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Arab Humor . . . No Joke

By [MELIK KAYLAN](#)

New York

In the end, what mars the Arab-American Comedy Festival is the danger to your health: The laughs come so thick and fast that there's no chance to breathe for minutes at a time. One shows up wondering, will it be an extended political rant? Will there be too much phoney applause for bad jokes, endless ethnic boosterism or straining for sympathy, a long bemoaning of injustices, all dressed up as humor? Not a bit of it. Instead, the audience gets a splendid, merciless anatomy of the Arab-American experience, so unsparingly self-critical that it goes beyond the politically incorrect to a species of comedy that often shucks off all conventions and nears pure anarchy.

This is a particularly notable achievement considering the political freight the festival implicitly carries. Last week's was the sixth annual event: seven shows in five nights -- this time at Comix, a comedy club in Manhattan. The producers had dreamed up the idea in response to post-9/11 pressures on the Arab-American community. "In 2003," says Dean Obeidallah, the co-founder, a 30-something from New Jersey of Italian-Arab parents, "you couldn't mention the Arab thing until the last minute or the venue wouldn't book you -- now they're all delighted to have us. But, of course, attitudes have changed so much in the interim. These days, people are more terrified of sneezing Mexicans than Arabs."

If Mr. Obeidallah, an affable Ken-doll look-alike and the festival's MC, sounds a mite provocative, he pales in comparison to female co-founder and fellow stand-up comedian Maysoon Zayid. Also from New Jersey, Ms. Maysoon has cerebral palsy and grinds out her remarks through gnashing jaws. "I found my husband in Gaza -- the best place for me. They have nowhere to run." Both producers have numerous major showbiz credits to their name -- Mr. Obeidallah starred in Comedy Central's "Axis of Evil" show and took it all over the Middle East. Ms. Zayid has appeared in several movies -- as have many of the 50 or so performers. The third producer, Waleed Zuaiter, of Palestinian extraction, came on in the second year and has just acted in a George Clooney film.

The festival week began with a series of shows devoted to sketches written specifically for this year, and then, midweek, shifted to stand-up comedy only -- all performed in a packed club seating some 300 people at tables. Thursday, the final evening, offered a selection of the best performances. It was on that evening that breathing between laughs seemed impossible, especially during the stand-up acts, which were on the whole superior to the sketches. Mr.

Obeidallah explained that while the sketches were new, and thus unpolished, the stand-ups offered material the comics had practiced over many independent occasions.

The first stand-up, an Egyptian-American named Eman Morgan, complained that even after 30 years his father's English was barely comprehensible. "You know your English is bad," he said, "when your gardener makes fun of you." He was followed by Ronnie Khalil, who has appeared on Showtime Arabia, a Viacom subsidiary in the Arab world, and has headlined around the Middle East. He talked about how Muslim feasts are all about suffering. "Our holiday Ramadan," he said, "is 30 days of self-deprivation. There's a reason why the Grinch never stole Ramadan."

Mr. Obeidallah came back on and chatted away, saying that it was great to see all the chain stores opening up in the Middle East -- except for one. He noticed that Target was absent. He introduced Ahmed Ahmed, an Egyptian-born, California-raised comic who has appeared on "Roseanne" and "The View" and was profiled on The Wall Street Journal's front page. He talked about performing around the Middle East -- in Kuwait, he was told "sir, you may not talk about sex, drugs, religion, and no bad language." He illustrated his reaction with a frozen grimace. "What the f- was I supposed to talk about?" He went on to praise Arab civilization. "Turns out we practically invented hygiene: perfume, soap, deodorant, the toothbrush . . . what happened?" He was followed by Joe DeRosa, part-Egyptian part-Italian, who had a coveted half-hour special on Comedy Central in February. "There's too much racism against foreigners," he said. "Foreigners welcome, I say -- come one, come all. Just don't smell like your country."

Ms. Zayid, subtly swaying with palsy but wenchy withal, came on clothed in a long Arab dress. "My father thinks I'm the world's biggest prostitute," she said, "because I do stand-up comedy in public." She went on to add that she had worked proudly for candidate Obama's election. "They told me, 'we were looking for a black lesbian in a wheelchair but we found you. You're perfect.'" For this reporter, the evening hit its peak with Aron Kader, a Palestinian-Mormon Gary Cooper lookalike. "Any Palestinian-Mormons in the audience?" he asked, sighing knowingly at the ensuing silence. He went on to relate, with brilliant impersonations of Arab elders, how he was sitting with his extended family in the West Bank and happened to ask, "what would you do if there was peace?" Conveying their reaction, his face went dumbstruck.

"Huhhh?"

"What would you do?"

"No, no. We will fight and fight and fight and . . ."

Successful as the show is stateside, according to Mr. Obeidallah, "they love what we do in the Middle East." Though the festival doesn't travel, many of its stars do, and Mr. Obeidallah has recently performed in Beirut, Cairo and Amman to audiences of thousands, always in English. "They didn't have stand-up as a genre until we turned up," he says. "We're comedy missionaries. They export religion; we export comedy back at them. They can't get enough. We're like superstars -- they know all about us, especially the young, and it's all through YouTube."

As part of his self-appointed mission, Mr. Obeidallah teaches seminars in stand-up comedy with colleagues, sometimes selecting one or two local wannabes to include in the night's show. "We're

missionaries both ways," he says. "We like teaching Americans about Arabs through comedy. In the early days, reporters would cover us and you'd get headlines like, 'Arab Comedy: Oxmoron?' We're converting people, one laugh at a time."

Mr. Kaylan writes about culture and the arts for the Journal.

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