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[Dean Obeidallah](#)

Posted December 4, 2008 | 09:24 AM (EST)

Middle East Sees "Explosion" Of Comedy, First Stand Up Festival In Arab World

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1. Do Arabs actually laugh? 2. Do Arabs understand jokes? 3. Don't they hate you because you are American?

Those are just a few of the actual questions I have heard when I tell people in the US that I'm performing stand up comedy in the Arab world. This week's historic Amman Stand Up Comedy Festival in Jordan - as well as the other recent shows I have performed in the Middle East - have answered those questions as follows: 1. Arabs do laugh (In fact, many are very funny themselves); 2. Arabs do understand the jokes in English; 3. No, they don't all hate us - in fact, a large number of Arabs actually love us.



I know that the Arab world isn't the usual stop for American comedians. I still haven't heard a comedian say: "This weekend I'm at the Chuckle Hut in Beirut." (In part because there is no chuckle Hut in Beirut or a comedy club anywhere in the region.) But a new phenomenon has emerged in the Middle East over the last year that no one could have predicted: Arabs love stand up comedy. Finally, it appears America is bringing something to the Arab world that they really like - in fact, they are paying to see it.

While there were a few stand up comedy shows in the region over the past few years, it wasn't until last year's "Axis of Evil Tour" that the Middle East saw a comedy explosion. (And yes, I use the word "explosion" with great hesitancy in an article about the Middle East, but it is the best way to describe the dramatic growth in comedy.) While there is no history of stand up comedy in the Arab world, YouTube and American TV shows airing in the region have brought our comedy there and its catching on fast.

To give you a sense of how much Arabs love stand up comedy, I recently performed in Beirut with Middle Eastern-American comedians Maz Jobrani and Ahmed Ahmed and we sold over 5,000 tickets. Just a few weeks ago I co-headlined a show with comedian Aron Kader in Cairo and over 4,000 people attended.

The material we perform is almost all in English and basically the exact jokes we tell in the comedy clubs in the US. (With a few local jokes thrown in as well.) The audiences in the Arab world - which are predominantly but not exclusively Muslim - have no problem laughing at themselves or jokes about relationships, politics, pop culture, or just standard US observational comedic material. Its been amazing to see these audiences laugh at the identical jokes we have told to US audiences. It makes you realize that we have a lot more in common than some would believe. (Or frankly more in common than some want us to believe.)

The Amman Festival came about after I had performed three sold out shows there this past August. The City's Mayor, Omar Maani, approached me about helping produce a festival in Amman. (I am also the co-creator/producer of the annual NY Arab-American Comedy Festival with my friend and fellow comedian Maysoon Zayid.)

The Mayor explained the City wanted to create the first stand up comedy festival ever in the Middle East to showcase comedic talent from around the world, to encourage more Jordanians to get involved in comedy and to show the world that Arabs love to laugh. (This last reason is especially important to me because lets be honest - when is the last time you saw an Arab on US television or film laughing - other than perhaps a sinister Arab terrorist -often played by an Indian guy - laughing devilishly as he describes his maniacal plans.)

Thus, was born the Amman Stand Up Comedy Festival - a not for profit Festival owned by the City of which I am serving as the Executive Producer. This inaugural festival runs from December 2-6, 2008 and features over 20 comedians from the US, Canada, Australia and Arab world. The comedians are not all of Arab heritage - but most are "brown" (Arab, Pakistani, Indian, Iranian) - with the closing night headliner being well known comedian Russell Peters. If the Festival becomes an annual tradition, we hope to include as many different backgrounds and comedic voices as possible.

One big part of the Festival, and of our recent shows in the region, has been to teach comedy to the locals. I feel as though I'm a comedy missionary. However, instead of religion, we are bringing comedy to this part of the world. We have held free comedy workshops and auditions to add some local talent to our recent shows. Its been amazing to see how much raw comedic talent there is in the Middle East.

We just completed the second night of the Festival here in Amman and its going great. (The second night was the only show in Arabic and it marked the first all Arabic stand up comedy show ever in the Middle East.) All the shows were sold out over a week in advance breaking another stereotype about Arabs, namely that they always wait to the last minute to buy tickets.

