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Passant Rabie

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Cairo Shows Its Funny Side

Axis of Evil veterans return as comedians Ronnie Khalil and Sherif Hedayat debut in front of a home crowd

By Passant Rabie

Dean Obeidallah

"Why don't you want to audition?" asked Egyptian-American stand-up comedian Ronnie Khalil. I replied that I didn't think I was very funny. "Well you never know until you're up on stage and people aren't laughing," he said.

Despite the butterflies fluttering around in my stomach, I put my name on the list of 19 aspiring comedians hoping for a spot in the Arabs Gone Wild comedy show on November 7.

After the first laughs resonated from the audience, my nerves completely disappeared and instead, a rush of adrenaline pumped through my veins. I didn't want to leave the stage. I understood why Khalil refers to performing as an addiction, and why Sherif Hedayat, another Egyptian-American performing at Arabs Gone Wild, describes it as his escape from reality.

Eighty Million Comedians

It is the morning after the two back-to-back shows, and despite their obvious physical exhaustion, Khalil and Hedayat are still on a emotional high from the success of their very first performance in their motherland.

Arabs Gone Wild had over 4,000 people of all ages laughing hysterically at the jokes of Palestinian-American comedians Dean Obeidallah and Aron Kader, both making their second appearance in Cairo, and Maysoon Zayid, a first-time performer here. Egypt's up-and-coming comedian George Azmy and two other locals chosen from the auditions, Ola Roshdy and Sherif Zaher, rounded out the show.

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"It still hasn't hit me that I'm in a country filled with 80 million funny people and I'm the one on the main stage," says Hedayat. "For both of us to stand out enough that people would come to see the show, it's overwhelming. I can't comprehend it, but it's such an honor."

For Khalil, it was also a bit personal, as it was his first time performing in front of his entire family.

"I didn't want to embarrass them," he says, joking that a bad performance would mean that his family would have to hear people say, "oh we saw your son, he was he was there."

"Hopefully now, from the phone calls I've got, they have a sense of pride and it makes me happy to know," he says.

After posing for photos and signing autographs for hundreds of fans after the show, both Khalil and Hedayat said they have been overwhelmed by the number of emails, Facebook friend requests and comments from their Cairo audience thanking and congratulating them.

"It's just a great, great feeling and that's why you do it," says Khalil.

From Real Life to Life on Stage

For both comics, a career in stand-up comedy was not the original plan.

Hedayat, 34, was born in Egypt and lived here until his father moved the family to Dayton, Ohio, in 1986, when Hedayat was 12 years old.

Growing up, his first passion was racecar driving, and he still describes it as his "first love."

It wasn't until Hedayat was attending Wright State University in Dayton that he performed a stand-up routine for the first time during an open-mic night at a local comedy club.

"I thought I did really well [at the time]," says Hedayat. "It's amazing how people think that the first time on stage, how great they were. For the record, I was horrible." It took him a year before he could get back on stage again, "just out of how much I thought I sucked," he says. He then began developing his material and performing once every couple of months. For the next few years, Hedayat would go back and forth between performing stand-up comedy and starting several businesses.

"Whenever I found that the real world was too stressful, I would quit my job and go back to comedy," he says.

The last time Hedayat quit his job was five years ago, when he sold his computer company and used the money to supplement his income as a comedian. Around the same time, the Axis of Evil comedy tour, featuring Arab-American comedians Ahmed Ahmed, Maz Jobrani, Kader and Obeidallah, kicked off, showing Hedayat that Middle Eastern comedy was gaining popular appeal.

Much like Hedayat, Khalil didn't anticipate a career in stand-up comedy even though he discovered his funny bone at a young age.



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Ronnie Khalil

Born in Miami, Florida, Khalil, 31, first unveiled his comic ability at a talent show in seventh grade, when he got up on stage in a giant plaid jacket and asked the audience, “don’t you hate it when you buy a new shirt and there’s still a pin in it?” He reached in his jacket and pulled a bowling pin from under his shirt.

