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Charter provides fodder for Jewish, Muslim comics

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Janice Arnold, Staff Reporter, Friday, December 13, 2013

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Comedians and pals Eman El-Husseini, left, and Jess Salomon take a beauty break before taking to the stage in Koshers Jokes for the Halaladays.

MONTREAL — When Jeff Schouela and Eman El-Husseini created Koshers Jokes for the Halaladays (KJH) in 2010, bringing together local Jewish and Muslim comics, the idea was to give those who feel left out during the Christmas season something to laugh about.

The fourth edition of the standup comedy show, taking place Dec. 19 to 21 at the Comedy Nest in the AMC Forum, will see the two faiths sharing the stage as natural allies rather than tentative partners in humorous dialogue.

While critics denounce the Quebec government's charter of values as divisive, Schouela said, in this instance it has had the beneficial effect of actually uniting the Jewish and Muslim communities in protest against its ban of religious attire in the public service.

Although not conceived as a statement of opposition, "this show will be more politically charged," he thinks. "Quebec has definitely taken measures to upset both the Jewish and Muslim communities. If anything, this show will help bring us closer together."

"Many comedians in this year's show have plenty to say about the charter, and it will be interesting to hear the reaction of the mixed audience," Schouela said.

"Obviously, humour is a great weapon to defuse political and religious tension."

Schouela, who is Jewish, traces his family roots to Syria via Egypt. He has been on the comedy circuit in Montreal, Toronto, New York and Los Angeles for the past 10 years, delivering his literate brand of wit.

He was the sole Jewish participant in We Ain't Terrorists, a showcase of Muslim comics. He is now heard on the XM satellite radio Canadian comedy channel Laugh Attack.

El-Husseini, another member of the lineup, echoed those views.

"As much as I don't agree with this charter, I must admit it is the best thing that happened to my career. Every media outlet wants to know what this Muslim girl is thinking," said El-Husseini, who immigrated to Canada with her Palestinian family from Kuwait in 1990.

A headliner at the annual Arab-American Comedy Festival in New York, El-Husseini (she performs simply as Eman) hosted the open mike nights at Comedy Works and is now seen on CTV's Comedy Now!

Expect plenty about the charter in her act.

She underlines that the ties between Jewish and Muslim comedians were already strong.

"I came up with KJH because I wanted to shed light on how close the Jewish and Muslim comics happen to be on the Montreal comedy scene."

"I think Jews and Muslims have a similar sense of humour – I often joke Muslims are the new Jews in comedy – and we're lucky to live in Canada where we can develop relationships among one another."

"It's something to really be so proud of, and this is precisely why I believe this show has been successful and is returning for its fourth year."

KJH began three years ago as a single night show. This year, there are not only three performances in Montreal, but KJH has gone national with versions in Ottawa and Toronto as well.

El-Husseini co-produces those two shows with Jess Salomon, another Montreal comic who will be performing in Montreal.

Together, they have become poster girls for the Jewish-Muslim resistance through humour.

"It took us a while to develop a friendship, but that was due to how much Jess loves to talk – a lot," El-Husseini jokes, but after the first KJH they had connected, each appreciating that their respective views on the Israeli-Palestinian situation were moderate.

They have put together another comedy show, Pretty Semitic, featuring them and other female Jewish and Arab comedians, that they staged in Chicago last spring and are bringing to Bialik High School in January.



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With respect to El-Husseini's jibe about her alleged loquaciousness, Salomon pleads guilty as charged. "It's true I do like to talk and my voice is soft. Luckily though, I'll be performing with a microphone and a time limit."

Like El-Husseini and Schouela, she feels the charter has only helped cement an already strong connection between the funny men and women in the two communities.

"Last year's show took place in a context of rockets being lobbed back and forth between Israel and Gaza," she observes. "This year on a local level it's going to be fun to satirize a common foe."

She thanks the Parti Québécois for providing "the ideal comic fodder in that it is so ridiculous. It's like the PQ is saying, 'No religion shall be entitled to oppress the women of the province. That's our job.'"

A lawyer by training, Salomon for 2 1/2 years worked in The Hague on the war crimes prosecution against leaders of the former Yugoslavia. That is before she got serious and turned to comedy full time.

Kidding aside about the charter, Salomon hopes KJH continues to make Jews and Muslims feel more comfortable with each other.

"I've heard so many people say, 'I have a Jewish (or a Muslim) friend and we really get along, we just don't discuss politics'. I've never understood that.

"There are people I won't discuss politics with because they invoke God and religion and that is the end of the argument; really there's no point.

"But with others, people who are reasonable, curious and logical, I don't see why you wouldn't. It's good to have what you know or think you know challenged."

That happens a lot between the two of them.

"Eman and I go back and forth on a lot of things, and when we make a point, we'll ask each other: Where did you learn that? If it's at the dinner table, it doesn't count. You have to at least back it up with Wikipedia. Wikipedia isn't always perfect but it beats 'dinner table'.

"That the root of our friendship, I think. Maybe it's that when we started talking politics everyone at the bar disappeared and we were the only ones left. Even people who didn't smoke went outside for a cigarette."

Oh, and Muslim humour is not an oxymoron, far from it. "I'm jealous of how fresh and new this wave of Muslim comics is. Jewish comedy is the oldest comedy there is," Salomon says.

Also appearing in KJH are Dave Acer, Abdul Butt, and Toby Muresianu.

All shows are at 8 p.m. For tickets, call 514-932-6378 or visit www.comedynest.com.

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