

Featured

Travel Ban: Make America Laugh Again

by Bobby LePire

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Travel Ban: Make America Laugh Again opens with comedian Aron Kader doing a stand-up act about current U.S. politics and society. The half Palestinian/half Mormon says what a time it is to live in the United States because one wouldn't find the government doing certain activities. Director Sam Chouia intercuts this routine with news footage of President Donald Trump either saying the opposite or acting in a manner contradictory to Kader's topics.

The audience for this important documentary never hears the punchline to Kader's set-ups and the point made is startling. The absurd has become reality, and if you are descended from any Middle Eastern nation, then the United States of America does not look too kindly on you; even if you were born in this country. Then the movie explores the background for how the titular-based comedy tour came into existence.

Mitzi Shore had been booking minority talent for the Belly Room—a small, 50-seat space for rising comedic talent situated above The Comedy Store (which she co-founded)—since 1978. First, it was used to spotlight female comics. When these comics become more mainstream, Shore started booking LGBTQ acts, along with underrepresented ethnicities in comedy, such as Latin and Middle Eastern people. In the year 2000, Shore had discussions with comedian Maz Jobrani about ensuring that there were voices of Palestinian, Saudi, Israeli, Lebanon, and other countries from the Fertile Crescent region being represented. They were to be called the Arabian Knights.



"...bringing talented Middle Eastern comics together for the Travel Ban Comedy Tour."

Less than a year later, the attacks on the World Trade Center took place. Having already established themselves on a regular cycle (and in "excellent spots" on Friday and Saturday nights) at The Comedy Store, the comedians decide to take their act on the road. They did this because how their people were being depicted due to the horrible tragedy. Dubbing themselves the "Axis Of Evil Comedy Tour," their show would eventually air on Comedy Central.

All of that is just the preamble to what *Travel Ban* really has on its mind. While things for people of color were hard under George W. Bush, with Trump as president, things have gotten much more intense. Much like in the wake of 9/11, Kader feels it will be comedy that unites everyone and helps overcome prejudice. Now, Kader, along with Jobrani, are bringing talented Middle Eastern comics together for the *Travel Ban Comedy Tour*.

Chouia follows Kader as he assembles the lineup, interviews the acts about their thoughts on the current president and his administration, and where their comedy comes from. There's Kader, of course, and Jobrani, along with Reem Edan, Amir K, Travina Springer, Jennifer Jajeh, and Ismael Louf to name a select few of the talent involved with the comedy show.

Not too long ago, I read an article about *Saturday Night Live* and how their ratings have been the best in a long time thanks to their politics heavy skits. Other comedians/hosts such as Trevor Noah, Samantha Bee, and Seth Meyers are also seen as being at the forefront of holding the highest office in the nation accountable and see invested viewers tuning in nightly.





“...the calling to perform and do a show somewhere and in part, knowing what they can achieve...”

Similar conversations, about how comedians are seen as being the great rallying point for those civic-minded enough to stay abreast of the day-to-day legislative policies happen throughout the documentary. When so many of these fine, hardworking people continuously get 'randomly selected' for screenings in airports (for one individual, it is seven times in five months), what keeps them going? In part, the calling to perform and do a show somewhere and in part, knowing what they can achieve through their routines.

Stand-up Ramy Youssef shares a story from when he was doing a show in Jacksonville. He asks if there were any Muslims in the room? A lady responded with, "We don't do that here." Youssef notes that there was no malice in her voice, rather she was simply stating a fact. This lady stayed through his whole set and got pictures with Youssef, citing him as "one of the good ones." Youssef wanted to explain to her that most Muslims are great, wonderful, "good" folk and it is only a very vocal and extreme minority that is bad. He didn't, but he does hope that her pleasant interaction with him helps the lady broaden her horizons on such a front.

The heart of *Travel Ban* lies with Aron Kader and his two-year-old daughter. Near the end of the of the movie, Kader talks about a critical discussion he will have to have with his child. In a few years, Kader is going to have to sit her down and explain that for the color of her skin and heritage there will be people out there who hate her. He laments this and hopes for change.

Travel Ban: Make America Laugh Again is frustrating to watch. Not because it is poorly made; it is not, quite the opposite in fact. Instead, it is frustrating that in this day and age, a person still has to fight for their right to be considered a human being. As this film proves though, comedy can combat bigotry.



Travel Ban: Make America Great Again (2018) Written and directed by Sam Chouia. Starring Aron Kader, Maz Jobrani, Russell Peters, Ramy Youssef, Reem Edan, Amir K, Travina Springer, Jennifer Jajeh, Ismael Loutfi, Paul Elia, Heidi Hamilton.

9 Gummi Bears (out of 10)



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