Around the age of 22, Khalil and a friend decided to start writing material for stand-up comedy. During his first performance, he met with a rough crowd that booed him and played music to get him off the stage.

“I didn’t do well, but there was something about it that I enjoyed, so I kept doing it,” says Khalil, who began performing more regularly. After performing professionally for three to four years, Khalil quit his job at an advertising firm.

“It was one of the toughest decisions I’ve ever made, but it was also one of the best,” he says. “Sometimes you have to say, ‘to heck with it, why not? I’m young.””



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Aron Kader

The Middle Eastern Angle

After adopting stand-up comedy as a full-time career, the comics had to deal with the hurdles that come with being Arab comedians in the US.

“I was getting booed for being Middle Eastern way before 9/11,” says Hedayat, noting that there were some comedians who started declaring their ethnicity in their routines only when Middle Eastern comedy became popular.

After the terrorist attacks, Hedayat’s parents advised him to back off some of his Middle Eastern material, but he refused.

“After 9/11 I was scared to do any Middle Eastern comedy in the US,” says Khalil. “but then I started to talk about it more and saw that people were interested.”

Khalil, who defines himself as an Egyptian-American because he believes that both possess ‘fantastic qualities’, explains that being of Arab ethnicity can be a double-edged sword.

“I have gotten a lot of [gigs] because I was Arab-American, but I also get pigeon-holed a lot because of it,” he says.

Both comedians stress that their material goes beyond their ethnicity, but when performing in the Middle East, they do more jokes about the culture.

“This show for Sherif and I was such a big deal because it was our coming home and I think we had so many ideas and so many different jokes,” says Khalil. “You had to see on stage just how overjoyed we were to be in front of our home audience.”

Hedayat agrees “It was so hard not to talk about [the culture] because we were so emotional about some of the things that happened [to us].” He is marking his first visit to his homeland in 14 years by filming a documentary, *14 Days After 14 Years*, due to come out in spring 2009.

Local Heroes

Compared to the other comedy shows that have made or are making their way to Cairo — namely *Axis of Evil* in November 2007 and *Maz, Ahmed and Friends* in May 2009 — *Arabs Gone Wild* hits home for audience members by delivering more punch lines on local issues such as the infamous Cairo traffic.

Hedayat won the crowd over in the first few seconds by pulling a hazard triangle, which drivers are required to have under the new traffic law, out of the back of his pants and breaking it over his knee. Khalil connected with the audience by relating his father’s burning desire for him to get married to a girl with brains, beauty and ‘bersonality.’

Other highlights from the night included Obeidallah’s list of Arab internet slang such as ‘OMA – Oh My Allah,’ Zayid’s parody of the smelly meals and even smellier cologne of the passenger next to her on her Egyptair flight, and Kader’s speculation about the book President George W. Bush would write after leaving office, with the first chapter titled “What’s my dog thinking?”. Azmy’s spot-on classification of the three ‘species’ crossing the streets of Cairo — the suicidal family, the depressed citizen and the man standing in the middle of the street with his back to you — was also a big crowd-pleaser.

Aside from a night of laughter, the show nurtured some local talent by letting Roshdy and Zaher premiere their skills in front of a large audience.

Roshdy, has been acting since she was eight years old and is best known for her role as Nancy in the sitcom Tamer and Shawkeya. Still, she found comedy a rush: "When I got offstage, I almost hit the ceiling from the excitement."

Zaher had never tried stand-up before, but is now inspired to become a comedian after performing on the show. "I went expecting to get a few laughs," he says. "but amazingly the reaction was incredible."

Hedayat says that he was not surprised by the amount of talent they discovered in Cairo. "I've always known that Egyptians were funny," he says. "Picking the two funniest for the show was the hardest part."

Both Hedayat and Khalil believe that stand-up comedy has potential to grow in Cairo. "I definitely think there's a chance for it to develop," says Khalil. "Egyptians have stuff to say, and they need someone believing in them." *et*

