

May 25, 2007
8 Sivan, 5767

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Jews/Arabs yuk it up at Roy Thomson Hall

By **DAVID SILVERBERG**
Special to The CJN

Three Jews and an Arab walk into Roy Thomson Hall.

No, it's not a corny joke, but that's a good guess, considering all four of them are comedians who will share the stage at Roy Thomson Hall on May 29.

Dubbed the Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour, the event features an entertaining mix of Middle East perspectives, in what is being billed as the first time Palestinian and Israeli comics have ever toured together.

"Our primary purpose is to put on a funny show," says American-born Charles Warady, on the phone from his home outside Jerusalem. "If we bring people together, if we offer a social statement, that's extra."

Warady, 51, doesn't want to turn the show into a Middle East peace mission, and he hopes audiences will enjoy certain jokes long after the show is over.

"How many people remember a politician's words after a speech? And how many people memorize a comedian's best lines?" He laughs. "I think our way is much better."

Joining Warady in Toronto – the only show they're staging in North America – are comedians Yisrael Campbell, an Orthodox Jew living in Israel; African-American convert Aaron Freeman; and Palestinian American Ray Hanania.

The blend of Jewish and non-Jewish performers has been a winning formula for a comedy group only six months old. After the success of early January shows in Jerusalem, the troupe has high hopes for North American exposure.

So why book Toronto as the first and only gig?

"Our promoter believed in us," says Hanania, a Chicago resident. "It's a taboo show, so not every city wants to get involved. That problem is typical of the problems facing the Middle East. In Chicago, some people didn't like this Palestinian-Israeli alliance, because it might make them think, 'Oh no, this peace

is contagious. We might realize those two warring sides don't hate each other as much as we thought.'"

Since he announced his partnership with Jewish comedians, Hanania has already faced five cancelled shows in Chicago.

He's not about to let those producers ruin his good vibes.

"I always believed humour is very powerful in showing how human we all can be," Hanania says. "If you laugh with other people, you bond with them."

The comedians admit some of their jokes might make sensitive audiences cringe, but in a way that says, "This joke pokes fun at Israeli-Arab relations, which should be laughed at sometimes."

Hanania offers one example of his biting comedy: "I married a Jewish woman, and at my wedding, the Arab and Jewish guests were mucking around at dinner. They were arguing over who invented hummus, flicking pita and matzah at each other. There were 38 casualties, one Jew, and 37 Arabs went to the hospital. An event like this attracts attention from the news media, so the next day, the headline read: 'One Jew injured at Arab terrorist meeting.'"

The other comics deal with similar topics, but with their own flair. Freeman, a black convert to Judaism, can get a big laugh with a line about his friends' reaction to his conversion: "You trying to give an extra merit badge to a KKK sniper?"

The Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour has earned international media attention, but in Toronto, the tour is also attracting one special celebrity. Maya Angelou, a well-known American poet and social activist, will open the evening with introductory remarks.

"I don't know what she'll be saying," Warady says, "but I insisted her opening shouldn't be funnier than any of our acts."

Hanania is optimistic about the gig and the future of where the tour will go. He hopes to bring the troupe to the Palestinian territories for an upcoming show, but for now, he'll settle for something in between.

"We want to do an open mike show in the West Bank to find new Palestinian and Israeli voices," he says. "We know people want to get on stage, but in this political climate, they're afraid to be seen as moderates. I think comedy can change that."

The Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour takes place May 29, 8 p.m., at Roy Thomson Hall, 60 Simcoe St. Tickets range from \$49 to \$69 (including taxes) and can be purchased through www.roythomson.com or by calling

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