

## Emirati stand-up comedians face social challenges

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DUBAI - Comedy has always been a cultural staple in the region, from situation comedies to slapstick television shows.

But, recently, artistes like Palestinian-American Aron Kader and Egyptian-American Ronnie Khalil have glorified the stand-up scene in the Emirates for a younger, more uninhibited generation of comedians waiting on the sidelines for a chance to shine.

Emirati comedian and entrepreneur Ali Al Sayed created a ripple by setting up Dubomedy, the city's first comedy school, back in 2007, with his partner, comedian Mina Liccione.

Dubomedy offers rotating classes throughout the year, allowing students to showcase their talent every nine weeks. "It's time for the younger generation to come out and show the world what they've got," he said.

Al Sayed has also launched a weekly comedy and variety show called 'Monday Night Funnies' as a platform for amateurs. "We're getting more Arabs and Emiratis in the course nowadays, which we didn't have at first," Al Sayed said. "Next year, we plan to start a comedy course in Arabic."

Abz Ali tried his hand at stand-up for the first time at the 2009 Dubai Shopping Festival when the aspiring Emirati comedian was only 19 years old.

"The energy we felt when we were up on stage was amazing. I still remember feeling so nervous backstage, especially since I knew I was going to be on the same stage as comedy greats like Dean Obeidallah and Aron Kader," he said of his experience.

Ali is currently taking a hiatus from comedy to focus on his education at university, but expressed a strong desire to return to the scene in the future.

"I think if more people know about stand-up comedy intensive courses in Dubai, they'd seize the opportunity. I just wish there were more open-mic nights here to promote local talents," he added.

With high audience attendance rates at shows and the increase in workshops and classes in the city, comedy star Ronnie Khalil is hoping that spreading the word on stand-up will encourage more people in the region to participate.

As one of the region's most seasoned comedians, Khalil has recently started a comedy intensive workshop at Miranda Davidson Studios.

"There is both interest and a lot of talent from the local population," Khalil said. "The ultimate goal is to form a solid community of comics and comedy writers, which is a great way of developing this industry," he added.

Emirati Dhay Al Hamadi has been trying to graduate from class clown to professional comedienne since she came back to Dubai after 10 years in Canada.

"I remember the first time I went to an open-mic night at a Comedy Club in Toronto. There was an amateur

her college years in Toronto. “The applause is addictive. You hear it once and you want to hear it again,” she added.

Dhay has yet to return to the stage since arriving in Dubai in September, primarily because she has received a lot of negative feedback from family friends.

“It is definitely not easy being a funny girl in my community. Many people said a lot of discouraging and downright cruel things to me, including quoting scripture to make me feel like what I’m doing is sinful or wrong. I don’t see how making people laugh can be a bad thing. I’m standing up for myself when I take the stage,” she said, adding that she is looking forward to signing up for a comedy intensive course in the coming month.

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