

How triple threat Francesca Fiorentini uses comedy, journalism, and activism to prove her point.

# One-Woman Show

Words by Jessica Gordon  
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As a comic, finding your voice is the biggest struggle. You may have a solid five minutes, be able to tell a funny story, and have the timing down—but how strong is your angle? What do you really have to say?

For Francesca Fiorentini, that angle—her voice—is the part that comes easy.

In a 9-minute YouTube video called “The Rich Want To Keep You Dumb,” shot for Al Jazeera’s online comedy channel, Newsbroke, Fiorentini breaks down why “intellectual,” which translates to “kale eaters,” has become a dirty word in current American politics. Cutting to a Fox News clip of conservative activist Charlie Kirk spouting off about the “the islands of totalitarianism” that are American universities, Fiorentini interrupts with: “Time out. Charlie Kirk never actually went to college. Why would he? He’s on Fox. Time in.”

Sharp, quick, and cunning, Fiorentini does not hold back. And the blessing of the internet, she says, is that you don’t have to make everything TV-safe. It’s a fierce ideology that works to her advantage both in comedy and on serious spots for the network, including “The Real Deal with the Border,” where she explains immigration policy while reporting from the walls, fences, and security patrol on the U.S.-Mexico border.

Fiorentini explains her work as “breaking down tough concepts into succinct pieces with a strong perspective backed up by facts and fart jokes.” But it’s her knack for using performance to connect the dots with social justice and activism that brings the views (as many as 52 million hits for a single video spot).

Her role—part journalist, part comedian, part activist—isn’t one that a career-focused, traditional overachiever could fill. Rather, it’s one that’s braided by varied life experiences, unexpected twists, and a passion for truth, and Fiorentini has plenty of all three.

Like the rest of us who are old enough to remember September 11, 2001, Fiorentini’s world changed that day; it was the same week the California native turned 18 and moved to New York City from Palo Alto for her first week of college at NYU.

While many of her classmates left the city in the wake of the terrorist attack, shook by its proximity and uncertain of what would happen next, Fiorentini stayed. “It changed everything, I became totally curious about the world,” she says. “The first question I asked was, ‘Why?’ The Bush administration told us it was because they were jealous of our freedom, which sounded like BS to me. It felt like an important moment to stay in New York and figure things out.”

Fiorentini swiftly changed majors from Communications and Marketing to Postcolonial and Feminist Theory at NYU’s Gallatin School of Individualized Study (“and now I’m a millionaire,” she jokes). When asked where she thought her major would take her, “I just wanted to learn more,” she says. “Mostly I skipped class and went to protest. I learned more from my fellow activists and community organizers than I ever did in school.”

A self-described playful “drama kid” who did improv in high school, Fiorentini put her creative inclinations on the back burner and dove into life as a social organizer. After graduation, she worked in Lower Manhattan’s legendary Peace Pentagon building as an editor for both the War Resisters League and activist news magazine *Left Turn*.

But the combination of being in her 20s, working in leftist politics, and living in New York City was a grind. So when love—or “lurve,” as she describes it—presented itself in 2008, Fiorentini followed it to Argentina. In Buenos Aires, a city she describes as enchanting and bohemian, “I spent five years de-NewYorkifying myself,” she says. “I gained back my ability to be present and creative, and just chill out a bit.” Fiorentini worked odd jobs, taught English, drank red wine, ate steak (“I’m cool on steak for a while”), and, most daringly, explored stand-up comedy.

She began performing in and hosting a weekly comedy show called “Grin-go,” doing bits in both in English and Spanish (in which she became fluent) for audiences of mostly tourists, including Danes, who she says didn’t necessarily laugh on the outside. “I could’ve gotten up and slipped on a banana peel, and I would’ve gotten way more laughs,” she says. However, Fiorentini found comfort on

stage. "If you just focus on making fun of sleazy Argentine men and gullible American women, you can't go wrong."

Augmenting her live act, she started a YouTube channel in her apartment, writing jokes about what she was seeing abroad. "When you live abroad, you have an incredible perspective on the United States," she says. "I'm someone who firmly believes that if you build it, they will come, even if what you build is a green screen in your living room, a camera, and begging your boyfriend to help you record something at 11 at night."

Fiorentini honed her joke-writing skills and produced cohesive videos, so when she heard that Al Jazeera was going to start an online version of their network called AJ+ in 2013, she jumped at the opportunity as both a career and way to move back to the Bay Area. "They were looking for a host and a producer, and I said, 'I'm there.' I was basically doing it on my own already."

Now living in San Francisco, she's produced more than 100 videos for Newsbroke, and expanded her correspondent repertoire to freelance hosting for Explorer on the National Geographic Channel. In January, she won a 2018 Planned Parenthood Media Excellence Award for her piece, "Jailed for a Miscarriage," exposing the struggle of women who've had miscarriages in El Salvador under the shadow of the country's oppressive abortion laws.

With role models like Jon Stewart and Dave Chappelle, Fiorentini sees her ability to shed light onto crucial social issues as a great privilege. "Everything you're saying is coming from your mouth, your mind, your perspective and yours alone," she says. "There's something [about it] that's more powerful than making people laugh."

Her vision of the future is optimistic, with a caveat. "I foresee a psychic break with the amount of internet technology and hyper-consumerist BS that we are fed," she says, noting Occupy Wall Street as an example. "I think young folks are deeply cynical and smart, but also very much insulated and distracted, and rightfully so—everything is depressing right now. But there's going to be a moment of realizing, 'All this is crap we're inheriting is a bunch of crap,' and in that, a fight for the future. I think we're going to have to get angry in a positive way."

Makeup: Bridget O'Donnell  
Photography Assistant: Gabriel Manevich

