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CAIRO STANDS UP FOR COMEDY

By Dalia Rabie

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ARABS GONE WILD HAS AUDIENCES 'SHOOTING HUMMUS OUT THEIR NOSES'

"What's up with these new cigarette packs? Are they collector's items?" asked comedian Dean Obeidallah, "I got the guy with the oxygen mask, do you have the one with the amputated arm?"

Commenting on the infamous pictures of a hospital patient now featured on the cover of cigarette packs, Obeidallah had audiences at the Arabs Gone Wild comedy show roaring with laughter.

In a jam-packed hall at the Cairo International Conference Center, Obeidallah opened the show and wasn't afraid to touch on sensitive issues: "I'm going to talk about politics now, if that's ok. American politics, of course. I am no fool."

Back with his second show in Cairo, Obeidallah tore the stage along with Arab-American comedians Maysoun Zayid, Aron Kader, Ronnie Khalil and Sherif Hedayat as well as Egypt's own George Azmy with two gigs last Friday.

Cairo hopped on the stand-up comedy wagon last year with the Axis of Evil Middle East Comedy Tour, and does not seem to be letting up anytime soon.

Keeping the engines running is marketing company Benchmark, which brought the Arabs Gone Wild comedy show that had Cairo audiences in stitches for two hours straight.

As the show's host, Obeidallah's set was divided into six segments between each comedian's set. That, however, did not take away from his jokes' oomph. Six months after his debut in Cairo last May, Obeidallah was back with brand new material, predominantly local and very relatable.

A self-proclaimed "clean comic," Obeidallah says he includes more material about the Middle East when performing in the region, a strategy that proved hugely successful with Friday night's audience.

The hot topic of the night was inevitably Barack Obama's win last week. Obeidallah poked fun at the 'controversy' surrounding Obama's religious affiliation, saying that Muslim will soon become the "M" word, and a politically correct term such as "Pork-free Americans" should be used instead.

What distinguished this comedy show from preceding performances was that it hit nerves with the audience, touching on very local topics.

Egyptian-American comedian Sherif Hedayat won the crowd over with punch lines on sexual harassment as well as his move to America.



Aron Kader.

Popping out a hazard triangle from under his shirt and snapping it to pieces on his knees, Hedayat's jokes about the new traffic law were received with loud applause and roaring laughter.

Sporting the Egyptian national football team's jersey and making his homecoming in Egypt after 14 years, Hedayat's excitement about performing in his motherland brought him closer to the audience.

He put humorous twists on incidents that took place right before he came on stage, joking about the difficulty of communicating in English with cameramen at the show, who didn't understand what Hedayat wanted when he asked for a "power outlet." After explaining it further, the cameraman asked him if "bower" was the word he was looking for.

Traffic, day-to-day expressions as well as the capital's notorious taxis and minibuses made the punch lines of Egyptian-American Ronnie Khalil – whose real name is Shaheer – also making his debut in the motherland.

Khalil, who spoke about his experience as an Egyptian born in the US, struck the right chord with observations about Egyptians' 'patriotism' that is only prompted should an 'outsider' badmouth their country.

Continuing with the local jokes was Egypt's own George Azmy, who was undeniably one of the highlights of the show. Observational comedy delivered by an Egyptian who has experienced the country's bitter and sweet sides first hand had the audience cracking up and prompted several standing ovations.

Azmy's clever categorization of Egyptian pedestrians into "species" was spot on and was definitely something everyone can relate to.

"There are three main categories of pedestrians," Azmy jokes, "the suicidal family, the depressed citizen and the side-street superstar" — who always bumps into your side-view mirror.

Azmy's stab at Egyptian pop songs struck a funny chord as he pulled out a list of "the most used 26 words in Egyptian songs."

Also making her debut, Maysoon Zayid, the first female to ever co-star in a comedy show in Egypt, set out to change the rules in what she believes is a "male-dominated" field.

"Nobody wanted to take a chance on putting a woman on the show ... they are always afraid of how audiences would react," she told Daily News Egypt.

