

Did you hear the one about the Jew and the Muslim?

Five Jewish and five Muslim stand-ups have joined forces for the third annual Koshers Jokes for the Halaladays

BY BILL BROWNSTEIN, THE GAZETTE DECEMBER 19, 2012



The annual Koshers Jokes for the Halaladays takes place December 20, 2012 at the Comedy Nest. Jews and Muslims come together in mirth. Comics present will be (left to right): Eman, Mark Wilner, Abdul Butt and Jess Soloman photographed in Montreal on December 6, 2012.

Photograph by: Marie-France Coallier, The Gazette



MONTREAL — They are thumb-wrestling one another. How else would you expect a group of Jewish and Muslim stand-up comics to warm up?

It is hard to see who has got the upper thumb in these bouts. That's because the participants can't stop giggling. The warm-up essentially serves to underscore the lack of conflict between the participating comics as they prepare for the third annual Kosher Jokes for the Halaladays, running Dec. 20-22 at the Comedy Nest.

Five Jewish and five Muslim stand-ups from Montreal have joined forces once again to bring holiday cheer as well as jeers to folks of all denominations. They have already done shows in Toronto and Ottawa and touched both nerves and funny-bones in the process.

Though tensions might be high between these two groups in other parts of the planet, the situation is much in contrast among Jewish and Muslim comics here. They work and play together in harmony, not only for this spectacle but throughout the year as well. However, come Christmas, they have even more in common: They all feel left out of traditional Yuletide festivities.

"It's a good thing that both groups have such a strong sense of humour to get over being left out in the cold," trouper Ryan Wilner says. "What we're showing here is a unified comedic front."

"That's it," Eman, co-star, creator and co-producer of the show says. "The cold calms us down here. Can't fight when it's freezing."

"The comedy can often get lost in the fog of war," Jess Salomon, co-star and the show's other co-producer says. "But there are a lot of moderate voices out there. Comics like us who live and work together, and this provides the perfect opportunity for us to stage this kind of show and to make a kind of statement about unity. When it comes down to it, Muslims and Jews are still considered outsiders by many in this province."

"We have a secret weapon working for us," Abdul Butt notes.

Yes, that would be mirth and it can combat conflict.

"The funny thing is that we all relate so well," Butt adds. "Jews get me, my humour. I don't know if it's because my act is a lot about complaining about worldly things that we have to go through with others, or the fact that we both eat blessed meat."

"And Muslims get me," Salomon says. "Muslims are my fans. The Jews — not so much — except for my 93-year-old grandmother."

"The funny thing is that the Muslims and Jews on the Montreal comedy scene tend to be really good friends, and that was one of the goals of the show. Muslims are actually the new Jews in the comedy world. The reality is also that we have very similar senses of humour, probably because we're both minorities here." Eman says.

They also tend to target themselves in their material. “I like to point how I always run into my mother returning something at the IGA in Côte-St-Luc,” Wilner cites as an example. “My act consists of a lot of things overheard at the IGA in Côte-St-Luc.”

Butt’s dad is often the butt of his jokes. “My dad is always angry that we don’t seem to make anything in Canada anymore. I made a bet with him that he couldn’t find a shirt made in Canada. He lost. Then I brought him to Roots — a supposedly Canadian store — where he couldn’t find anything made here and it made him more angry.”

It was small consolation to Butt’s dad that his offspring was made in Canada. “That’s why he has tried to sell me to Roots.”

Eman, whose roots are Palestinian, likes to kibitz about how her Jewish friends want to know how Palestinians really feel about them. “My answer is: the same way Jews feel about the Palestinians. And they say: ‘Oh, that’s not good.’ ”

Eman, whose roots are Palestinian, points out the beauty of living in Montreal is that people can coexist yet still maintain their own opinions — “without killing one another.” She has also taken her stand-up act to Jerusalem, Ramallah and the West Bank. “All three cities were awesome,” she reports. “If given the opportunity, people there love to laugh, too. There is a group of Jewish and Muslim comics who do tour in the region.”

The Montreal gang has expansion plans, without infringing on anyone else’s territory. They are thinking about bringing Koshers Jokes for the Halaladays to Winnipeg, Calgary and Vancouver and even have their sights set on the U.S. in the future. Eman and Salomon actually produced and starred in Pretty Semitic in Chicago.

“That’s another misconception held by many,” Eman says. “People think Arabs are anti-Semitic, which is impossible because we are Semitic, too. We’re all Semites. Yup, we’re both hated equally.” Pause. “It makes for great comedy — any time of year.”

“Really, no one has to worry about us bombing,” Wilner says, before quickly adding. “On stage, that is.”

Koshers Jokes for the Halaladays: A Comedy Show for Jews and Muslims for Christmas takes place Dec. 20-22 at The Comedy Nest, 2313 Ste. Catherine St. W. Performing over the three nights will be Abdul Butt, Eman, Jess Salomon, Ryan Wilner, Jeff Schouela, Bilal Mammah, Ali Mohammadi, Dan Laxer, Nour Haddidi and Robby Hoffman. Showtime: 8:30 p.m. Tickets: \$15; \$12 for students on Dec. 20 and 21. Call: 514-932-6378 or go to www.comedynest.com.

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