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(Entertainment) Thursday, 21 February 2008, 15:55 PST
Meghan Barr, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

COLUMBUS, Ohio - The Jews lined up on one side of the room, the Arabs on the other, eyeing each other suspiciously. The occasion was a happy one - a wedding - but hostilities ran high.

It's not every day that an Arab comedian marries a practising Jew.

"We didn't have a bridal party. We had a UN peacekeeping force, right down the middle," says Ray Hanania, recalling his wedding day in a joke that caused laughter across Israel.

The standup comic visited the Holy Land with three Jewish comedians last year during the Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour, a show that tries to break down cultural barriers in the strife-ridden Middle East.

The troupe has brought its act to the United States in a tour of college campuses, including a recent performance at Ohio State University.

The small band of comedians spins jokes from both sides of the bloody conflict. In Israel, they sought to ease suffering through laughter. Now they're trying to score some American laughs and dispel prevailing stereotypes of Israelis and Palestinians.

The dichotomy of watching Hanania, a Palestinian-American, perform alongside comedian Yisrael Campbell - a Catholic-turned-Orthodox Jew - may turn some heads, but that is entirely the point, Hanania says.

Aaron Freeman, a comic who converted to Judaism, and Charley Warady, whose jokes about Israeli life and politics have graced Comedy Central, round out the group.

Breeding humour from the ashes of violence is still a relatively new phenomenon, though standup comics are known for building their acts around taboo subjects such as racism and prejudice. When it comes to making light of death on the Gaza Strip, however, the laughs can be a tougher sell.

"We don't make fun of the death and the killing, but we do make fun of the stuff that goes behind justifying it," Hanania says.

Their material delves into controversial waters, mocking Hamas suicide bombers and the Israeli government in a single breath. One segment spoofing the musical "West Side Story" - "West Bank Story" - features song lyrics such as: "When I will go back to Jerusalem, I'll start a delicatessen; all Arabs will praise to Allah, thank you for each oil dollar."

At the troupe's U.S. debut in Chicago, where they played to a predominantly Jewish audience, some jokes brought an uncomfortable pause but no boos.

"We got no complaints after the show at all," says Hal M. Lewis, a professor at The Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies, which hosted the sold-out performance at Ohio State. "No one indicated that they thought it might be inappropriate or too much."

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A former president of the Palestinian American Congress, a nonprofit activism group, and nationally syndicated columnist, Hanania is accustomed to controversy. A public disagreement with a Jewish comedian over the conflict in 2002 ended his relationship with a popular Chicago comedy club, and he was labelled a "terrorism supporter" by a conservative commentator on the web.

"We think part of the big deal is, you know, Western perception," Hanania says. "The way people look at the conflict. The U.S. has a major influence over what happens in the Middle East."

Americans are wary of offending each other, troupe member Freeman says.

"In Israel, it's a much freer, open discussion about Israeli-Palestinian matters than in the U.S.," Freeman said. "There's far less political correctness in Israel."

MASA Israel Journey, which sponsors trips to Israel for young Jewish Americans, is coordinating with Jewish student groups such as Hillel, a national Jewish organization on college campuses, to publicize the show on campuses. In turn, the Jewish groups are reaching out to Arab organizations, recruitment associate Megan Schiff said.

Zohar Bahar Ben-Hai, 27, an Israeli, serves as the Israel fellow at Ohio State's Hillel and is helping to plan the event, which she hopes will help launch a student dialogue about Middle East affairs on campus. Compared with Israelis and Palestinians, Americans tend to make harsher judgments about the conflict, sometimes based on inaccurate information, she said.

"What I had expected is that as a third party that is not really involved in the conflict, there would be a deeper understanding of both sides," Bahar Ben-Hai said. "But I see so many people just forming perceptions and arguments without trying to see the other side."

It remains to be seen how the show will go over as the funnymen take their act on the road. At least 500 students RSVP'd to the Ohio State performance, which was booked in an auditorium that seats up to 600 people.

The tour will swing through campuses in Iowa, Michigan, Missouri and California, among other places. And after that?

"Once we conquer the United States, we're going to try to conquer the West Bank," Hanania says.

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