



THE LADIES *are* LAUGHING

FEATURE: SANAD TABBAA. PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF THE COMEDIANS

Captivating comediennes Maysoon Zayid, Leila Ben Abdallah and Nour Hadidi give their insights on making it in comedy.

It might surprise you to know that there is a sinister side to the world of witty commentary and sharp one-liners. You'd think that comedians, people who create so much laughter, would be received with applause and admiration. However, standup comedy is no easy gig and another profession where sexism can seep in and sour the show.

Conservative Arab societies can be less

than open to standup comedians, banning jokes about sex, politics and religion or the comics from appearing on stage altogether.

Even still, comedy is resilient and has proved to be a smash hit in the Middle East. The Web has opened the floodgates. One needs only to look to the multitude of funny Arabic posts on Facebook and YouTube, the reception of Amman's popular, though short-lived, *Stand Up*

Comedy Festival or even the cartoons crafted by Kharabeesh, and Emad Hajjaj along with other jokesters who have made their homes in the West. If given the chance, comedy – delivered by women, men, Arabs or non-Arabs – can flourish in our region. The following three women provide prime examples of why and let us in on their trials, tribulations and of course a joke or two.



MAYSOON ZAYID

Being deprived of oxygen for 180 seconds after birth seriously damaged Maysoon Zayid's motor control centre and left her physically impaired in all limbs. Regardless of this incurable cerebral palsy the Palestinian-American has excelled. Maysoon studied acting at Arizona State University and took up tap-dancing before becoming one of the premier Arab standup comedians alive today. With her amusing observations and self-deprecating tales Maysoon has performed on countless tours including the *Axis of Evil* showcase. She is a co-founder of the *New York Arab American Comedy Festival* and appears in films such as *You Don't Mess with the Zohan* among others.

Today, between performing, writing and training up-and-coming comics she runs the charity, Maysoon's Kids, which aims to provide education for disabled Palestinian youths that have been rejected by the mainstream school system.

Why did you get into comedy?

Since I was eight years old I always dreamt of being on the American TV show *General Hospital*. At university I even majored in acting and upon graduating, I got a job as an extra on a TV show. I thought I would be quickly promoted to lead actress, but that didn't happen and

I remained a glorified piece of furniture that you could only recognise from the back of my head. It became clear to me that Hollywood casting directors didn't hire fluffy, ethnic, disabled actors. They only hired perfect people. But there were exceptions to the rule. I grew up watching actresses like Whoopi Goldberg, Rosie O'Donnell and Ellen. All of these women

had one thing in common: they were comedians... so, I became a comic!

How long have you been in comedy?

I have been doing comedy for 15 years. I love it. It's a great job. I get to make people laugh while forcing them to listen to my opinions. I've been blessed to tour the world and have done comedy in places



Maysoon performing

like London, Amman, Jerusalem and Hollywood. I've also done workshops all throughout the Middle East and trained a lot of comics in the region.

Do you perform bilingually?

I perform in Arabic and English. Very few standup comics perform in Arabic, but I have been doing this since the beginning of my career: I don't just

translate my jokes. My Arabic routine is a whole different story and I love the Arabic language. It's perfect for comedy because it is so descriptive.

As a young Arab woman did you find it difficult to get into comedy?

When I started comedy I was oblivious to the fact that I had everything going against me. I didn't think of myself as a

female comic, or a disabled comic, or a brown comic: I was just a comic. Nobody treated me differently. I was just one of the guys. I didn't make a big deal about being the only girl in the room. Comics seemed more concerned about following me because I always had really good sets than with the fact that I was a woman.

Who's the meanest comedian you know?

Ahmed Ahmed. He may actually be the meanest person I know!

Has Cerebral Palsy affected your career?

No, it hasn't affected my ability to perform in any way. It's funny, I have more energy than most people without cerebral palsy (CP) I know. I travel all over the world on my own and can go days without sleep. Other comics on tour watch me in awe. CP has affected my ability to get a job in Hollywood, though. People with disabilities are the largest minority in the world yet we are the most under-represented in entertainment and the media. I hope to change that, but it has definitely been my biggest challenge.

What have you been doing lately?

