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That's a funny mix

Israeli, Palestinian comics working together for Middle-East peace

By **JIM SLOTEK**, SUN MEDIA

E-MAIL TO A FRIEND  PRINT PAGE  WRITE US  LETTER TO THE EDITOR 

The events of Sept. 11, 2001 didn't exactly inspire a lot of laughs. But the tragedy launched at least one comedy career, and started a ball rolling that became the Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour.

When the planes hit the towers, Palestinian-American Ray Hanania was a respected political columnist at the Chicago Sun-Times, who dabbled in comedy on the side.

"After Sept. 11, I decided comedy was the only way to talk to people," Hanania says in an interview with his longtime friend Aaron Freeman, an African-American converted Jew. "Nobody would listen to a column. It didn't matter how reasonable you were, it didn't matter what you said. They had a real hard stereotype about you, that was it. Humour was the only way to break through that. I could see it in people.

"Weeks after Sept. 11, I had somebody threaten to kill me. He lived down the street from he, he signed it, put his address on it. I mean, what possesses somebody? When he found out who I was, he said, 'Sorry, it was the wrong Arab.' "

Freeman, as he's wont to do, chimes in with a friendly shot. "He's an Arab, so they hate him, but the Muslims hate him 'cause he's a Christian. Me and his wife defend him, although frankly she's not that nuts about him. I, on the other hand, need him for an act."

The "act" in this case is the Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour, a travelling lineup featuring Hanania, Freeman and two Israeli comics (Yisrael Campbell and Charley Warady), that dares to dream of achieving peace in the Middle East through laughs.

Of course, that Arab leg of the tour remains a dream, period. "We had a Lebanese newspaper interview me," Hanania

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says, "and I said, 'Do you want to interview the other guys?' And the reporter said 'No, if I interview an Israeli, I'll go to jail.'"

DEBUT

"So when we're in the Arab world, we'll be calling the show Ray Hanania and His Three Hostages."

So no Arab shows just yet. But, after packing them in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, the show makes its North American debut tonight at Toronto's Roy Thomson Hall with "special guest" Maya Angelou.

You didn't know Maya Angelou did shtick? Me neither. "What, you never read her book *Why Did The Caged Bird Cross The Road?*," says a deadpan Freeman. In fact, Angelou heard about the comedy tour through its Canadian producer Howard Szigeti, who also produces the Unique Lives & Experiences Women's Lecture Series, and volunteered to be part of the show.

"She's gonna read poetry or something, who knows?" says Freeman. "She'll do whatever she wants and we're thrilled to have her. May 29 will be the first time we meet her. This will be the funniest version of a Maya Angelou show anybody's ever seen, I promise you that."

Says Hanania: "This is going to be the beginning of more of these shows in North America. We go back to Israel June 6 to 18 for 10 shows, then more shows in Canada and the U.S.

"Frankly, there are many Arab-Jewish comedy combinations, but there are no Palestinian-Israeli combinations. It's not done. No Arabs will appear with Israelis, though they'll appear with Jews.

"We can't get any Palestinians to join us. They just won't do it and that's something we'd like to change. We want to take this show to the West Bank. I go there, I sit with Palestinians, and let me tell you, they don't sit at home at night crying about their lives.

"Humour is a way for them to get a grip on life, to make their human side public and show us who they really are."

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