

“A CNN correspondent recently said Arabs are the new blacks. When I heard him say that I was excited. I’m like oh my God, we’re cool”

Jackie Oweis Sawiris

If humour is an underused weapon in Arabs’ war against prejudice, a bunch of comedians have arrived with a massive new arsenal



“On September 10th, I went to bed a white guy,” says comedian Dean Obeidallah during the opening of his one-man routine. “On September 11th, I woke up an Arab.” It’s the kind of line that permeates *The Watch List*, Comedy Central’s new series of Middle Eastern-American stand-up and sketch acts, whose name was, of course, inspired by the more sinister and far less convincing Homeland Security compilation. It currently airs on the channel’s broadband network Motherload, and is the first show ever to be produced by a major American entertainment company starring comics of Middle Eastern backgrounds – and only Middle Eastern backgrounds. They poke fun at everything from marriage to racial profiling to patriotism to baking cookies – all in the name of anything to do with Arab, the Middle East and Islam.

“We’re doing what we can to redefine ourselves in a funny, likeable way,” says Dean, a half-Palestinian, half-Sicilian litigation-attorney-turned-stand-up-comic, whose one-man show, *I Come In Peace*, enjoyed an extended Off-Broadway run in New York last autumn. “We’re making inroads, but it takes time.” He believes Comedy Central’s initial refusal

to dole out a budget to produce *The Watch List* for television, but instead air it on their online channel, is a blessing in disguise. “The internet makes the world smaller and Watch List more accessible... It will be up online forever as long as the archives are kept up.”

The Watch List’s cyber-trial proved there is a market out there, and Dean and his fellow band of Middle Eastern-American comics has tapped into it with sufficient force to dent the formulaic, politically-filtered landscape of commercial television. In early March, it earned a network slot on Comedy Central, and although *Watch List* fans do have to stay awake until 2am to catch two minutes, the network is considering a prime-time half hour show. In the meantime, Comedy Central TV has aired *The Axis of Evil Comedy Tour*, a ballsy, frenetic concert of Middle Eastern humour starring some members of *The Watch List*.

Arab-American comedians are, it seems, suddenly in vogue. Dean Obeidallah is also the co-founder and executive producer of the New York Arab-American Comedy Festival, which comprises six nights of stand up comedy, film and theatre – all of it not-for-profit. It received substantial coverage in media outlets across the world, from al-Jazeera to the *Christian*

Science Monitor to US State Department publications, and in addition to the Middle East Bizarre – “little local shows in New York City that keep audiences excited about comedy and Arab-American comedy” – Arab comedy is no longer an oxymoron it once was. “If it wasn’t for the festival, *The Watch List* wouldn’t have happened,” Dean says of the grass roots initiative. “The festival gave Comedy Central the confidence we could do this. *Watch List* is a labour of love. It’s a passion, but it’s fun too.”

Of course, making fun of how Arabs can’t make fun of themselves will be missed, but laughter is a sound long unheard but long overdue from this community; Arab-flavoured humour is finally making a global appearance.

The Watch List is co-created and co-produced by Emmy award-winning writer Max Brooks, son of director Mel Brooks. Using very much his father’s successful approach of mocking hatred and prejudice, Brooks believes “humour is the sugar coating on the Advil. It doesn’t ram stuff down people’s throats. Blacks did it in the 1950s, Jews did it all their lives.”

After an initially negative response to a query from Dean, a former *Saturday Night Live* colleague, about doing a show with Arab and Middle Eastern comedians, Max agreed to get involved on the condition that



Palestinian comic
Maysoon Zayid



Soundbytes from The Watch List

Ahmed Ahmed
 “My name really is Ahmed Ahmed. I can’t fly anywhere. If you Google my name it comes up on the FBI’s most wanted list. Twice.”

Ronnie Khalil
 “My parents are Egyptian. Basically that means they just want me to get married ... What do you get when you cross a woman with an opinion – the death penalty ... Meet Fatima your new wife – she only speaks when you ask her a question ... Hey, two Muslims walk into a bar, just kidding – against our religion.”

Aron Kader
 “What would we have without Arabic numerals? Roman numerals. 7-11 goes out of business if it’s called VIIXI.”

Nasry Malak
 “So ever since 9/11 me and my family have gone out of our way to become as patriotic as possible. So we’re thinking of turning in my father. Not because he’s done anything but it would make us look SO patriotic.”

Dean Obeidallah
 “We are so racially profiled now as a group that I heard a correspondent on CNN not too long ago say ‘Arabs are the new blacks’. When I heard him say that I’m gonna be honest – I was excited. I’m like oh my God, we’re cool.”

Joe Derosa
 “How friggin’ lazy of a racist do you have to be when you don’t even separate the stereotypes anymore, you just throw them all together in one big pile: Why don’t you go back to your oil well, stop and buy some fried chicken and watermelon on your way there before you sneak over the border to open a 7-11 up in this country.”

Maz Jobrani
 “Just once I wish they would show us doing something good, man. Just once show us doing something good – like baking cookies. Because I’ve been to Iran; we have cookies.”

the comedians “had to be Americans of Arab descent. They had to have a shared American experience.” That shared experience was, and continues to be, a big deal to Max, who is acutely aware of the dangers of singling out a group of people who have been long term, fully assimilated members of a society. “Arabs were Americans before 9/11. They were Puerto Ricans with curly hair. Dean has only been an Arab for five years. All of a sudden there’s this white guy who is signalled out as an Arab.

