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## Shedding Light on the Burgeoning Middle East Comedy Scene



[News](#) Sabina Giado Sep 11, 2010 | 3:53 AM



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Sabina is a screenwriter, freelance reporter and a member of the first all-female stand-up comedy troupe in the Middle East, Funny Girls.

“ **Comedy is one of many solutions to a problem – we do not have enough stories about the everyday life of Arabs and Muslims.**

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According to Jamil Abu Wardeh's recent talk on TED, there is an explosion of comedy in the Middle East - an unfortunate choice of words, he admits, but apt nonetheless.

Riding the wave of success from the Axis of Evil Comedy Tour's 2007 Comedy Central special, Abu Wardeh, who is a freelance consultant on original content (@jamiltv), brought the three comedians, Maz Jobrani, Aron Kader and Ahmed Ahmed, all American-born, but of Middle Eastern origin, to the Middle East later that year under the banner of Showtime Arabia. Wonho Chung, a Jeddah-born South Korean-Vietnamese comedian, who, due to his upbringing, speaks perfect Arabic, was selected to round out the troupe. The comedians performed to packed houses in five Arab countries and held competitions for amateur talent in local universities.

The tour sparked a comedy revolution, leading to a surge in the demand for stand-up comedy, especially localized content produced by local comedians.

Jobrani, Kader and Ahmed initially founded the troupe in America largely to counteract the prevailing negative stereotypes surrounding the Middle Eastern-American community post 9/11.

Abu Wardeh says that comedians could very well be activists. "The greatest comedy is born out of drama," he says, "Good comedy comes from simply taking it [stereotypes, painful situations] and flipping them on their head...it's the opposition to the normal thought process that gives you a funny moment."

However, he strongly cautions against politicized comedy a la Lenny Bruce and Bill Hicks, saying that Arab and Muslim comedians would simply reinforce the stereotype by talking constantly about being Arab, Muslim or a veiled woman. "Our comedy should be about being normal - we are now [considered] abnormal....[Comedy should be about] bringing back the positivity, sharing the love and ignoring the politics. Right now, the conversation we should be having is how hungry and dizzy we get before Iftar. In the West, it might be compared to being on the Atkins diet."

"I think I made a mistake in my talk by saying that the three B's (blue material, beliefs and 'bolitics') are not allowed. I should have said that those topics should be treated with respect...Respect means thinking of others."

Omar Ismail, one of the recent crop of comedians to spring from Dubai's burgeoning art scene, also consciously keeps pointed references to the 3Bs out of his comedy. "Nobody called Tim Allen a 'white comedian' or a 'Christian comedian'. He is just a comedian...I think concentrating on what makes you different can alienate your audience...I want to be a comedian. I want to be a Muslim. I want to add to both comedy and Islam. I don't want to be a Muslim comedian."

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Abu Wardeh looks back with nostalgia at the golden era of Middle Eastern comedy, especially the humorous stage plays that marked the careers of Egyptian Adel Imam, Lebanese comedian Doreid Lahham and Kuwaiti comedians Abdul Hussain and Abdul Ridha in the early 1960s and '70s. "We used to have great comedy in the Middle East – intelligent slapstick humour...this died down in the '80s and '90's"

"[At the moment] Comedy is one of many solutions to a problem – we do not have enough stories about the everyday life of Arabs and Muslims."

Where will this runaway funny train stop? "We created something new but we don't know how it's going to be used," says Abu-Wardeh. "What I do know is that we have all these new people [other artists], we have new stories in...all these mediums,...stories that connect and are funny."

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