A lot. It's been a crazy year. In January, the *TEDTalk* I did was posted and has been life changing. It's been translated into 35 languages and viewed worldwide. I've been getting emails from all over the globe from people who saw the talk and were affected in a positive way. So that has been incredible. I am still touring my standup show; I don't think I will ever quit. I'm also working on producing a movie I wrote and I am writing a book. This year is the 11th anniversary of the *New York Arab American Comedy Festival*, which I co-founded and co-produced with fellow comedian, Dean Obeidallah, so we are excited for that. I am also doing TV spots here and there until I find a permanent job hosting a talk show, or as a character on *General Hospital*. And of course I'm doing yoga. It's great to be busy.

For more information visit Maysoon.com or follow her on twitter at [@maysoonayid](https://twitter.com/maysoonayid).

The comedian pictured in traditional dress





(photographer: Rand Huneidi)

NOUR HADIDI

Nour Hadidi relocated from Jordan to snowy Canada to study in 2006. Today, she regularly performs her standup show at different Montreal venues such as Jimbo's Comedyworks and The Comedy Nest club. She also co-hosts a monthly show featuring rotating lineups of Montreal's best comedians. Prior to this she performed with Jeddah-born and Amman-raised comedian Wonho Chung as opening act, the *Kosher Jokes for Halaldays* show and appeared at Boston's *Women In Comedy Festival*, Toronto's *SheDot Festival* and *The New York Arab American Comedy Festival*.

Why did you get into comedy?

I've been obsessed with comedy from a very young age, watching sitcoms and funny movies over and over again. I loved *Mad About You*, *Fresh Prince*, *Father of the Bride*, *Mrs. Doubtfire* and almost any movie with Steve Martin or Robin Williams. I also enjoyed Arabic programmes such as *Maraya*, *Yawmiyat Modeer zam*, *Jameel wa Hanaz* and hold *Madreset El Moshagebeen* in high regard. There's something universal about comedy and the way it makes you feel.

How long have you been in comedy?

I've been doing standup for two and a half years. When I was in high school the idea of me doing standup or anything comedy related seemed too far-fetched. I didn't take theatre arts because I was focussed on getting a science equivalence

in school. Even when I auditioned to host our high school fashion show, I lost out to two guys in my class.

I discovered standup on YouTube when I was in university. In my last year, I went to a standup comedy show, *Arabs Gone Wild*, which was hosted by Ali Hassan and featured Dean Obeidallah, Maysoon Zayid and Eman El-Husseini among

other Middle Eastern comedians. It was then that I knew I had to give it a try.

I tried standup for the first time in 2010 after I graduated from university. I did it probably four to five times over that summer but I started my job in the autumn and didn't make time for it. I started again in 2012 and haven't stopped since.



On stage at the New York Arab American Comedy Festival (photographer: Larisa Shaterian)



At Comedy Hostel
(photographer:
Rand Huneidi)

As a young Arab woman did you face any difficulty getting into comedy?

I'm fortunate that both Maysoon and Eman paved the way for me because when I started, they had been doing standup for a while in New York and Montreal. The latter is a cultural melting pot; the comedy scene here is full of comedians from all walks of life. We have different ethnicities, ages, backgrounds and educations and the only thing that matters is whether or not you're funny on stage.

Whose voice would you like to narrate your life?

Ron Howard, but just like he does for *Arrested Development*.

What is your favourite joke or the best you've heard lately?

That is a tough question because of all the great comedy I've seen this summer!

I went to Hannibal Buress' show at the Knitting Factory in Brooklyn. Neal Brennan was performing that night and had a great joke about how apps are like psycho girlfriends: once a week it pops up and asks 'do you like me?' Well you need to go to the app store and tell people you like me. By the way, I need access to all your contacts!

Have you ever been heckled?

Yes, if a comedian tells you they haven't been heckled then they're either lying or haven't been in the game long enough. Before I left for New York, I was performing at an open mic in Montreal and an audience member yelled out my punch lines before I finished the jokes because he had seen me before. I asked him his name and what he did for a living. He said that he was a semi-retired insurance broker and I replied that he was a part-time broker and a full time a-hole.

What's next for you?

I'll probably be doing standup for a while. I host my own monthly show in Montreal with another comedian Rachel Gendron. It's called *4 Shits and Giggles* and is a mix of pros and up-and-comers like us. The venue where we hold our show closed down so we're looking for a new one right now.

I'm also going back to New York this fall for the *New York Arab American Comedy Festival*. It's Maysoon Zayid and Dean Obeidallah's comedy love child. This is going to be my third year in a row performing with them, and I can't wait!