Hopefully (Or "Inshallah" as Arabs say which means "God willing") the Festival will become an annual comedy event in the same way as the Montreal and Melbourne Comedy Festivals.

However, our goals are a little more challenging then simply putting on a funny show. We also want to change people's perceptions about Arabs and even show Arabs themselves that they can be funny. Maybe we can even attract American tourists to come to the region so they can find out first hand that the answer to their question is: Yes, Arabs do know how to laugh.



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NEW
I saw the Axis of Evil Comedy Tour in DC and was truly amazed and inspired by how fantastic the comedians were. I am so excited that they are bringing their comedy to the Middle East and dispelling stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims. I am so impressed by the dedication of these comedians, and especially Dean! Good luck to you!

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I went to he show last night and the show was great.

I am a Jordanian who is US educated.

If I wanted to go for a short answer, yes Arabs do laugh.

If I wanted to go for long answer, it would be very complicated.

Even though everyone at the show laughed so hard, I would not use this as a yardstick to judge the Jordanian society. Because I think that the people attending were largely more likely to laugh at the jokes than the average Jordanian, hence their attendance. Most of them were well off and none of them came from impoverished regions in Jordan like Zarqa or Mafraq. They were more likely to speak very good English and be more liberal than the average Jordanian. Basically they are a minority.

Nonetheless, the success of the festival does offer some hope.

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loves it

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Those who lead society into war do so in large part because they lack a sense of humor. Comedy relies on empathy and on making connections with others. Congrats on the success of the festival, Dean, and keep breaking down those barriers!

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[- Rahan](#) [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Rahan](#) [permalink](#)

The most popular shows in summertime Cairo are comedic plays, which are defacto standup comedy with a three-acte script.

I always wondered why stand up comedy never caught on especially in a place like Egypt, a country known for its populace's biting sarcasm and sense of humor.

Dean should think about a concept for a tv program akin The Daily Show. The comedic treasure trove in the area's inept political establishments would dwarf the Bush administration's best (worst) tries.

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- JScott [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of JScott](#) [permalink](#)

So will Margaret Cho and Kathy Griffin be going to Amman soon?

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- truthynesslover [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of truthynesslover](#) [permalink](#)

if one of the definitions of comedy is tragedy plus time they have alot of foder.

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- SamAhmad [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of SamAhmad](#) [permalink](#)

I don't get it.

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- kylennblack [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of kylennblack](#) [permalink](#)

I heard the Axis of Evil guys on the radio a few years back. They're thoughtful, engaging and very, very funny.

I want tickets!

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- josmahaz [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of josmahaz](#) [permalink](#)

Dean has made one more monumental stride in his quest for comedy globalization. The Amman Stand Up Comedy Festival is an amazing success story of continuing to bring people together from all sides of the globe for a common purpose: to laugh. But it's much more than that. By telling jokes and laughing together, we are also teaching and learning, making light of truths and shattering myths and misconceptions, and ultimately gaining a deeper understanding of one another by highlighting our similarities while respecting our differences. Mabrook to Dean and all those involved. His work is a true inspiration to anyone interested in building a better and more peaceful world.

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This is awesome!

The more people see in common, the less they fear a thing, or a people. I think what you are doing is great! I'm so glad it's such a success.

I

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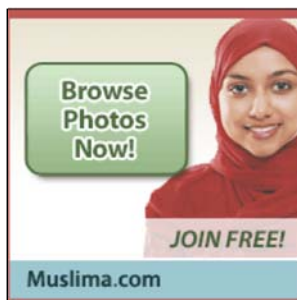
Awesome story! Comedy is a great export

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- blessingindisguise [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of blessingindisguise](#) [permalink](#)

This is a great story, a welcome break from the usual hate- and fear-mongering we're usually subjected to. Sometimes after looking at the news it's hard to remember that people around the world have many more similarities than differences. A relatively few fanatics here and abroad make so much more noise.

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It's "Friday Night Live"

Great sketch comedy, new every week You deserve to laugh. Hard. TGIF!

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