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## Jews and Palestinian Arab fish for laughs

By **SHELDON KIRSHNER**  
*Staff Reporter*

It was business as usual when the Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour rolled into Toronto last week.

Thousands of kilometres away, the Israeli Air Force struck a Hamas training camp in the Gaza Strip and Israeli troops killed two Hamas militants in a gun battle during a cross-border raid into Gaza. Meanwhile, Hamas fired three Qassam rockets into the western Negev.

But at Roy Thomson Hall in downtown Toronto, the continuing strife in the Mideast seemed surreal as four cheeky standup comedians trolled for laughs.

Three of the jesters were Jewish and one was a Palestinian Christian.

So where was the Muslim?

Never mind.

As the one-night-only show got under way, a sonorous voice boomed: “To Israelis, no home demolitions. To Palestinians, please disarm explosive belts.”

The self-deprecating tone having been established, the foursome – Aaron Freeman, Charley Warady, Ray Hanania and Yisrael Campbell – wrung chuckles and laughter from an appreciative audience consisting of about 900 Jews, Christians and Muslims.

“We’re cracking jokes for peace,” said Freeman, a Chicago-born African-American convert to Judaism. “To prove that we can get along, at least for two hours.”

Explaining his conversion, the gravel-voiced Freeman joked, “I really became a Jew to confuse the Nation of Islam.”

In a gentle jab at himself and haredim in Israel, he said, “We had to move out because the neighbourhood went black. They didn’t mean me.”

Warady, an American Jew who has appeared on the Comedy Central network and made aliyah a decade ago, poked fun at Israelis who can't keep dents off their new cars, corruption in high places, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's unpopularity and El Al Airlines.

If you buy a new car in Israel, you might as well take a hammer to it so as to avoid heartache, he advised.

In a biting reference to the scandals that have enveloped Israeli cabinet ministers of late, he said that a criminal record is a job requirement for Israeli pols.

Ripping into El Al, Warady opined that it is the world's sole airline that offers standing room only.

In a dig at Olmert, he said that his current ratings are so miserable that U.S. President George W. Bush looks good by comparison.

Without missing a beat, Warady also skewered Amir Peretz, who lost the leadership of the Labor party in last week's primary, and Shimon Peres, the Kadima party's candidate for Israel's presidency.

Hanania, a former Chicago newspaper columnist whose parents hail from Bethlehem and Jerusalem, framed his black humour within the context of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States.

"Usually, they don't let me into buildings so big," he observed in dead-pan fashion. "Something happens to you, I go to jail for 18 months."

Professing not to be a terrorist, he said, "I pay people to do that."

Saving a few choice words for this country, he said, "Canada isn't violent enough for me."

After tossing off a ribald joke about vibrators and airport security, he confided that the question he is asked most often at airports is: "Are you on my flight?"

In a play on words concerning the abundance of Arab fossil fuel, Hanania remarked, "Just because we have oil doesn't make us crude."

Turning more serious, he disclosed that he and his Jewish wife divided their house on the basis of the partition of Palestine. She allocated 78 per cent for herself and only 22 per cent for him.

In a stinging parting shot, he said that if Israel's security "wall" is a "fence," then the Western Wall should be called the Western Fence.

Campbell, an Irish Italian Catholic from Philadelphia who converted to Judaism in the mid-1990s and now lives as a haredi Jew in Israel, appeared on the stage all in black.

“Is it warm in here, or am I the only one dressed for 17th-century Poland?”

Campbell, whose first name was originally Christopher, talked excitedly about his journey from Reform and Conservative Judaism to strict Orthodoxy and his immigration to Israel.

In cutting asides, he said, “There is a Hebrew word for hell – ulpan,” and thanked his lucky stars that he was circumcised in a hospital.

He, too, took a swipe at the culture of corruption among Israeli politicians. As he put it in the course of a monologue, “The entire government is being indicted.”

The jokesters were applauded as they wrapped, and as the crowd filed out of the cavernous hall, an old Japanese woman in granny glasses leaned on her cane and told a friend, “This was a totally different experience.”

You know what? She was right.

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