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**TALK LIKE AN EGYPTIAN:**  
Since Sept. 11, Middle Eastern comedians such as Ahmed Ahmed have started confronting their nationality head-on in their routines, using laughter to defuse tensions.  
ROBERT HARBISON - STAFF

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## Give it up for the 'Axis of Evil Tour'

By [Gloria Goodale](#) | *Arts and culture correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor*

HOLLYWOOD, CALIF. —

Ahmed Ahmed travels a lot. Just the other day, says the heavily bearded Egyptian, he was at the airport. An older couple waiting for a flight came over and asked him where he was headed.

"I told them, 'I have a one-way ticket to Paradise,'" he says. Pause for laughter.

Yup, he says, airports are tough for him right now. They are for everyone, he adds. Nobody likes having to get there an extra hour early or being delayed by all the extra security. But just to make sure, he says, "I get there a month and a half early."

The Cairo-born actor/comedian is onstage in Hollywood, part of a recent evening put on by Twentieth Century Fox television to showcase Middle Eastern comics. As Shaun Majumder, the emcee, explains, "We've got people from hot spots all over the world. "This is the 'Axis of Evil Tour,'" he says with what could only be described as a challenging glint in his eye.

The five comics who share the stage tonight share that look. It is as if to say, "I dare you not to laugh," even at something that touches a pretty tender nerve for just about everyone right now, given code orange alerts and impending war.

All five comedians were working professionals before the events of Sept. 11, but discovered that after the attacks, they had no choice but to tackle the issue of their national origin head-on. To avoid the issue would be emotionally dishonest.

"I'm from Iran," says Maz Jobrani, "where we don't take American

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Express, but we take Americans." He tips his imaginary hat for a drum roll, to let the audience in on what he knows - this is a corny joke that plays to deeply held stereotypes in the American psyche.



Just like race-conscious comedians such as Richard Pryor, who in the 1970s used comedy as an offense and a defense, Jobrani is happy if the audience laughs, but he also wants them to think.

"Comedy is about getting people to laugh at the things that scare them most," he says. If he and his fellow comedians can make people take a step back from their terror, they can not only relieve their own angst, but help tone the whole country down a notch. You have to be unafraid to joke about anything, he says, even a popular president contemplating war. "I don't want to go to war with Iraq," he says onstage, "because Iran sounds a lot like Iraq, and if there's one president who can mess that up, it's President Bush. He's not too good with the alphabet."

Perhaps remarkably to those who feel some things just aren't funny, the comedians all say they've had great responses to their routines. Ahmed was in New York after the attacks and says he felt audiences were grateful for the release. "They loved it, because they all wanted to laugh," he says.

Since the attacks, Ahmed himself has become a bit of a poster child for the entire concept of comedy based on events in the Middle East. He's been profiled in major newspapers and magazines, and he toured the country doing standup with a rabbi, just about as in-your-face as you can get, he says with a laugh. Yet, with rare exceptions, audiences have been enthusiastic and supportive.

"Bob Hope once said, 'As long as there's war, there will be comedy,'" says Ahmed. "You need it to humanize people all over the world."

Thelma Vickroy is in tonight's audience and says the appeal of these comedians is no mystery to her. First, they're very funny, she says, standing outside the club after the show, laughing at the memory. "These are real professionals. They're not just newcomers trying to trade on a single thing," she says.

The best comedians make you face not just your fears, but your prejudices and blind spots, she says. They do it best when they put their own vulnerability on display.

"When I get pulled over by the LAPD," says Ahmed during his act, "I just tell them I'm black. I know I'm going to get beat up either way, but at least I'll be alive."

Ms. Vickroy, a filmmaker and assistant professor of film at California State University, is making a movie about Ahmed. "The bottom line with him is it's an American immigrant story," she says, adding that this is true of millions of this country's Muslims. "It's so fundamentally American - his family moving here, wanting their children to succeed."

She says she enjoys watching audiences, because she sees them empathizing with the humanity of the family stories, such as this bit from Lebanese Alle Ghadban: "People from the Middle East don't have children, they have employees."

This empathy is also very American, adds Vickroy. "If you look at our history," she says, "we have a great tradition of comedians making jokes about and helping us to understand and accept people who are different than us." At the same time, comedy tries to keep everyone from taking themselves too seriously.

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#### Today's print issue



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"When black people go into prison, they come out with names like Muhammad," says Ahmed, whose full name is Ahmed Abou Bakr Ahmed Mohamed Ali Abdul-Waheb Kawidia. "I don't want to go into prison - I'd probably come out with a name like LeRoi Jones."

Beyond that, comedy is just a great cathartic outlet for people's frustrations and fears. Take one comic's suggestion for tracking down the elusive head of Al Qaeda: "If the American military can't find Osama bin Laden," says Armenian-American Sam Tripoli, "I know someone who can. The student-loan people. They can find anyone in two weeks."

## CROSS-CULTURAL CHUCKLES

The comics put their own twists on traditional topics of the standup scene, such as dating. "I seem to attract women who want to rebel against their parents," says Ahmed Ahmed. "This girl came over to me and said real coyly, 'Make me your Egyptian princess.' So," he says with a shrug, "I threw a sheet over her head and told her to be quiet."

Dysfunctional families are also a ripe target. "My dad is Palestinian and my mom is a Mormon," says Aron Kader. "My mom asks me if I want to go on a [Mormon] mission. In Arab, that word means something else altogether, like something you don't come back from."

And of course, there's politics. Maz Jobrani has some thoughts on the government requirement that Middle Eastern men register. "So, let's see. I'm a terrorist on the way to bomb something. I've got the car; I've got the map. What am I missing? Oh, yeah. I forgot to go down and register."

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