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Can laughter make America great again?

If you can make someone laugh, they can't possibly hate you.

[Ramon Youseph](#)

28 April 2019



Aron Kader, standup comedian, February 13 2010. | Danicaart via Wikimedia Commons. CC BY-SA 3.0.

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When Donald Trump became America's 45th President on a campaign of hate and bigotry, Middle Eastern Americans must have collectively put their heads in their hands and sighed 'not again.' After all, they had been through the ringer of racism after the September 11th World Trade Centre attacks. What do you do if you're a Middle Eastern immigrant and your newly elected President vilifies you for the sake of his own political ambitions?

If you're Palestinian/American comedian Aron Kader you respond with the tools you have - a stage and a captive audience. That's the story behind the new documentary "[Travel Ban: Make America Laugh Again](#)," which is written and directed by [Samy Chouia](#). The film explores what it's like to be brown and immigrant in Trump's America through the eyes of comedians from Middle Eastern backgrounds.

It chronicles Kader's journey to stage a one-off stand-up comedy event in Hollywood's renowned [HaHa Comedy Club](#), featuring a line-up of some of America's top Middle Eastern and Muslim comedians who comment on the country's political situation. As Trump continues to solidify his base by repeatedly targeting anyone of an immigrant and Middle Eastern origin, and with racially motivated crimes on the rise, can this maverick comedy troupe tackle hate through the power of laughter?

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"I am not sure if it can turn the tide completely," Samy Chouia told me in a recent interview, "but it sure helps fight it and hopefully reduce it. Racism stems from ignorance and insecurity. People would need to dig deep in their subconscious and learn how to overcome their ignorance and insecurity before they can overcome their racism."

Hateful bigotry is alive and well in the US right now, empowered and mainstreamed by the Oval Office - consider Trump's refusal to condemn the actions of white supremacists at Charlottesville or his targeting on Twitter of Congresswoman Ilhan Omar. The opening segment of "Travel Ban" illustrates this situation by juxtaposing scenes of Aron Kader talking about a more tolerant and accepting America with footage of racial attacks and the sort of vile abusive rhetoric normally found on YouTube's comments section, or the slanted vision of a Fox News editorial.

Equally chilling is a recent FBI report that cites a 17% rise in hate crimes in 2017 compared with the previous year, with most of the victims being targeted for their race, ethnicity (59% of the total) or religion (21%). All the more reason then why the Travel Ban troupe are determined to meet hate head on with laughter, but these statistics do beg the question: in a country built by immigrants and deemed a cultural melting pot, why does hate sell so well?

"It's much easier to sell people on hate because it would easily distract them from their own miserable lives and failures," says Samy. "Let's face it, a happy, successful person doesn't have time to hate or let others live rent-free in his head. Creating scapegoats and assigning blame to minorities in order to achieve a political goal has been practiced to perfection in the past century by the Bolsheviks, the Nazis, the Khmer Rouge, the Serbs, and the Hutus just to name a few."

The mission of "Travel Ban" is simple: to counter the rise of hate through stand-up comedy. Mainstream shows such as "Saturday Night Live" and "The Daily Show" poke fun at figures like Trump and comment on the current political climate, but stand-up comedy offers a platform for the voices of those directly affected to be heard. It was the late "Mitzy Shore," legendary owner of the Comedy Store in Los Angeles, who gave Middle Eastern comedians that voice.

In the film, the comedians recall how a year before the World Trade Centre attacks, Shore foresaw a war between America and the Middle East that would see Middle Eastern people become even more misrepresented in the media. She proposed the idea of forming a troupe of comedians of Middle Eastern origin to challenge those misconceptions. It's not without irony that a Jewish American like Shore would galvanise Middle Eastern comedians as a positive force for change - quite the contrast to today when Trump and his allies are so supportive of Israeli President Benjamin Netanyahu in his continued oppression of the Palestinian people.

With Shore's help, Kader, along with fellow comedians Jobrani and Ahmed formed the "Arabian Knights," later renamed as the "Axis of Evil Comedy Tour." The tour received a flood of positive publicity, and many messages from audience-goers whose perspective was fundamentally changed after watching Middle Eastern comedians laugh, tell jokes and make fun of themselves.

It was Kader's aim for "Travel Ban" to have the same positive effects. The film and the show itself feature a line-up of Middle Eastern-American comedians including Feraz Ozel (whose family originate from Afghanistan and Pakistan) Jack Assadourian Jr (whose roots are Armenian) Sammy

and Kader, Jack Halpern) (whose roots are Armenian, Samy Obeid (Lebanese-Texan), and Peter Shahriari - aka "Pete the Persian" (who is of Iranian extraction). Unlike mainstream comedy shows, stand-up comics have a unique ability to open the audience's mind and help them to see the world through a different prism, and, as the curtain closes, to gain a new perspective. Samy agrees:

"Laughter brings people together and builds bridges between cultures. I think one of the comedians said that laughter is a statement of something. If people came together to laugh, it's an agreement that they recognize each other's humanity and are less likely to hate each other."

The film provides a lens that brings the comedians' thoughts on people's blurred perceptions of Middle Easterners into focus, thus sharpening the debate on Trump's divisive policies. It's re-affirming to see the performers act as the antithesis to the rise in hate in American society by collectively agreeing *not* make the show about trashing Trump and his supporters. Mostly they point their comical imagination at themselves, putting their culture and heritage on stage and shining a discerning yet amusing spotlight on them.

Hence, Obeid makes fun of his Lebanese-Texan heritage by talking about putting the "y'all" in "yalah" (the Arabic word for "hurry"), while Ozel laughs about how he switches his ethnicity depending on current events and circumstances. If necessary he resorts to calling himself Indian when all else fails, since 'nobody can really tell the difference.'

That isn't to say that Trump doesn't get the occasional roasting, though it's never done with spite or hate. Aside from journalists, comedians are the one group that is not afraid to speak unpleasant truths to power, calling them to account for their actions.

"Comedy is a place where bullshit can't exist," Peter Shahriari told me over the phone, "because as soon as something is disingenuous or obviously nonsensical from a political area people home in on that and they call bullshit on it and it's the place where - it's sad to say - but truth can be told."

Can comedy overcome hate in the battle for America's heart and soul, a country of immigrants after all, some of whom are now on the receiving end of their homeland's darker side? In taking a real situation, re-examining it and breaking it into its core components, comedy exposes profound absurdities, and thankfully it has the potential to overhaul a person's outlook.

In essence, comedy is the antidote to nonsense, and to the divisive and destructive nature of hostility and bigotry. As Kader observes in the film, "If hate and violence were going to solve a problem shit would've been solved a long time ago."

Among lots of other efforts like it, "Travel Ban" could well be the antidote to the venom of Trump's America that comedians prescribe, a shot in the arm that reduces the plague of hate and replaces it with unity, or at least greater mutual understanding. As Samy pointedly says:

"If you can make someone laugh, they can't possibly hate you. That is the crux of the film I think. Laughter brings people closer together and humanizes the other."

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