

COMEDY: LAUGHS FROM THE MIDDLE EAST

## 'Once you've laughed, you've lost'

The Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour hopes to bring peace through jokes

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A Jew and an Arab walk into a bar at the King Edward Hotel in Toronto.

At first, there are no punch lines, even though Aaron Freeman and Ray Hanania are the comics in town to promote the forthcoming Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour. The Toronto leg of the "Peace Through Comedy" initiative, which has already knocked 'em dead (in the good sense) in Tel Aviv and East Jerusalem, has attracted a celebrity host. Poet Maya Angelou will appear with the funnymen at Roy Thomson Hall on May 29.

The mention of 79-year-old Angelou provokes a joke spree during a publicity photo shoot. "Try to get my sexy smile," Hanania, a Chicago-born Palestinian tells a newspaper photographer.

"That's not sexy," exclaims Freeman, a black Jew, his voice settling into a warm purr. "It's late at night after the show. There's a knock on your door. It's Ma-ya An-gel-ooou and she ain't got nothin' on."

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A smile tugs the corners of Hanania's lips. "Why don't you shoot him?" he begs the photographer.

"Violence doesn't solve anything," Freeman laughs.

Seconds later, the comics are asked if comedians have stumped for peace in the Middle East before. A set-up line Freeman is quick to pounce on.

"Sure," he says, a sideways grin splitting his face. "First there was Jimmy Carter, Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin at Camp David. They were hilarious."

"Actually, we don't do political humour," Hanania comments. "We put a Palestinian and a Jew on a stage in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv to settle a more important question: hummus and tabbouleh. Who invented it?"

Hanania and Freeman, along with Israeli American comedians, Charley Warady and Yisrael Campbell, performed similar material at synagogues and comedy clubs like Jerusalem's American Colony Hotel in January. The four comics, who are scheduled to appear with Angelou at Roy Thomson Hall, were born in Chicago, which leads you to wonder if the U.S. State Department had anything to do with the tour.

"No, it's more like American Express," Hanania says. "Charley Warady and I grew up not far from each other in Pill Hill in Chicago. He

e-mailed me last year and I asked him if he was willing to go on stage with a Palestinian in Jerusalem. He said, 'sure.' That's how it all started. We paid our own way."

The tour took some time to organize. Many Israeli and American comics refused to participate. There were protests, picketers. The Israeli-Palestinian comedy tour opened in Jerusalem several hours after a Palestinian suicide bomber killed three Israelis at a bakery in Eilat. Nevertheless, the show and Mideast tour, which was performed entirely in English, went off with without a hitch or heckle.

"It was fantastic," Freeman says. "Wall to wall people, everybody laughed, everybody enjoyed themselves."

"We talked to some protesters beforehand," Hanania says. "Got them laughing."

"Once you've laughed, you've lost," Freeman says. "It's impossible to hold a rifle straight if you're laughing." Hanania nods, adding, "Comedy is an optimistic act. Most people only laugh if they think everything is going to be alright."

Unfortunately for Hanania, his participation in the Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour went over better on the West Bank than on the west bank of Lake Michigan.

"When I got home, I found out that five shows I was going to do for Arab groups here were cancelled," he says with a shrug. Hanania suddenly found himself persona non grata in the Baba Ghanoush Belt, the clubs and fairs that make up the Arab-American equivalent of the Jewish American Borscht Belt.

Hanania couldn't have been entirely surprised. The 53-year-old, former Chicago Sun-Times columnist and media consultant has been fighting an uphill struggle for laughs in America ever since he became a professional comedian, in an effort to preserve his sanity, two months after 9/11.

"After 9/11, I got hate e-mail, neighbours would abuse me, say things. Other people, friends didn't call or say anything. It was pretty bad," he remembers. "A month or so after Sept. 11, I was at a luncheon at Chicago's Columbia College when someone asked me how could I be an Arab after what my people did in New York?"

"I just kind of snapped, I said, 'I don't know about Sept. 11. All I know is before I could get into this building I got strip-searched five times.'" On Hanania went, doing a variation on Rodney Dangerfield's I-don't-get-any-respect routine. The students laughed. He felt a lot better. Like he'd been able to tell his side of a story for the first time since the attack on the World Trade Center.

In January, 2002, Hanania made his debut as an Arab-American comic at a Chicago nightclub open-mike venue. The comedian says he wasn't nearly as frightened as the nightclub owner.

"He came over right before I went on and said, 'Please, tell them you're a Vietnam vet,' Hanania remembers, smiling. "He was afraid they were going to kill me."

A few months later, the fledgling comic dealt with his first heckler when Jewish-American comedian Jackie Mason refused to permit Hanania to open for him at a Chicago club. When informed that Hanania had a Jewish wife, Mason snapped, "To me, it means nothing. There are a lot of self-hating Jews around."

Hanania says he still hears insults and racist comments, but figures the best way to deal with prejudice is to laugh it off.

"That's what the early American-Jewish comedians, the Marx Brothers, George Burns, Jack Benny did," he says. "Comedy is the language of minorities, it's a way to cope and get by ... and hopefully be understood."

Hanania and Freeman say they haven't yet prepared any Canadian material for their Toronto show. Suddenly, Freeman wonders if that's a mistake. "If we bomb, maybe we'll be held as political prisoners," he says.

"Yeah, they'll have to exchange hostages," Hanania jokes. "Chicago will have to give Canada back Conrad Black."

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