in a racist tirade on a video that went viral in 2016. “These are the things I show and talk about.”

His show has evolved over its months of touring (though he admits he hasn't been doing as much writing for the past few months, since he's been focusing his time on Mattis). He frequently updates and reworks it to reflect the goings-on on both sides of the 49th parallel.

Majumder can't help but laugh a little at the fact that, at the beginning of his show's run, he made fun of Canadian politics for being so devoid of material.

“I make fun of the fact that our scandals in Canada are so lame compared to Trump's scandals, that Trudeau can't even buy himself a scandal, a real, juicy scandal,” he says.

Majumder poked fun at the “scandal” surrounding Trudeau when he “dressed up like Aladdin” – words that, in that moment, were referencing Trudeau's 2018 trip to India, when he took heat for overdoing it with traditional Indian outfits.

Then the federal election campaign happened.

“The joke became reality,” Majumder says, laughing.

His show covers a lot of ground – from the rise of neo-Nazism in the U.S. and the #MeToo movement, to his own upbringing as the sole “beige” kid in Burlington, Newfoundland, population 350.

And no, Majumder doesn't have any sad tales about racism in small-town Newfoundland.

“I thought I was lily-white,” says Majumder, the son of an Indian father and white mother. “I had no idea I was any different. It was amazing; looking back, there were some things said to me that I now realize were somewhat racist-slash-ignorant. ... I laugh because, in Newfoundland, even when people say things that are racist, they're still coming from a place of love.”

He tells the story of a woman he met while taking his show back home to Newfoundland. As he speaks, the faintly Celtic lilt that remains in his speaking voice broadens into a full-on Newfoundland brogue.

The woman in question was a fan, and she couldn't wait to compliment Majumder on his skill with accents. So, in finest Newfoundland style, she told him: “We love you, Shaun, we do; you do the best Paki.”

Majumder laughs with genuine warmth at the memory.

“I was like, ‘That's so racistly sweet.’”

It's that kind of good-natured acceptance of humanity, with all its foibles, that Majumder brings with him on the road.

“The way that I'm doing it is, ‘Come into my house and let's talk about stuff that we will all collectively think is ridiculous,’” he says. “It's a safe way of doing it. I'm having fun with the ridiculousness of hate. In the end, it's a very positive message.”

Because, he says, humans are a pretty good species as a lot.

“Ultimately, we all want to love each other; there’s no doubt about it. The fear that gets in the way of people connecting and seeing another person? That’s a problem. People are most definitely fearful.”

But, he says, we don’t start out that way.

“Like, look at Mattis right now. She is completely open to everything in the world,” he says, and his voice is gentle.

“Now that I stare down at my beautiful child, I think I have to write a LOVE show.”

Glamping comes to the Rock

Looking back, Shaun Majumder can see how Plan A may have been overly ambitious: a grand-scale eco-hotel in Burlington, Newfoundland, a remote fishing and lumber community with a population of 314, six hours from St. John’s. Still, his motivation to share his hometown (‘ometown, as the Newfoundlanders say) was strong. It’s why the L.A.-based actor and former CBC star bought the plot of land that was once the site of his childhood schoolhouse. Architects were hired, blueprints drawn up, and a TV series (Majumder Manor) was even launched to chronicle his journey from actor to luxury innkeeper. But when his team didn’t secure full funding for the resort right away, they changed direction and decided to build a community greenhouse for season one. Its opening provided the climactic season finale for the show, and an excuse to throw a party called The Gathering, now an annual food, music and comedy festival.

“That’s why we first got the tents, because we were hosting chefs and musicians, and there was nowhere to sleep them,” Majumder says of the white canvas prospect tents that were placed around the property. In the summer of 2014, when he married his long-time partner, Shelby Fenner, guests stayed in the same basic lodgings, decorated with cozy-chic touches like one-of-a-kind quilts and turquoise Muskoka chairs. A friend suggested the tents could work as a way to demonstrate proof of concept to investors while welcoming guests and getting the word out. Putting them up on Airbnb meant they could sidestep a good deal of red tape. The original tents were replaced by custom-made versions, hand-stitched in Newfoundland and in keeping with Majumder’s overall goal of a socially responsible, sustainable business. ‘Ome Sweet ‘Ome launched officially in the summer of 2016, charging \$75 to \$100 per night and pulling in \$28,000 in the first season (June to late September). By last year they were up to \$120,000. Somewhere along the line Majumder arrived at a realization: “We thought, wait a second, maybe these tents aren’t just a temporary solution—maybe the glamping thing is the main idea.”

And a good one at that, given the growing interest in luxury camping, a travel option that offers the wonders of the great outdoors minus the work. Taking inspiration from African safari tents, the glamping trend first emerged in California about 10 years ago—the term itself entered the popular lexicon in 2012, when El Capitan Canyon resort was featured on an episode of the Real Housewives of Orange County. Majumder and Fenner took a trip to the Santa Barbara destination in 2013 and learned that the tent accommodations (rather than the cabins or main hotel) were always the most popular. “People want to have this rugged, outdoor, under-the-stars experience, but they don’t want to set up the tents, they don’t want to get wet, they don’t want to worry about safety,” says Majumder. At ‘Ome Sweet ‘Ome, tents are solar-powered and have propane heaters. Compost toilets are a two-minute walk and Wi-Fi is available only at the house where guests check in. Initially a practical limitation, it’s now seen as a selling point. “The whole point is that we want people to unplug and take a break from their devices,” he says—fewer iPhones, more eye contact.