In an attempt to connect with said audience, Zayid, sporting a "Got Falafel" t-shirt, chose to perform mostly in Arabic and even quoted the famous Adel Imam.

"I perform in both Arabic and English, which gives me more jokes and allows me to play on both languages," she said.

Anecdotes about her father, marriage and problems she faces at the airport were well received.

Zayid generally likes to open with a joke about herself, announcing to her audience that she has cerebral palsy. However, in a culture where people look the other way on disabilities, some of Zayid's jokes had a few audience members squirming in their seats.

Her late show audience let her down when she took a stab at the local airline EgyptAir. There was allegedly a high-ranking female official in the audience who took offense to that joke and expressed it vocally.

Zayid said this threw her off, and expressed dismay at the idea of someone, especially another woman, taking offense to a joke that was "neither offensive nor political."

"It is even more shocking that she had no comment on the men's

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George Azmy.



Dean Obeidallah.

jokes on the same topic," she said.

"Still, I look forward to my next Cairo show," said Zayid, who will be performing at a comedy festival next December in Amman, where she "will be doing jokes about all of this, unedited."

Zayid admits to altering her material when performing in the region. "I can get away with a lot more in the US," she said.

Zayid, who aspires for an all-female comedy show in the Middle East, still maintains that her material is conservative and feels that she bares the responsibility of portraying women in the region.

Closing the show was Axis of Evil's Aron Kader, starting off with his staples about being a son of a Palestinian father and Mormon mother, highlighting the difference between both groups.

He captured the audience with his uncanny Bush impersonation as well as his depiction of the difference between men and women.

One of the night's other highlights was Khalil's closing dance, meant to teach audiences how to "fake their way" through a hip hop song in a club by shouting "What," "Here it comes" and "This is the part."

Moreover, Azmy's delivery and comedic timing demonstrated how much he, as well as his material, have evolved since he tried out for last year's auditions with the Axis of Evil Comedy Tour and his appearance on Showtime's Friday Night Live comedy show in Dubai.

Obeidallah also elicited loud laughter and applause when he pulled out a list of Arab versions of common internet expressions.

A day prior to the big shows, the comedians (sans Kader) shared trade secrets with aspiring comedians who were invited to attend the free "stand-up comedy workshop," after which auditioners tried out their jokes in front of a panel of judges, comprised of the comedians.

The workshop aimed at breathing life into a form of art that was only unearthed with last year's successful Axis of Evil Comedy Tour.

Knowing your audience, coming up with original material, pausing for laughter and having confidence are a few of the many tips given by the comedians, with Azmy focusing on performing in Egypt specifically.

For Zayid and Azmy, who perform in both Arabic and English, linguistics is essential. "You can tell a funny joke in English that won't necessarily be as funny in Arabic and vice versa," Azmy explained.

To get a head start, Khalil advised wannabe comedians to write down everything they like and everything they hate and take it from there.

"This workshop is part of Dean's and my mission statement to encourage Arabs to use comedy to express themselves," Zayid said, "because comedy has a very strong voice."

This is the second workshop Obeidallah and Zayid have organized in the Middle East after a similar one in Amman last August.

Around 20 people signed up for the auditions, two of which — Ola Roushdy (Nancy of hit sitcom "Tamer and Shawkeya") and Sherif Zaher — were picked to perform as the shows' opening acts.

The aspiring comedians managed to tickle the judges' funny bone with five-minute skits in both English and Arabic. They were encouraged to take it a step further and hone their talents by holding open mic nights and even performing in front of each other.

"The talent is definitely there, it's up to them to keep in touch with each other and have their own comedy shows. It doesn't necessarily have to be us [performing]," Obeidallah said.

"We want to encourage more young Arabs to be involved in the entertainment field, there should be more of us," he added, "we don't all have to be doctors and lawyers."

With the comedians paving the way, the budding local stand-up comedy scene is well on its way to



Maysoun Zayid.



Ronnie Khalil.



Sherif Hedayat.

establishing itself as the newest, most hip form of entertainment. One thing is for sure, more successful gigs like Arabs Gone Wild are guaranteed to have me, as Obeidallah would say, "laughing my hijab off."

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