Find out more about Nour on her website www.nourhadidi.com or on twitter @NourHadidi.



(photographer: Mindy Tucker)

LEILA BEN ABDALLAH

Washington DC based actress, comedian and writer, Leila Ben Abdallah regularly performs improvisational comedy at The People's Improv Theatre in New York. The bright up-and-comer has performed at the *New York Arab-American Comedy Festival*, *The PEN World Voices Festival* for Munkeytown Productions, with the Numu Arts Collective, on *College Humor*, *Fresh Ground Pepper* and *The Claque*. She has also created two solo shows; *How Did I Get Here? The Beverly Blondell Story* and *Leticia's Fifth Birthday Party* as well as written and produced *Eighty-Sixed*, a pilot about the New York restaurant industry.

How long have you been in comedy?

I have been in comedic plays and films for over 10 years, but it's been about three years since I started exclusively writing and performing comedy and called myself a comedian.

As a young Arab woman did you find this any difficult?

Actually, being an Arab was what got me in to the profession in the first place! My first gig in New York City was as a sketch actor in the *New York Arab-American Comedy Festival*, and I have had the pleasure of performing in five years of festivals.

One of the most difficult things I deal with now is that people have certain expectations when they hear my name before seeing my comedy or meeting me because my name is so distinctively Muslim. I think people expect that my comedy will be very political, or be predominantly about being an Arab in America post 9/11. I try to view the difficulties that come with being an Arab woman in comedy as an interesting challenge, and I consider it an honour to be in a position where I get to help dismantle stereotypes and maybe provide some understanding about my culture.



With fellow comics at the Arab American Comedy Festival

Have you ever been made fun of on stage?

I was heckled the first time I ever tried standup. I was the only woman performing, and there were no women in the audience. At the end of my performance, I thanked the audience and said that that was my first time performing. One of the other comedians who was in the audience decided that since I was new, I was an easy target, so he started to aggressively flirt with me and make sexual comments in front of the entire room. I didn't want to look like I could not take a joke, so I tried to just laugh and not get angry, but every comedian after him proceeded to make sexually inappropriate comments about me; it became almost like a contest among them to see who could be the most lewd. It was extremely uncomfortable and angered me because clearly no one had listened to my jokes only because I am a woman. Needless to say, I never performed there again.

You've worked in the restaurant industry, who was your worst customer?

The restaurant where I work only accepts cash as payment, we do not take credit cards, and recently, a man got so angry that I could not take his credit card to pay his check that he literally threw the cash in my face and made me pick it up off the floor. All the other diners were so shocked by his behaviour that a lot of people ended up tipping me extra because they felt bad that this man had been so disrespectful. The ironic part was that just the day before, I had performed my first solo-show, which was a huge accomplishment for me as a comedian, and to be so disrespected the very next day was such a surreal feeling.

What have you been doing lately?

I performed my original solo-play in the *New York International Fringe Festival* this summer, which is the largest arts festival in North America. I also produced, wrote and starred in an independent TV pilot about what it is like to work in a restaurant in New York City. I have been working on submitting the pilot to film and TV festivals and pitching the show idea to TV networks in the hopes that one will like the idea and hire me to put the show on TV. It's online at Eightysixedpilot.com!



Leila in *How Did I Get Here?*
The Beverly Blondell Story
(photographer: Tamsi M. New)

What's next for you?

Writing, writing, lots of writing! I have spent the last two years perfecting and performing my current hour-long solo-play and I independently produced the television pilot. After so long focussing on the same two pieces of work, it's time to develop something new. A colleague of mine and I are writing a romantic comedy screenplay and another colleague and I are writing a TV show.

After spending a year creating a solo show, I am eager to collaborate with other comedians! Developing solo material is wonderful, it's lovely to be able to tell your own stories in your own way, but it can be lonely. I am also looking for a new agent to help me find work on other projects. I produce most of my own stuff, but it is exhausting and expensive and I would love to get more work on outside projects.

What is your favourite joke or the best you've heard recently?

My favourite joke is by the late comedian Mitch Hedberg. "I'm sick of following my dreams. I'm just gonna ask where they're going and meet up with them later." His whole act was almost entirely one-line jokes. He was brilliant!

You can find Leila Ben Abdallah at her website Leilaben-abdallah.com or on Twitter @L_BenAbdallah.



A screenshot
from her series,
Eighty-Sixed