

Middle Eastern comedians don't tiptoe around post-9/11 politics

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Thursday, September 7, 2006

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Doing political comedy is risky, even in a culture where "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart" and "The Colbert Report" are revered. That's what Aron Kader, an Arab American comedian from Los Angeles, is finding.

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"There's a weird backlash within the culture of the comics," says Kader, 32. "This weird group that kind of looks at us like, 'OK, go ahead and profit off 9/11.' Like it's an opportunistic venture."

Kader is one of three Middle Eastern Americans who make up the Axis of Evil Comedy Tour, an occasionally trenchant, mostly lighthearted comedy trio dedicated to dispelling stereotypes and offering a safety valve of laughs in a tense world. The trio appear Saturday at 7:30 p.m. at the Palace of Fine Arts.

"We always have been Arab Americans," Kader explains. "We always have talked about that and it's always been a part of our act. It's just that now when we say it, it's a political statement."

"Some people say, 'We get this on the news, we're oversaturated' or 'I don't need to go to a comedy show to get politics.' Well, then go see Dane Cook or one of these comedians who talks about grilled cheese sandwiches for an hour."

In addition to Kader, the Axis of Evil includes Maz Jobrani, an Iranian American who was reared in Tiburon, and Ahmed Ahmed, an Egyptian American who grew up in Riverside and has to supply birth certificate, naturalization papers and other identification when he enters an airport because he shares a name with a terrorist at large.

For the Palace of Fine Arts show, the Axis of Evil trio is slightly altered. Ahmed is busy at the Toronto Film Festival, and Dean Obeidallah, a Palestinian American who occasionally appears on the bill, is taking his place.

Kader, who has blue eyes, curly black hair and a face that he calls "ambiguous ethnic," doesn't have Ahmed's problems at airport security portals. He's a cultural blend: His dad is Palestinian American and his redheaded mom is a Mormon. He grew up in Utah until age 9, later in a suburb of Washington, D.C., and has three brothers, each of whom supports his career and frequently suggests jokes.

Onstage, Kader's ethnic and religious mix is an icebreaker: "Any Palestinian Mormons out there?" he'll ask a crowd. "My people, my people," he'll add in a mock-plaintive voice.

Among the Axis of Evil trio, Kader is by far the most political onstage. He trashes President Bush, slams the Iraq war and invariably gets laughs mocking Bush's "Heh-heh" -- that nervous, slightly contemptuous laugh.

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Similarly, Kader is forthright, a tad reckless in an interview context. He holds a dim view of Arab American celebrities, like the 1960s sitcom star who married a once-popular talk-show host, who avoid being identified by ethnic origin.

"My suspicion with a lot of these people is that either they're not political at all and they're afraid to look stupid, or they're incredibly right-wing and don't want to be outed -- especially in Hollywood -- as being not far enough to the left. Professionally, I can see their concerns; personally, I don't know how they sleep at night."

Kader mentions a certain A-list comic actor, the star of several recent hit movies, who wants to keep secret the fact that his father is half Lebanese. "I think he's afraid that the Arab community is going to put him in a situation to either sign a protest or put his name on a list, or they're gonna hit him up for money or make him the poster boy, obviously, because he's very successful and famous."

Kader rarely gets acting gigs: He appeared on "The Shield," and shot a pilot for NBC that didn't get sold. "As an actor you're competing with a huge pool of guys," he says. "When you go onstage, you're competing with nobody, because comics aren't doing that much political material that's on point."

Kader has lived in Los Angeles since he was 19, and learned a lot of his stagecraft with the Groundlings, the Los Angeles improv company that spawned Pee-wee Herman, Phil Hartman and Lisa Kudrow. He's been doing Axis of Evil shows since 2000, when Mitzi Shore, the owner of the Comedy Store in Los Angeles, suggested that he, Ahmed and Jobrani all work together around a Middle Eastern theme. She suggested "Arabian Nights" as a title, but that didn't fly since Jobrani comes from Iran, which is Persian and not Arabian.

Onstage, Kader likes to keep things topical but says breaking news is good for a day, maybe two, "and then it's over."

When a Danish newspaper, Jyllands-Posten, infuriated fundamentalist Muslims with a cartoon series depicting the prophet Muhammad, Kader says, "I thought, 'I have to say something.' That's all anyone was talking about."

"So I said, 'When these Arabs see this cartoon, why can't they just sign a petition or maybe do a protest or write their local sheikh? There's gotta be somebody who got whiplash when he saw the cartoon. So instead of burning down buildings and tipping over cars, let's just sign petitions. Then find the guy who got injured, hire a Jewish lawyer named Bernie or Ira and sue the newspaper.'"

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This article appeared on page E - 1 of the San Francisco Chronicle

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