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Jewish and Palestinian comics give new meaning to Mideast quartet diplomacy

Los Angeles Times

CHICAGO -- Comic Ray Hanania nervously paced backstage at the Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies and occasionally peeked around the velvet curtains to gauge the mood of the school's packed theater.

The downtown audience -- Arab businessmen, a Palestinian professor, Jewish students and Israeli families -- glanced curiously at one another and quietly chatted in their seats. Some fidgeted nervously.

"Think it'll be like Tel Aviv?" asked fellow comedian Charley Warady, an Israeli who grew up in the same South Side neighborhood in Chicago as Hanania. "Or will it be like East Jerusalem?"

Hanania, a Palestinian American, grinned and rolled his eyes in memory.

The Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour -- which also includes Aaron Freeman, a black Jewish convert from Chicago, and Yisrael Campbell, an Orthodox Jew from Jerusalem (and formerly a Roman Catholic who lived in Philadelphia) -- has shared some unlikely stages and pushed the boundaries of political humor over the last year.

The comedians' goal is to help people laugh at the tensions between Israelis and Palestinians through their brand of stand-up diplomacy.

The idea to develop the Israeli-Palestinian show came about in late 2006, when Warady read online that Hanania was writing a book about their childhood neighborhood. He e-mailed Hanania, and the pair became friends.

After discovering that they were pursuing careers in stand-up comedy, the men decided to work together. They recruited Freeman and Campbell, and booked a series of gigs in Israel, including stops in Tel Aviv and East and West Jerusalem. Now the quartet is getting ready to launch a 15-city tour starting at the University of Wisconsin, Madison in early February.

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