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Mideast not funny? Four comics are working on it

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Anthony Robert La Penna / For The Times

HEARD THE ONE ABOUT . . . : Yisrael Campbell and the rest of the Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour comics believe that laughter creates unity — even if only for a few moments.

A troupe of three Jews and a Palestinian aims to promote understanding through laughter.

By P.J. Huffstutter, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
January 22, 2008

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.

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"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, an African American 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.

"You can take a joke that, if we had a serious discussion, would really create an emotional argument," Hanania said. "But when you do it as a joke -- me making fun of the wall, Charley making fun of the checkpoints -- then everyone laughs. And everyone's unified for the moment."

Still, it's tough to imagine anyone being able to giggle over the region's ever-growing tensions.

Recent Israeli ground and air attacks in the Gaza Strip have killed 18 Palestinians,

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including the son of a senior Hamas leader. Palestinians continued firing rockets into Israel, while Israel temporarily blocked all shipments of fuel, food and emergency supplies to Gaza.

But the comics insist that, during times of intense stress, people are hungry for the chance to laugh. "We're a bunch of comedians. We're not going to solve anything. We're not going to cause peace," said Warady, who moved from the U.S. to Israel in 1996. "What we want people to understand, and to point out, is that the fighting is stupid."

A tongue-in-cheek mood emerged on the streets of Israel in 2006, after the militant group Hamas won a landslide victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections: Taxi drivers reportedly rified about how their orange-hued cabs would have to be painted green -- the color of Hamas -- and residents exchanged quips through cellphone text messages about how beer brands would be renamed with holy monikers.

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 both 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.

There was rejection from both sides of the borders. An Israeli company declined to book them because it didn't "want to alienate anyone's sensitivities," Warady said. "I said, 'Yeah, I understand, it's because we're promoting peace.'"

When Hanania returned to Chicago last summer, several Arab American organizations that had previously booked him as a solo act canceled.

"No one would come out and say it, but it was because I'd shared a stage with an Israeli," said Hanania, who's also an author and a political columnist. "It's one thing to perform with a Jew. But the political ramifications of crossing that Israeli-Palestinian line are too much for some people."

Still, the quartet found a welcoming audience in a variety of venues, traveling from Haifa to Beersheba. Whether the audience was predominantly Israeli or Palestinian, Hanania said, the desire to laugh was universal.

Now the quartet is getting ready to crisscross the U.S. over the next two months, performing at college campuses, community centers and faith-based festivals.

The 15-city tour starts at the University of Wisconsin in Madison in early February, with a stop in Southern California later in the month.

Before hitting the road, they recently tested their material back on familiar turf in Chicago.

For two hours, the four men joked about such subjects as taking classes from a "master suicide bomber" with missing limbs ("Can I defer to next semester?" quipped Campbell) and took swipes at President Bush.

"Our goal is to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in six shows," Freeman told the sold-out crowd of more than 400. "This is our 20th show. But we're making progress. Our beloved president, George Bush, was in Israel and he announced to the world that it is time that the occupation must end."

Freeman waited a beat. Then, he deadpanned, "Thus, we are giving Washington back to the Indians."

The audience laughed at that one, but sometimes the punch lines fell flat. When Warady delivered a joke about how a series of earthquakes in Jerusalem made him think "that if we can't figure a way to divide up Jerusalem, somebody else will," the largely Israeli audience was uncomfortably silent, before politely laughing.

After the show, as the comics chatted with friends in the theater's lobby, audience members approached to say thanks -- and make a suggestion.


"You should have even numbers of Israelis and Palestinians on stage. And a woman," said Miriam Joyce, 71, a history and political science professor from the Calumet campus of Purdue University, in Hammond, Ind. Otherwise, Joyce pointed out, it's not truly "a fair division between Israelis and Palestinians."

Hanania replied with a grin, "When we perform in Ramallah, we call ourselves 'Ray Hanania and the Three Hostages.' That better?"


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