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# Working toward peace in the Middle East, one joke at a time

Comedians from both sides of Israel-Palestine divide come together by taking a stand-up route

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**BRUCE DEMARA**  
ENTERTAINMENT REPORTER

Three Israelis and a Palestinian walk into a bar ...

Now here's the punchline.

Five months after an improbably successful tour of Israel, including a stop in Arab-majority East Jerusalem, the same four guys, representing both sides of the divide in one of the world's enduring conflicts, are making their North American debut with The Israeli Palestinian Comedy Tour show at Roy Thomson Hall tomorrow .

But can stand-up comedy play a role in paving the way to Middle East peace? Hey, it couldn't hurt, so these guys are giving it a shot and dishing out yuks along the way.

"In America, there are a lot of Arab-Jewish comedy teams. But there are no Palestinian-Israeli comedy teams. That's the big thing we're doing. My question is `why not?'" said Ray Hanania, a Palestinian-American Christian who got the ball rolling.

Hanania, a veteran award-winning journalist/columnist who turned to stand-up comedy in the aftermath of 9/11, is acutely aware of how incendiary the idea is. In 2002, veteran Jewish comic Jackie Mason refused to appear onstage with him in Chicago after learning he was Palestinian.

Hanania first broached the idea of the joint show with fellow Chicago comic Aaron Freeman, a black Jewish convert, and Charley Warady, a Jewish-American who immigrated to Israel a decade ago. Rounding out the cast: Yisrael Campbell, an Orthodox Jewish convert from Catholicism who also lives in Israel.

Their five-gig tour in January sparked a flurry of largely positive international media coverage while generating hardly any dissent other than a token denunciation from Palestinian leader Ismail Haniya.

Howard Szigeti, creator of the acclaimed Unique Lives and Experiences women's lecture series, decided bringing the quartet to Toronto sounded "pretty cool."

"Putting on my Ed Sullivan hat for a moment, I thought `These guys are really, really funny and they deserve to have an audience in North America,'" he said. He hopes to book future North American dates.

Author and civil rights activist Maya Angelou, who had to cancel plans to introduce the event, said, "I think that if these two (sides) can get together and make each other laugh, over the miles of history ... I think that's worth encouraging, exhorting and supporting."

For his part, Szigeti is still amazed at the audacity of the idea.

"There were no incidents, no protests, nothing. Everybody basically rallied to the theme of the initiative: if we can laugh together, we can live together," Szigeti said.

For Hanania, the tour was not without personal consequences. Upon returning to the U.S., several of his gigs before Arab-American groups were suddenly cancelled.

Still, Hanania said, the focus is on comedy, not politics, in the upcoming Toronto show.

"We don't have to compromise our views to perform together.... I'm not trying to convince Israelis that Palestinians are right and they're wrong ... and the Israeli comedians aren't trying to convince audiences that Israelis are right and Palestinians are wrong.

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