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Aaron Freeman (left), Ray Hanania, Charley Warady and Yisrael Campbell line up for laughs at Roy Thomson Hall.

By DAVID SILVERMAN/ GETTY IMAGES

## Comedy Preview

# PUNCHLINES FOR PEACE

## The historic Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour brings mirth to Middle Eastern politics

By DEBBIE FEIN-GOLDBACH

 PRINT

**ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN COMEDY TOUR** with Charley Warady, Yisrael Campbell, Aaron Freeman and Ray Hanania, with a special appearance by Maya Angelou. Tuesday (May 29), 8 pm at Roy Thomson Hall (60 Simcoe). \$49-\$69. **416-872-4255**, [www.roythomson.com](http://www.roythomson.com).

At a pub in Toronto, two American comedians - a Jew and a Palestinian - decide to share a pizza. One wants meat, the other likes vegetarian. When the server suggests veggie with sausage on half, they agree. The pie arrives cut down the middle, diverse toppings edging along the border.

Talk about piece negotiations.

Chowing down and drinking beers, they tell me about themselves. Aaron Freeman is an African-American Jewish convert. Ray Hanania is Palestinian American.

When they're not on the road performing, both live in Chicago. Last January they joined forces with two Israeli expat American comedians to form The Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour.

Getting straight answers from two comics in a perpetual race to out-punchline each other can be a tough assignment.

"We knew each other as journalists, as friends," says Hanania. "And we started doing comedy after September 11."

"Ray sold me my third wife," interjects Freeman.

"She was actually my first wife," says Hanania, setting off a round of



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banter. This happens throughout the interview, making me feel caught in the vortex of an ongoing in-joke.

The two weren't kidding last December when they got the extreme idea of taking their politically laced Mideast stand-up routines to the motherland. Many Israeli comedians wouldn't perform with them, but Charley Warady (a secular Jew) and Yisrael Campbell (an Irish Catholic convert who's now an ultra-Orthodox Jew) signed on, and by January they were performing together.

They believe so strongly in the power of laughter to open the lines of communication, they maxed out their credit cards and self-financed the tour. Their faith paid off with five sold-out shows.

At Jerusalem's Kol HaNeshama synagogue, an 80-seat booking became a crowd of 300 with standing room only. Hanania says about 30 Arab-Palestinians attended. "Afterwards, they talked to us. They didn't like every joke, but overall it was very positive."

When they go back, they hope to perform in the West Bank. There's some interest in Bethlehem and Ramallah, but venue owners have concerns about providing security for the Israeli comedians.

Why three Jews and one Palestinian?

"Listen," says Hanania. "Jews have been doing comedy for what, 200 years? We've just started." Freeman calls their 3:1 ratio "the Middle Eastern math."

Since Hanania is a Christian Arab, the group's geography reflects Israel's. "We need a four-state solution here," quips Freeman.

But really, it's a comedy solution they're pushing for. If people can laugh together they can live together. "There's a desire to believe the worst about the conflict in the Middle East," says Hanania. "Humour is the only way to save people."

If this is true, their show at Roy Thomson Hall, which includes a special appearance by poet Maya Angelou, better be damned hilarious.

It's too bad our interview is liberally peppered with jokes recycled from clips on their website ([www.ipcomedytour.com](http://www.ipcomedytour.com)). But they do have an incredible energy, and their material can be provocative a YouTube clip includes a skirmish between Hanania and Campbell. They're also quick off the cuff.

"You Jewish?" Freeman asks me. When I don't confirm that in fact I am, Hanania checks me out. "I'd take you hostage."

I'm laughing, but not everyone's amused. In the U.S., many Arab-American comedians won't work with Hanania, and he's lost some gigs. Plus, he's been warned that getting on a stage and saying you're an Arab comedian can brand you as anti-American.

"When I first started, people said, 'You're going onstage after September 11 to do comedy? Make sure you mention you served in the Vietnam War.'"

"Wow! I never thought I'd brag about that. Now it's going to save my life."


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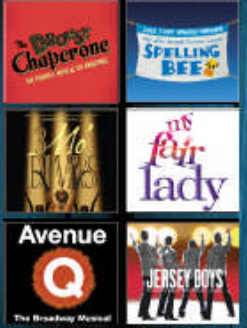


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