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These Are Tough Times for Comedians Who Happen to Be Arab-American

By JONATHAN KAUFMAN
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
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Three days after Sept. 11, Ahmed Ahmed took the stage at the Comedy Store on Sunset Boulevard in West Hollywood for the toughest stand-up comedy gig of his life.

"You have no idea how rough it is to be an Arab these days," he said, peering out at the Friday-night crowd. "I went to the airport to check in. The man at the ticket counter said, 'Are these your bags?' I said, 'Yes, sir.' He said, 'Did you pack them yourself?' I said, 'Yes, sir.' They arrested me."

"On the flight all my meals come pre-cut," Mr. Ahmed went on. "They won't give me any utensils. When I got up to go to the bathroom, they give me an escort. I can't even fly a kite in this country."

"The other night I went to a nightclub with a friend and we were carded at the door. I showed the woman my California driver's license, which has my full name -- Ahmed Aboubakr Ahmed -- and a picture of me with a beard. Her eyes bugged out of her head. I put my hand on her shoulder and said, 'Look, we just want to come in and celebrate. I just graduated from flight school.'"

Think it's tough finding a job in this economy? Try being an Arab-American comedian.

"I used to start my shows by saying, 'I'm Arab -- hey, look how quiet it got. Like a bomb's about to go off,'" says Mr. Ahmed, 31 years old. "I don't tell that joke now."

Mr. Ahmed, who played "Terrorist No. 4" in the thriller "Executive Decision," got his break about a year ago when Mitzi Shore, the owner of the Comedy Store, which helped launch the careers of Jay Leno, David Letterman and countless others, decided to put on a monthly show featuring Arab-American comedians. Called "Arabian Nights," it included Mr. Ahmed, born in Egypt, a Palestinian-American, an Iranian-American and David Teitelbaum, who says he was included "as the token Jew." The show featured Middle Eastern music and a belly dancer.

"Things were very tense in the Middle East and the show was conceived as a gesture of healing, a gesture of peace," says Duncan Trussell, the club's talent coordinator, speaking for Ms. Shore, who declined a request for an interview. "There are things that people can say through comedy and hear through comedy that they can't say or hear in other ways."

"I would come on stage and say, 'I'm David Teitelbaum and I'll be your Jew this evening,' " recalls Mr.



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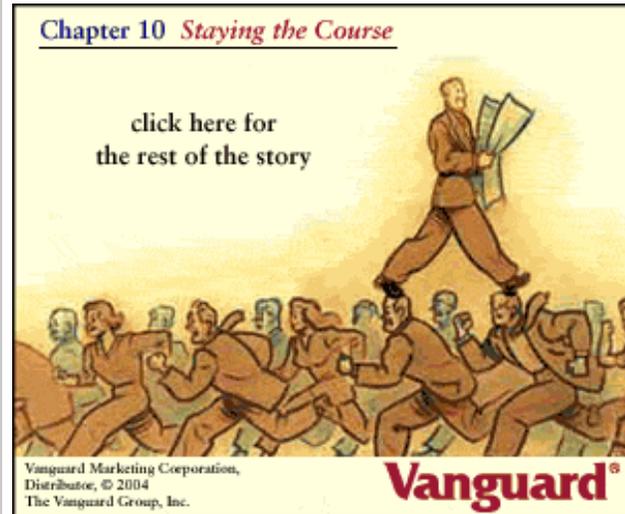


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Teitelbaum. "How can I serve you? Would you like some chopped liver, some gefilte fish, the West Bank?"

Aron Kader, a Palestinian-American whose father has long been active in Palestinian causes, would come on stage and say: "You read the papers and they really don't support the Palestinians. It'll be headlines like 'Israeli Injured, 100 Palestinians dead.' Or 'Tank Scratched by Rock, Reprisal Warned.' Or 'Palestinian Attacks Bullet With Body, Aggression Condemned.'"

The shows, renamed "Arabian Knights," were a success, drawing crowds to the club's main room and attracting Arab-Americans who hadn't ever been in a Comedy Store audience.

Then came Sept. 11. "Arabian Knights" was put on hiatus. A date Mr. Ahmed had at another club in Sacramento was canceled because, the booker told him, his heritage might upset customers, Mr. Ahmed says. Ms. Shore, who is Jewish, sent Mr. Ahmed to one of the Comedy Store's smaller rooms to rework his routine. "I went back to the drawing board," says Mr. Ahmed.

Mr. Teitelbaum sympathized with the plight of his fellow comedians. "It's hard enough to get an audience behind you. Before you can get them to laugh, you have to get them to like you -- and that's hard when your name is Ahmed Ahmed and you've got 15 seconds to win them over."

Mr. Ahmed knows. These days, he begins his show: "I'm not a mean Arab. I'm a funny Arab. I was raised in California. I like apple pie and Budweiser." He pauses. "I'm telling you all this so none of you follow me out to the car after the show."

After reworking his routine, adding new jokes such as the ones about taking a plane, Mr. Ahmed is appearing solo in the main room of the Comedy Store again. So are the other veterans of "Arabian Knights." The Comedy Store says it is considering resurrecting the show in January.

Mr. Kader, the most political of the comedians, jettisoned the headline routine as too anti-Israel. Before Sept. 11, he had always gotten a big laugh talking about growing up in Utah with a Palestinian father and Mormon-American mother: "When I was a teenager, the Mormons came to me to talk about going on a mission. To an Arab, a mission is a duffel bag, two sticks of dynamite, and a quick exit from a sidewalk cafe." That was cut, too.

Working with an American comic, Mr. Kader came up with a new skit in which the two play a married couple. She frisks Mr. Kader when he comes home with the groceries. He focused on jokes about the Middle East that were evenhanded: "The problem in the Middle East is that everyone thinks they are the chosen people. The Jews -- we are the chosen people. The Arabs -- we are the chosen people. Look, if you're the chosen people, how come you're living in the middle of a desert? Maybe the Samoans are the chosen people."

Says Mr. Kader: "I want to help change the image of the Palestinians in America -- to show that we are assimilated, that we can laugh at ourselves just like everybody else."

Maz Jobrani, who was born in Iran and is Persian, not Arab, dropped all his jokes that made fun of President Bush. In June, he finished acting in a CBS made-for-TV movie, starring Chuck Norris, called "The President's Man 2," a sequel to a 2000 CBS feature. In the new film, Mr. Jobrani plays an Afghan terrorist building a bomb to blow up a Chicago office building. The movie is scheduled for broadcast next year.

"I hope it doesn't come out," Mr. Jobrani started telling audiences after Sept. 11. "I don't want people recognizing me on the street shouting, 'That's him! Get him!'"

"I'm an American citizen," he says. "I was born in Iran. I've learned to deal with that. When someone says, 'Maz, where are you from?' I look them right in the eye and say, 'I'm Italian.'"

"Suddenly all my Middle Eastern friends are named Tony."

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