



ARAB-AMERICAN COMICS FIND CAUSE TO LAUGH

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Tuesday night, a select group of highly skilled Arab-Americans attacked President Bush.

Using weapons of mass deconstruction - wit, humor, parody, impersonation and satire - standup comics at the New York Arab-American Comedy Festival unleashed an arsenal of jokes and criticism, taking apart the President one piece at a time.

When comic Dave Merheje crosses the border from Canada, he says, he's forced to stare at a giant image of Bush.

"I swear, he's started to whisper things to me like, 'I'm riiiiiiiiiiiiich,'" he said at the New York City Improv Comedy Club. "Man, a deer could run a country better than him."

Festival co-founder Dean Obeidallah wondered about the President's pronunciation of Al Qaeda. "He says, 'El Kay-ee-da.' It went from a terrorist group to a Spanish restaurant."

"He says the 'W' in his name stands for 'women.' I say it stands for WRONG," continued Obeidallah, to cheers from the audience. "But knowing Bush, he'd probably deny that, saying that word starts with 'R.'"

The four-day festival showcasing the talents of Arab-Americans wrapped last night. In two shows at the Improv, the performers used humor to face the complexities their community experiences in a time of global turbulence.

Ahmed Ahmed lamented being on the no-fly list and suffering month-and-a-half delays before boarding flights.

"Security has gotten so tight, I was thinking of going to the airport in a G-string" so officials will wave him through, he said.

Aron Kader talked about the negative portrayal of Palestinians in the media, summed up in a headline like "Palestinian Attacks Bullet With Body."

But as with all standup, sex and family life were fair game, too.

Joe DeRosa worried about being unattractive and "skinny-fat" and complained about "bad sex faces." Helen Maalik lamented bringing falafel to school for lunch when all the other kids brought peanut butter and jelly. Amer Zahr wondered why his father could not get the hang of voice mail.

"A lot of [what the comics joke about] is actually true," said Anan Zahr, 50, who traveled from Philadelphia to catch her son's set. Anan recalled how after 9/11, she was subject to discrimination, even though, as a Palestinian, she is often mistaken for Puerto Rican or Cuban.

"These are all things I totally identify with, as my friends do. You don't even have to be Arab-American to understand the difficulties."

"Since 9/11, the Arab-American community has felt under siege, they've been circling wagons, becoming closer and more supportive of each other," says Obeidallah. "The comedy has changed from simple ethnic humor to much more political content."

"This festival is a way to dispel stereotypes. We try to do what we can through the art to define who we are, as opposed to others who don't know us, or don't want to know us, doing so."

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