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Cultural comedy

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By Rena Fulka, Staff writer

If we can laugh together, we can live together.

That's the impetus driving the Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour featuring a Palestinian American Christian, two Israeli Jews and an Egyptian American Muslim. The group will perform Saturday at B'nai Yehuda Beth Sholom in Homewood.

"It's rare to get a Christian, two Jews and a Muslim on stage together doing comedy," said temple event chairman Brian Zakem, who has high hopes for a diverse audience.

"This is the only place they're performing in the south suburbs, so we're going all out to reach as many faith groups as possible. We want to form bonds in the here and now with each other."

To set the stage for cross-cultural dialogue, a temple congregant crafted a tent shaded by two palm trees with a sign that reads "Welcome" in English, Hebrew and Arabic.

"It symbolizes the tent of Abraham," Zakem said, adding that Abraham is the common patriarch of Christians, Jews and Muslims.

Though the welcome sign is trilingual, comedians Ray Hanania, Charley Warady, Yisrael Campbell and Sherif Hedayat will perform their routines in English.

Opportunities for laughter and relationship building will be available before and after the show.

At 3 p.m., Campbell, Hanania and Warady will host "Punchlines for Peace: Using Humor to Defuse Conflict," a 90-minute program to demonstrate how humor can be used to increase understanding.

"We're offering this program entirely free as a community service, and we encourage people to bring food and clothing donations for Respond Now in Chicago Heights," Zakem said.

The Meet the Comedians reception at 10 p.m. features schmoozing and Middle Eastern desserts.

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find out more

The Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour appears for a three-part program Saturday at B'nai Yehuda Beth Sholom, 1424 W. 183rd St., Homewood.

"Punchlines for Peace: Using Humor to Defuse Conflict," an interactive demonstration with Ray Hanania and Charley Warady, is from 3 to 4:30 p.m. Admission is free with food or clothing donations for Respond Now in Chicago Heights.

The comedy show begins at 7:30 p.m.; tickets are \$30 at the door. Meet the Comedians reception is at 10 p.m.; the \$45 price includes show admission.

For more information, call the temple at (708) 799-4110.

breaking cultural barriers with humor

Orland Park resident Ray Hanania, a graduate of Reavis High School in Burbank, made his debut on the comedy stage after the World Trade Center tragedy in 2001.

The author and political activist is publisher of Arab American Times and hosts a radio show on WCEB-AM.

His self-syndicated columns, which "define the moderate Palestinian and Arab voice," have appeared in the Jerusalem Post, Ynetnews, Arab News in Saudi Arabia and newspapers across the United States.

During his journalism career, Hanania also wrote for the former Daily Southtown and the Chicago Sun-Times. He is cofounder of the National Arab American Journalist Association and a member of the Society of Professional Journalist Diversity Committee and Asian American Journalist Association Media Watch Committee.

Hanania launched the Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour with Charley Warady, and later added entertainers Aaron Freeman, Yisrael Campbell and Sherif Hedayat to the team.

"We organized our first tour of Israel to test the premise out in January 2007 to enthusiastic audiences, and then returned in June where we also performed for a predominantly Palestinian audience at the Ambassador Hotel in East Jerusalem," Hanania said.

Q. What was the biggest challenge when you and Warady hit the road as a twosome?

A. Facing the animosity of some Arabs and Muslims against me because I broke the "taboo" and decided to appear with an "Israeli" as opposed to working only with comedians who were "Jewish." And Charley facing resistance from Israelis who also refused to perform with an outspoken Palestinian.

Q. How did you come to add two more comedians to the Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour?

A. We wanted to ensure the show offered a broad mix of comedy. Although our purpose is to use humor to help bridge the wide gap between Israelis and Palestinians, and Jews and Muslims and Christian Arabs, the comedy has to be funny. It has to be humor. So Aaron Freeman, a veteran of Second City, serves as the emcee and "fire starter," and Yisrael Campbell, a veteran of Jewish and Israeli comedy, is the show closer.

Q. Do the four of you ever perform as a group, or just individually?

A. We perform as a group, individually. Aaron opens, followed by Charley and then me, and then Yisrael Campbell. We also perform as individuals and also as smaller pairings. Aaron and I have been performing together since I first entered stand-up comedy after Sept. 11, 2001.

Q. How would you describe your stand-up routine?

A. It's a mix of humor. I don't consider myself a professional comedian, although the comedy has been well received by Arab, Muslim and Jewish audiences, and Palestinians and Israelis in Israel and parts of Palestine. Some of the humor is self-deprecating, some is political, some addresses the insanity of Palestinian-Israeli relations and some speaks to my marriage to my wife, Alison, who is Jewish. We have a son, Aaron, who is also Jewish.

Q. You've performed around the world. Where was your favorite audience and why?

A. I have performed in Beirut before the war, in Dubai, and also last Thanksgiving in London for two audiences of more than 25,000 people at the Global Peace and Unity convention, as an individual.

The Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour has performed in a dozen cities in Israel and for Palestinian audiences in East Jerusalem. My favorite shows have been in East Jerusalem at the Ambassador hotel (where we did three shows, one in June and two in December) for some 300 Palestinians at each show. They loved the humor, they loved the pairing of Palestinians and Israelis, and they respect the power of humor to recharge the human spirit in the worst of times and in the midst of the worst tragedies.

Q. What do audience members have in common?

A. Most audiences for the Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour have been Jewish and Israeli, but there have been many Arabs and Muslims and many Americans, but not enough Arabs and Muslims. Stand-up comedy is not natural to Arab culture, although humor is. But stand-up can be very political and it can make a much more powerful statement about political realities than a column, speech or a statement.

Q. Why has your comedy team met with great success?

A. I think there is a growing realization that Palestinians and Israelis are human beings first, and humor is a powerful way for humans to energize their faith in humanity. We don't make fun of the tragedy of the Middle East conflict, but we do laugh about the stupid logic that often drives people to do crazy things.

- Rena Fulka

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