

Comedians tackle major issues in Middle East

By Rick Kardonne

Tribune Entertainment Critic

TORONTO – The Toronto performance of the international Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour at Roy Thomson Hall last week was a clever show by four stand-up comedians who were positively pro-Israeli, pro-peace, and not afraid to tackle the major issues in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

There was no attempt to be “even-handed” by someone who would have provoked ill feelings by sarcastically denigrating Israel. The Palestinian Arab comedian, Chicago-born Ray Hanania, a Christian who is an award-winning columnist for Israel's largest-circulation daily, *Yediot Ahranot*, as well as having appeared on *CNN* and written for the *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, instead satirized the excesses of Islamic fundamentalism (“the 72 virgins are 72 rejects”), security measures on airplanes, which resulted from the arrest of the shoe bomber (“now if a washroom on a plane is occupied, it is really a disputed toilet area”) and the very name of Palestine (“Feinstein, Einstein, and Palestine: Why did the Arabs have to use the name Palestine?”).

Could they have not called their territory just The Gaza Strip? He told stories about his growing up in a mixed Jewish-Arab area on Chicago's northwest side (after the Six Day War, both groups went their separate ways) and after his divorce from an Arab woman, he married a Jew. He regularly appears in Israel as well as among Arab audiences.

The Israeli comedian, Usborn Charlie Warady, while affectionately describing some Israeli foibles such as their often complicated cell phones (“How do you use a Pelophone?”) and the current state of Israeli politics (“Olmert's ratings are so low that George W. Bush can

look at him and say that he, Bush, is not doing too bad”).

Yisrael Campbell, born Chris Campbell in Los Angeles, started out as a Catholic and charted his course of how he converted to become an Orthodox Jew. He appeared on stage in traditional Chassidic dress.

“I was Catholic enough to know I was going to hell, so I changed religions. I was born in a Catholic hospital in 1963 and I was circumcised. Thank God.” Now he lives in Israel.

His two most pungent comments were: “85 per cent of Israelis believe the government is corrupt. This means that the remaining 15 per cent are out of touch with reality.”

And, referring to Israel's high road accident rate, which last year resulted in the deaths of more than 500 Israelis, Campbell said: “If the Palestinians really want to kill Israelis, they should give each Israeli a car.” Unfortunately, Campbell's otherwise clever act was marred at the end of his act, and that of the show, by the inclusion of bathroom humour regarding newborn babies, which was out of place here.

Some of the sharpest wit was displayed by the emcee, Chicago-born Afro-American convert to Judaism Aaron Freeman. “I am here to embarrass the Nation of Islam (the antisemitic American Black Muslim group led by Louis Farrakhan).

And his comments on US presidential candidate Barack Obama were timely:

“Obama is the single most boring black man in the USA. Whites love him. He is the Will Smith of politics.”

Due to an unforeseen overriding professional obligation, the venerable Afro-American poet, Dr. Maya Angelou, was not able to attend the Israeli- Palestinian Comedy Tour, as was originally scheduled.