“Jews in Germany were totally assimilated. And the Germans killed them all, including German Jews who were German before they were anything else. I don’t want that to happen here the way it happened to Jews in Europe in World War II. Part of my job is to make sure it doesn’t happen.”

For Max, who grew up in California – “a desert full of Arabs and Jews and plenty of random racial violence” – humour has always been a weapon and America

an excellent place to wield it. “The USA is great because old world habits can remain in the old world and people can find a common ground here.”

“I’m a Palestinian Muslim virgin with cerebral palsy from New Jersey. And if that doesn’t make you feel better about your life, it should!”
 Maysoon Zayid, co-founder of the New York Arab-American Comedy Festival, opens her one-woman show *Little American Whore* with a line that breaks whatever residual stereotypical ice there may be about ethnicity, religion or disability. “It’s important the audience knows I have cerebral palsy so they don’t think I’m just nervous,” she smiles. “I’ve learned a lot in the past seven years about what it means to be disabled in the US and to be a disabled performer in the US. I’m in an industry that’s in love with normal things and I come in and I’m the exact opposite. But I’m not all about ‘ah, and now I shall struggle.’ I’m Palestinian: I’ve struggled *enough*...”

The actress and Palestinian rights activist – she comes back twice a year to work with disabled refugee children – is always ready with a self-deprecating quip. Her father, she says, “thought I was a stripper for the first three years of my career”, but she knows that her comedy has a serious, functional side, particularly when dealing with a culture under siege. “The Arab-American comedy movement – and it is a movement – is not about knock-knock jokes. It celebrates Arab-Americans before us,” she says.

Confirming the point, she has spent most of the past five months in Los Angeles co-writing a film script with Palestinian-American screenwriter Nizar Wattad, aka Ragtop of hip-hop group The Philistines, which she says is “about Arab-American life, living in between [cultures]

like so many people do. Arabs can play more than Terrorist #1.

“We don’t stop – we work 24 hours a day. I live bi-coastally, bi-continently. I

spend my down time on planes. My dad is so happy because he knows there’s no chance I’ll ever [have time to] go out and kiss a boy.”

Another benefit of the Arab-American Comedy Festival she co-produces is that it acts as both a recruiting tool and a training ground for up-and-coming comics. Like Maria Shehata. The Ohio-born, Egyptian-American stand-up comic moved to New York City 18 months ago to pursue comedy, and now regularly co-hosts *Comedy Combo #3*, a variety show featuring stand up, sketch, musical acts, and improv at Mo Pitkin’s House of Satisfaction on the Lower East Side. “If I’m not in one [stand up comedy show], I’m watching one,” she says, Amanda Baramki, an Egyptian-Lebanese-American stand up comic born and raised in Virginia, is another.

Both women, who understand more Arabic than they speak, incorporate a marginal amount of Arabic-specific material into their routines. And both feel the weight of a not-always-welcome responsibility

to represent Arabs. “I feel like a comic who happens to be Arab,” she says. “I do actually feel like an Arab person, but it’s not the only thing that defines me. If I just do what’s on my mind, and not necessarily political Arabic stuff, it actually normalises [the Arab part of] me a little bit more.”

It’s an inescapable irony – trying to escape an identity that went largely unrecognised before 9/11 and one that has since defined Arab-Americans whether they like it or not. Maria and Amanda are just trying to be themselves, and being Arab is part of that, but they “don’t want to represent all Arabs, but it gets put on you.” Dean, however, is actively rediscovering his connections to the Arab world. He has performed in Ramallah, Haifa, Beirut and Dubai, his Palestinian girlfriend is helping him learn Arabic and he may return to the Middle East this summer for a visit. “Beirut is remarkable,” he says. “I would love to go back. We wanted to do the festival there but it’s too unstable and I would feel too guilty if anything happened.”

Like fellow Palestinian-American Ray Hanania, Dean has also put together a touring comedy show in which humour is the treatment for the biggest regional malady. *Stand Up For Peace: The Two Comedian Solution to Middle East Peace* is, to quote the accompanying blurb, a “groundbreaking comedy show that brings Arab and Jewish-Americans together to laugh, and encourages a dialogue in support of a peaceful, political resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.”

Dean doesn’t believe comedy from an explicit standpoint is an alien concept in America, and the success of his homegrown festival is proof. “People get it,” he says. “Americans are not oblivious to the world. They know minorities have different perspectives than white people. People here understand entertainment has an impact on defining people. I write for Americans as an American of Arab heritage... My writing is coloured by my heritage.”

Maysoon, a little wired on caffeine – although it’s probably more to do with being a Palestinian Muslim virgin with cerebral palsy from New Jersey high on making a difference – concludes without a sigh or an ounce of recrimination: “We have the art to back up what we’re saying. It allows us to say what only Arab-Americans can say. And as the downward trend of vilifying Arabs continues, what’s going to save us is art.” ■

Over: Maz Jobrani has them rolling in the aisles. Good job he’s not on a plane.
 Above: *The Watch List* crew, Aron Kader, Ahmed Ahmed and Maz Jobrani.
 Top right: Dean Obeidallah and Max Brooks share the applause.