The luxury camping market is projected to reach \$1 billion by 2024, according to the research firm Arizton. Over the last few years, high-end tents and variations thereof (tree houses, pods, yurts, igloos) have popped up all over the planet—and then all over Instagram. Here in the Great White (and green and burnt-orange) North, our vast supply of nature makes us a prime location for upscale outdoorsiness. At the recently launched Blue Bayou Resort in South

Harbour, Nova Scotia, near the northern tip of the Cabot Trail, guests stay in heated geodesic domes equipped with washroom facilities, electricity, hot water and charcoal barbecues. The Clayoquot Wilderness Resort in Tofino, B.C., is considerably swankier: 25 tents surrounded by untouched rainforest and accessible only by plane, helicopter or boat. Starting at \$4,500 per person for a three-night stay, guests experience five-star flourishes like horse-and-carriage transport and a tasting menu featuring locally foraged ingredients. Gwyneth Paltrow's Goop website called it a "once-in-a-lifetime experience."

"What we're seeing with glamping is the evolving definition of luxury," says Canadian travel consultant Claire Newell. Particularly with the millennial market, luxury is about exceptional experiences. "People want the most unique, the most exclusive, the most remote," says Newell. And they want to feel good about the choices they're making. The trend to sustainability has moved into the hospitality market, says Bob McMahon, a retail and consumer business analyst at BDO Canada. "Consumers are willing to pay more for experiences that reflect their core values, and for a lot of people, caring about the future of the planet is part of that."

A hotel is no longer part of Majumder's plans. Sometimes, he says, you follow an idea where it takes you. Down the road he hopes to offer fishing and foraging excursions at 'Ome (current health and safety regulations mean guests must bring their own food or visit one of two nearby restaurants). For now, though, the focus is on expanding the brand all over Newfoundland, then the East Coast, then possibly the rest of Canada and beyond. The concept, he says, is ready-made for the franchise treatment, since the whole idea of 'Ome is showcasing and celebrating the surrounding environment. In Burlington, that means ocean views, summer icebergs and whale watching. "We have the best sheets, sure, but that's not the point," he says. "What's great about the tents is that they can put you in this magical location."

Shaun Majumder

Shaun Majumder, actor, comedian, television host (born 29 January 1972 in Toronto, ON). Shaun Majumder was raised in Baie Verte and Burlington, NL, until at age 14 he moved to Mississauga, Ont with his father, where he graduated from Clarkson Secondary School.

Majumder had always loved theatre and improvisation, and after a year at Dalhousie University he began doing standup comedy routines in the Toronto area and decided to pursue show business. His first television appearances were on a YTV children's show called Brain Wash, playing a character called Ed Brainbin.

Film credits include supporting roles in Harold and Kumar Go To White Castle, The Ladies Man, Pushing Tin and Purpose. For television he played a small-town gravedigger in Mary Walsh's series Hatching, Matching and Dispatching and appeared in episodes of Da Kink in My Hair, Robson Arms, Less Than Kind, Unhitched and 24. He was a regular on Cedric the Entertainer and has hosted many episodes of Just for Laughs. In 2010 Majumder took on the role of homicide detective Aman Mahajan in the dramatic series Detroit 1-8-7 and in 2012 he began to appear in a recurring role in The Firm, along with fellow Canadians Molly Parker and Callum Keith Rennie.

The 90-minute documentary Shaun Majumder, Every Word is Absolutely True focuses on the life of the standup comedian on tour across Canada. He returned to his home town, Burlington, to start a business intended to attract and serve visitors to the area; this resulted in the 12-part documentary series Majumder Manor (2013).

For much of his humour, Majumder, who joined the cast of CBC's This Hour Has 22 Minutes in 2003, draws on his own mixed heritage as the son of a South Asian father and a Newfoundland-born mother of European ancestry. Often he plays a character billed as his alter ego, a profusely sweating, heavily accented reporter named Raj Binder, who asks pointed questions and exaggerates and oversimplifies cultural differences until they become ridiculous as well as laughable.

Shaun Majumder has been nominated for numerous Gemini Awards. He won in 2004 for best host or interviewer in a practical information or performing arts program or series, for Shaun's Great Adventure. In 2006 he shared the Gemini Award for best ensemble performance in a comedy program or series with the cast of This Hour Has 22 Minutes.

Shaun Majumder's humour is often delivered straight-faced and straight-up as he pokes fun at ethnic differences, political correctness and Canada's national winter sport, hockey.

SOURCE 1 (Website)

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SOURCE 2 (Website)

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AUTHOR: Courtney Shea

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SOURCE 3 (Website)

TITLE: Shaun Majumder

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