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# Pushing the Envelope Through Stand-Up Comedy

By SARA HAMDAN

DUBAI — “When people wanted to watch my shows at underground cafes in Beirut, their families would say, ‘Well, underground, at least that’s safe,’” said Nemr Abou Nassar, a Lebanese stand-up comedian performing in Dubai during a regional tour. “You think it’s tough to start out as a comedian in New York or Los Angeles? Try Beirut.”

Such double entendres are reliable weapons for local comedians who are popularizing stand-up comedy in the Middle East. Comedy has always been taken seriously in the region, mainly in Egyptian theater and on slapstick television shows, but Mr. Nassar is part of a recent movement that is encouraging locals to get up onstage in front of a live audience, armed only with punch lines.

“I vent my frustrations in a very funny way that can turn something bad into something you can laugh at,” said Mr. Nassar, 27, who quit his job as an insurance broker to become a full-time comedian in 2006. “It’s a means of expression for me, but it’s also about representing a truthful image of the region.”

He must be doing something right. This year alone, he was the headliner at shows in Los Angeles and New York and was completing a comedy tour of seven cities in the Middle East.

All the laughter is having a ripple effect. Amman held its third annual stand-up comedy festival last week, bringing local and international talent onstage. Dubai held its first international performing arts festival this year, and dedicated two nights to stand-up comedy and improvisation.

Workshops are held in main cities throughout the year, including the nine-week rotating sessions held by the Dubomed team in Dubai — Mina Liccione, a New York comedian who is a professor at the New York Film Academy’s branch in Abu Dhabi, and the Emirati comedian and entrepreneur Ali Al Sayed.

“We don’t just want to do one-off shows around the region and leave; we decided to do courses to create a community of comedians, which doesn’t really exist here yet,” said Mr. Sayed, a

full-time comedian and the founder of the entertainment company Viva Dubai.

“When I was growing up, we always imported entertainment. Locally we’ve been telling the same jokes for 15 years, and it’s time for the younger generation to show that there is mad talent here.”

He and Ms. Liccione started the comedy school in 2007 for 15 students, all expatriates. Today, about 70 students participate in shows every nine weeks to showcase talent.

“Now, we’re getting more Arabs and Emiratis in the course, which we didn’t have at first,” Mr. Sayed said. “Next year we will start a comedy course in Arabic, too. We need to keep deviating from what we’ve been doing to keep things fresh.”

American comedians of Middle Eastern descent, particularly the original Axis of Evil group, are a big source of inspiration for regional artists.

Ahmed Ahmed, Maz Jobrani and Aron Kader broke ground when they first toured the Middle East in 2007, after forming Axis of Evil in 2005 and touring in the United States. The first regional tour was fully sponsored by Showtime, which aired a documentary about the experiences of the comedians in Jordan, Kuwait, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Lebanon — and helped raise their profile internationally. The group ended up selling out 27 shows in five countries in 30 days.

A frequent visitor to the region, Mr. Ahmed completed another tour this month with the American comedians Erik Griffin and Angelo Tsarouchas, and regional comedians like Sherif Azab of Saudi Arabia. In 35 days, the group visited Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, Jordan, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and the Emirates, and, for the first time, brought its international comedy to Syria.

“You can only talk about being Arab for so long, making terrorist and hairy chest and airplane drama jokes, but then it gets redundant,” said Mr. Ahmed, who recently directed the film “Just Like Us,” which deals with misconceptions about comedy in the Middle East — like whether or not people in the region speak English well enough to appreciate stand-up.

“My material is becoming more mainstream on this tour; it’s not just about Americans learning about the Middle East and vice versa,” Mr. Ahmed said. “Laughter is a common language around the world.”

Mr. Ahmed, who used to make a living playing roles as a cab driver or terrorist in major films before becoming a full-time comedian, makes an effort to give local amateurs in different cities a chance to get onstage with him.

This is key for local comedians, who struggle to find venues to practice. There are very few comedy clubs and open-mike nights, even in main cities.

Aside from workshops, amateurs pick up tricks from watching YouTube clips and coaching one another.

“It took 10 years of bars and little stages and two drunk people in the audience for comedians in America to get on TV and get spotted by an agent,” said Jamil Abu Wardeh, an entrepreneur who was credited with bringing Axis of Evil to the region when he was a producer at Showtime. “Here we don’t have venues, and it was a real challenge at the beginning to give stand-up comedians TV exposure.”

