

Comic Relief

Karen Ann Monsy

9 April 2010

Resident funny men (and women) are tumbling out of the woodwork—and leaving you doubled up with laughter. Karen Ann Monsy reports

Fifteen minutes before we are to meet, Emirati comedian Ali Al Sayed calls to apologise; he has most regrettably ‘forgotten’ about the interview. Considering it was April 1 that day and his regret held the shadow of a repressed laugh, his little joke didn’t get very far. It was, however, an insight into the comic inclinations of one of Dubai’s many upcoming funny men.



Ali Al Sayed & Mina Liccione

An all-rounder on the local entertainment scene, Ali considers himself a product of the corporate world. “Where I worked, I had to keep a straight face on throughout the day, which was very difficult for me. The company I was working for hired me to do a show for one of their gala dinners — and that’s how I stumbled onto comedy.” Two years ago, he met Broadway veteran Mina Liccione, and in their words, “that was it!” It was literally East meets West, but the two hit it off and co-founded Dubomedey Arts, an educational outlet for building an arts community. Before long, the venture created the now-popular weekly comedy show Monday Night Funnies, where local acts are more than welcome to take centre stage.

Mina ‘blames’ her family for all the comedy in her life, so to speak. Having had her first tap-dancing performance at age three and her first job as assistant dance and improvisation teacher at age 12, she’d read her cards right, from the outset. There was “never a doubt” in her mind that she was going to be a performer. “Comedy, in my family, is how we deal with life,” says the Italian-American. “It’s an attitude... you have to have a sense of humour. There are too many people and too much madness around you not to have one. The beauty of stand up comedy is: you can do it till the day you die,” she declares. “With stand-up, the older you get, the funnier you are!”

According to them, the fledgling state of the comedy industry here means less rivalry and more support. Ali says they get asked so often whether they’re in competition with The Laughter Factory, the oldest stand-up comedy promoter in the UAE, that he’d like to set the record straight: They are not. “The Laughter Factory are definitely the pioneers in this area,” he states. “I’ve attended many of their shows, which have great quality. I think they’re more directed towards the British crowd — and they’re honest about it as well.” Mina chimes in at this point to explain how they balance each other. “The Laughter Factory brings in UK humour for the British community here. We’re doing the opposite by embracing the local community and training artists here. Westerners attend our shows too, but we also want the local audience, people who live here.”

Emirates, where she and her students explore different genres of comedy. But how exactly do you teach someone to be funny? “You can’t,” responds Mina, in a flash. “I can’t teach people how to be funny, but I can help them see the funnier side of life.”

That said, Mina has her own definition of what’s funny — and what’s very clearly not. “I think if you have to harp on certain subjects or use slang every two minutes... then you’re not funny. I really don’t encourage swearing at all. You have to know where you are,” she says. “This is the environment that we live in, you have to respect it. So instead of focusing on the differences, I get my students to focus on the commonalities: family, traffic, queues, Dubai — these are things everybody connects to. I train them to make fun of themselves instead of pointing fingers.”



Palestinian-born *Omar Abu Holy* may not have the training, but he has always been seen as the last comic standing in his group of friends. A civil engineer by profession, the 23-year-old has his own unforgettable show time memories. His very first performance sticks out quite clearly in his mind — though perhaps for reasons different than you might think. “During last year’s DSF, they had something called the Comedy Café, during which comedians like Aron Kader (of Axis of Evil Comedy Tour fame) were brought in to hold workshops,” he says. “It was my first show, and I was talking when suddenly, I blanked out and just froze. People knew it was my first show, and were very nice. They started clapping, cheering me on, until I remembered my lines and told them they could stop!”

The workshops came to an end along with the DSF, but for some of its local attendees enough simply wasn’t enough. And thus, the Dubai Ambassadors of Comedy (DAC) was born. It was a simple love of the funnies that brought together its 12 original members. Interestingly, none of them share a common nationality. A DAC member himself, Omar’s take on comedy here has a lot to do with customising it for the region. “I think having a bit of Arab humour is important because we’re widely misunderstood. People think we’re rude and don’t have a sense of humour — but I want to prove that wrong,” he grins. “So I think now, we have to start with ourselves; laugh at ourselves and with ourselves. After a while, you learn how the crowd will react, what are the jokes that work... If the crowd is of a certain nationality/ culture, you need to give them stuff they’ll understand because too many times, jokes are lost in translation or cultural differences.”

Omar points out how it’s one thing to be funny for your friends — and another altogether when it’s in front of 700 total strangers. “At first, it can be pretty hard to deliver because you’re on a stage with a spotlight trained on you — because of which sometimes, you can’t even see the people you’re performing to. The only way you know you’ve succeeded is when you hear them laugh,” he chuckles. “If you don’t hear those laughs, it’s best you move on to your next lines — and fast!”



Another DAC member, Egyptian writer *Lamya Tawfik* knows she is not alone in believing that onstage, every comedian ought to go armed to the teeth with their wits — and then some — because you just never know who you might have to take on. Ask any comedian and they’ll probably tell you: their worst nightmare would involve getting heckled or jeered at onstage. “I was once performing at the American University of Sharjah and the crowd was laughing and having a good time when one student decided to heckle and said: ‘Go home!’ I just looked at him, faked a French accent and said: ‘Moi? Are you talking with moi?’ and just kept going. It was probably not the best way to tackle a heckler but it was my first — and only — heckler so far, and I really didn’t know how to react! I

Lamya Tawfik

still don't know how to react!" she exclaims. "The interesting thing is how the students came up to me later and hugged me, saying they thoroughly enjoyed the show and apologising profusely on behalf of their colleague. I thought that was really thoughtful of them."

While the bubbly 33-year-old is not at the stage where she can depend on comedy to pay the bills, she can't seem to quit inventing gags either. "Being on stage and connecting with the audience is immensely gratifying. The applause is addictive," she admits. "Watching someone begin to smile at something I said and then throw their heads back and laugh by the time I reach the punch line — simply exhilarating!"

**Aron Kader**

So how does she cook up such rib-tickers? Lamya's hesitation lasts a brief moment. "I can't believe I'm telling you this and you'll tell the whole world but this is what I do — and it's the truth! I get an idea that I want to write a piece about, grab my remote control or perfume bottle, use them as a fake mike and then face the wardrobe. Yes, the wardrobe is usually my first audience," she assures, before resuming. "I start talking as though I'm on stage... and find that while I'm speaking, I get more and more ideas. When I feel I'll forget what I just said, I run to the open notebook on my desk, jot down some keywords to remind myself of the jokes and then go back to my ever-patient wardrobe. I have to remember to keep the balcony curtains closed while I do this though — lest a neighbour sees me performing to my wardrobe!"

Disabusing any notions that residents here might not be easily given to cracking a smile, she says, "Dubaiites do enjoy a good laugh and the fact that our audience consists of so many nationalities makes it challenging to cater to them all — but it's also extremely satisfying when we manage to tickle a funny bone across all these various cultures."

Almost all locally based comedians are part-timers — which says a lot for this still-developing industry. But don't laugh them off yet. The punch line is only yet to come.