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Members of the Israeli-Palestinian comedy troupe Yisrael Campbell, Ray Hanania, Aaron Freeman and Charley Warady pose at the ZOA House Theater in Tel Aviv. The four comedians, three Jews and a Palestinian Christian, will be performing on Thursday night.

Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour performs on Thursday

By: Stephanie Wong

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Typically, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not a laughing matter. But, an unlikely comedy troupe is adding laughter to the stage.

The Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour (IPCT) will perform in Brown Hall on Thursday evening at 7 p.m. as part of its first tour of the U.S.

The troupe, which includes Arab and Israeli standup comedians despite the taboo associated with collaboration between the groups, is expected to prompt both laughter and controversy.

Ray Hanania started the group in 2006 in response to ongoing hostility in the Middle East.

"One of the best ways to get past animosity and hatred and stupid beliefs is to make people laugh. Comedy puts everybody at ease," said Hanania.

While the historical land dispute between Israelis and Palestinians is old and bitter, the troop members believe collaboration is possible.

Hanania is a Christian Palestinian-American, Aaron Freeman is an African-American Jew and both Charley Warady and Yisrael Campbell are Jewish emigrants from America to Israel.

"There is a big audience that wants to see Israelis and Palestinians get along, and many of them are Jewish and Palestinian," said Hanania.

According to Hanania, many people do not feel comfortable with the Israeli-Palestinian partnership. For five years, until Charles Warady first partnered with him in 2006, Hanania was unable to find an Israeli comedian willing to work with him. Moreover, the troupe of four has had some difficulty booking shows because of its mixed ethnicity.

For example, Warady and Campbell, as Israelis, are not allowed into the West Bank region of Ramalla

even though audiences there might enjoy the show.

Despite these difficulties, the IPCT has had great success with audiences, especially during its visits to Jerusalem and Tel Aviv last year.

The current U.S. tour, sponsored by MASA Israel Journeys, began in Wisconsin and is heading west to finish in Los Angeles.

"I'm excited to go to St. Louis and visit that Golden Arch," said Hanania jokingly. "Oh, silver? Arabs confuse everything. I was thinking of the great golden arches McDonalds!"

He said that audience members at Thursday's show should have basic knowledge about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but that all viewers, even if they are not Jewish or Muslim, will find the comedy funny.

"We only circumcise the Christians in the audience. We assume the rest are already done," said Hanania. Then he laughed and explained that comedy plays on human nature regardless of ethnicity.

He said that comedy reminds mixed audiences of their common humanity, opening the door to understanding and allowing the troupe to address issues that conflicted people refuse to address.

"If we can laugh together, we can live together," says the troupe's Web site. "When you use humor, you create a friendship that goes beyond the physical world into the world of subliminal influences. You actually change how someone looks at you and they don't realize they have changed. They see you as another human being. And, more importantly, they begin to see you as a friend. It is easy to hate a stranger. It is hard to hate a friend."

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