Without Nielsen ratings to gauge the popularity of regional shows, and without a precedent for stand-up comedy on television, Mr. Wardeh had a hard time persuading his superiors to put Axis of Evil on the air. It was not until Comedy Central aired the group’s successful U.S. tour and management shifted at Showtime that he was able to start organizing a regional tour for the group. Still, it wasn’t easy.

“The sales people who were supposed to help us get sponsors for the event would say, ‘You want to bring guys over to make fun of Arabs and Muslims? I’m not touching that. I want to live,’” Mr. Wardeh said. “I was constantly on the phone begging for them to take some of the cost of putting on the event, and the few promoters that agreed to work with us acted like they were doing us a favor.”

Even Mr. Nassar, the Lebanese comedian, had great difficulty when he started. Along with the radio station Mix FM, he helped finance Beirut’s first comedy festival, in 2008, and played host to a comedy program on the local radio station. But he got so disheartened when his money ran out that he nearly gave up.

“It’s still a risky time for stand-up now because we’re in that middle stage where we’re no longer small, but still not big enough,” said Mr. Nassar, who now makes a comfortable living as a full time stand-up comedian. “We’re still missing a community.”

To develop this community, he said, more people need to hone their skills and get up onstage. Dean Obeidallah, who performed with Axis of Evil in the Middle East, frequently hosts local workshops and was in charge of the Amman comedy festival this year.

“When Axis first asked me to tour with them in the region, I honestly didn’t think it would make money and didn’t want to quit my full-time job and risk nobody in the Middle East coming to see us,” said Mr. Obeidallah, who also is host of the Arab-American comedy festival in New York that includes comedians from the Middle East. “Nobody knew how huge it would

be. And it's getting bigger.”

With high audience attendance rates at shows and the increase in workshops and classes, Mr. Wardeh is hoping that spreading the word on stand-up will encourage more people in the region to participate.

“The ultimate goal is that enough of them will replicate the Western model and lead to a community of strong writers, which will lead to better sitcoms and talk shows and local film stars,” he said. “We are in desperate need of good comedy writers, especially in the Arabic language, and stand-up is a great way to develop this industry.”

Mr. Wardeh had the foresight to add Wonho Chung, an ethnic Korean who was born and raised in Jordan and who speaks flawless Arabic, to the Axis of Evil mix. The comedians named the new group Three Guys and Wonho, giving their extra team member a crash course in stand-up comedy before sending him on tour.

“My second time on stage, ever, was in front of Queen Rania and King Abdullah of Jordan,” said Mr. Chung, who has a background in musical theater and vocal studies. “You know how you lie on your C.V. and learn the skill you say you have later? I did that with stand-up. I was the only person who spoke Arabic among the Axis comedians, so, since Day One, a lot was thrown on my plate and I had to learn fast.”

Mr Chung does up to four events a month, performing family-friendly sets mostly in Arabic. Like most regional comedians, he avoids bringing up religion, politics, sex or the use of profanity.

“We are pushing the envelope one step at a time,” said Mr. Chung, whose YouTube clips have nearly 1.5 million views. “The Arab American comedians can get away with more than we can. For a local comedian, it can be limiting, but I grew up in this part of the world and I understand the cultural sensitivities.”

That is not to say that comedy is completely censored. In a smoke-filled bar in Dubai, Mr. Griffin and Mr. Tsarouchas, Americans who toured regionally with Mr. Ahmed, held nothing back from audiences.

Mr. Ahmed spoke freely about the restrictions placed on comedians by promoters before events, including negotiating how many expletives each person is allowed to say and how some countries are more conservative than others.

Sherif Azab, a comedian born and raised in Saudi Arabia, chooses to keep his material clean. He toured around the region this month with Mr. Ahmed, who was one of the first

international comedians to visit Riyadh. Local shows, which are usually advertised using social media to close networks of people, have grown from performances for 50 people in underground cafes to audiences of thousands in the kingdom and neighboring countries, including Bahrain.

“We used to get shows canceled every now and then because of venues afraid of getting blacklisted, not sure of what we would say,” Mr. Azab said of his start in comedy in early 2009. “People realize now that we’re not a threat.

“It’s just laughter. And who doesn’t love to laugh?”