

Laughter's New Profile

Since September 11, Arab-American comics have been wowing crowds—and puncturing stereotypes

BY LORRAINE ALI

PROFILING. DETAINMENT. Hate crimes. It's no fun being an Arab-American now—unless you also happen to be a comedian. "I went to the airport check-in counter," says Egyptian-American comic Ahmed Ahmed to a packed room at L.A.'s Comedy Store. "The lady behind the counter asked if I packed my bags myself. I said yes—and they arrested me." The audience titters nervously. But by the time he gets to his first Osama joke—"The only virgin he'll get in the afterlife is Janet Reno"—they're giving up the big laughs. For the next two hours at the Sunset Strip club, Palestinian-American Aron Kader, Iranian-American Maz Jobrani and Armenian-American Sam Tripoli riff on their cultures while the mainly white and Hispanic crowd eats it up. Ahmed says they couldn't get arrested before 9-11. To which Jobrani jokes, "It's easy now."

The Western and the Muslim worlds may seem more alienated than ever, but there's a growing demand for humor that bridges the gap. The Comedy Store's "Arabian Knights" shows regularly sell out—"I know I'm not a Middle Easterner," says Tripoli, "but we are all brothers with unibrows"—and Arab-American comics are landing prime spots in clubs nationwide. "All of a sudden we're topical," says Kader. "Before, it was like, 'Why are you talking about Arabs? Nobody cares about them.' Now everyone's listening."

Tonight at the Comedy Store, airport-profiling and cavity-search jokes get the big laughs, while evoking stereotypes comes in second. "Any Arabs in the audience?" Ahmed asks the crowd. "Raise your hand,

throw a rock, burn a flag." Kader's set gets a little more political. "The problem in the Middle East is that the Jews and Arabs think they're God's chosen people," he tells the audience. "If you are God's chosen people, why is there nothing but war and death over there? Look around, you're in the desert! I mean, have you been to Barbados or Hawaii? It's gorgeous over there. Maybe the Samoans are the chosen people. Have you thought of that?"

Kader & Co. represent a new twist on an American tradition of self-deprecating and edgy ethnic humor. They are doing for Middle Easterners what Richard Pryor, Margaret Cho and John Leguizamo did for

African-Americans, Asians and Hispanics—carrying their culture from the margins to the mainstream. "Since September 11, when people ask me about my ethnicity I look them straight in the eye and say, 'I'm Italian,'" jokes Jobrani during his set. He was born in Iran but raised in the United States. "We're all named Tony now."

Comedy Store owner Mitzi Shore (Pauly's

mom) launched "Arabian Knights" a year ago when she recognized Middle Eastern stand-up as an untapped comedy vein. Shore, who gave Leno and Letterman their start, had the comics working the club's main room until September 11. She suggested all four go back to the smaller rooms and refocus their acts. Says Jobrani, "I thought I'd never be funny again." But when they returned to the big stage in November, interest in the comics skyrocketed.

Reaction has been just as encouraging across the country. Ray Hanania, a former open-miker, just landed a spot at Zanies—Chicago's biggest club. "I'm married to a Jew," says Hanania, who's never at a loss for material. "Unless another Palestinian comic with a Jewish wife surfaces, I pretty much got that market cornered."

It's ironic, of course, that while hate crimes against Arab- and Mus-

lim-Americans have risen 300 percent in the past six months, so has interest in their comedy. Hanania hopes he and his peers can defuse a little tension, the way Jewish comedy punctured the anti-Semitism of the vaudeville era. "They didn't eliminate anti-Semitism, but they offset it," he says. "We can do that, too." According to Ahmed, the scales may already be tipping. "This woman came up to me after a show in a very military, conservative part of San Diego and said, 'Thanks a lot. I never thought I'd laugh at this stuff. I never knew Arabs could be so funny.'" Another stereotype bites the dust: she was expecting them to bomb. ■



IN THE SPOTLIGHT: Yucking it up with Ahmed, Tripoli, Jobrani and Kader