

## Middle East comedy bridges cultures

BY HEATH MCCOY, CALGARY HERALD JANUARY 10, 2012



Aron Kader hosts an evening of Muslim comics Wednesday in Calgary Courtesy, Aron Kader

Having spent his career riffing on his Middle Eastern heritage — confronting racial stereotypes but also poking fun at the culture — Aron Kader has taken heat from both sides of the political fence.

After 9/11, there was resistance and harsh feelings toward the New York Arab American Comedy Festival, in which he took part, and, trekking through the United States as part of the Axis of Evil Comedy Tour, featuring comedians from the Arab/Muslim community during the war in Iraq, there were some places that flat out refused to book the show.

“There’s always somebody to say, ‘This is terrible,’ ” says Kader, who will be bringing the Arab/Muslim comedy concept to the Laugh Shop tonight for a gig dubbed Arab Night in Canada. “Weirdly enough, we also get Muslims saying, ‘You shouldn’t be making jokes about your own.’ ”

The L.A.-born comedian, who credits his “Palestinian father and Mormon mother” for giving him his comedic outlook, also reports touring through certain Muslim countries and being told in no uncertain terms what he could and couldn’t make jokes about.

But Kader remains undeterred. Muslim/Arabic jokes are his niche and he’s sticking to it.

He’s an avid supporter of the Middle East comedy community, which he feels is enhanced by shows like Arab Night in Canada. Joining him for tonight’s Laugh Shop gig will be Toronto-based comedian Dave Merheje, of Lebanese heritage, and Detroit’s Mike Batayeh, who hails from a Christian Jordanian family.

“When I first started out in 2000, I wasn’t aware of any other Middle Eastern comedians,” Kader says. “Now there’s a big community and we’re really starting to come up in the world.

“We want to get the point where we’re not a novelty, where we’re sort of immersed.”

While the comedians on tonight’s bill don’t shy away from politically polarizing material, Kader stresses that a great deal of the show takes a lighthearted look at the quirks of Muslim/Arabic culture.

Though the approach has offended some Muslims, it’s also attracted many to the world of comedy.

A lot of “Muslims like to be made fun of by their own,” Kader insists. “The food, the crazy family gatherings. . . . It really is a good time to have us hold up the mirror for them.”

Kader also believes that telling jokes about the culture can help bridge the gap between Muslims and non-Muslims.

“We want to break into the media to help change some of the stereotypes,” Kader says. “If white people and non-Arab people come in with a negative view, that might change after they see our show and realize that we actually have a sense of humour and we love to make fun of ourselves.”

As comedians born and raised in Canada and the United States, Kader thinks that non-Muslim/Arab comedy fans might be surprised at the similarities they’ll find between themselves and the talent on the Arab Night in Canada bill.

“We’re probably more American and Canadian than some people realize, but we still hold onto our roots,” he says. “We haven’t forgotten where we come from.” Preview

Arab Night in Canada, tonight at 8 at the Laugh Shop in the Blackfoot Inn. For tickets phone 403-255-6900 or go online at [www.thelaughshopcalgary.com](http://www.thelaughshopcalgary.com)

[hmccoy@calgaryherald.com](mailto:hmccoy@calgaryherald.com) [Twitter@VanHeathen](#)

© Copyright (c) The Calgary Herald