

Stand-up comedy in Saudi Arabia



Rehman Akhtar Yousif Taha

It shouldn't work, but it does



From left: Nitin Mirani, Omar Al-Kahily, Firas Alola, Rehman Akhtar, Yousif Taha, Baraa Abdullah, Imran Al-Aradi. — Photos by Abdullah Mohiuddin

By Amjad Parkar Saudi Gazette

JEDDAH — Stand-up comedy is a concept that just should not work in the generally conservative Gulf region.

Yet, slowly but surely a movement dedicated to making people laugh while remaining sensitive to cultural and traditional norms is gathering pace, especially here in Saudi Arabia.

I was fortunate enough to spend time with a group of these comedians from throughout the Gulf, including the Kingdom, not only to see them perform but exploring firsthand their motivations for getting into this art profession, how they develop their material and perhaps most importantly, how they tailor it to their unique audiences.

These young guys were brought together thanks to one man, Rehman Akhtar, who recently staged a two-night show in Dhahran that was critically acclaimed and had audiences literally rolling out of their seats with laughter.

Akhtar, a communications consultant at Saudi Aramco who was born in Pakistan before moving to the UK as a young child, has staged three of these events before and told Saudi Gazette that the amount of effort needed to put on a show of this scale was nothing short of Herculean.

He said: "How do I do it? I do it through a lot of teamwork, a lot of coordination with people and I sell them the dream. "I have a dream of connecting people through comedy. Really, that is a personal mission that I'm on."

When asked whether he has achieved his dream, he said the success of the shows proved that people could laugh with each other regardless of their backgrounds.

Akhtar said staging a show in Saudi Arabia needed much more work than holding a similar event in a Western country, particularly when it came to finding venues, getting the audience to the venue and getting the event authorized.

"Let's not forget that comedy is still not fully accepted out there, although it is becoming more acceptable. "If we want to organize these shows completely to Western standards, then we're going to lose before we've even started."

He said he probably would not organize a show on such a

scale again, although he still refused to completely rule it out.

"When I'm organizing a show, it completely takes over my life. "I'm a full-time employee of a company and I became a part-time father, husband and son (when I start organizing the show). "So that's why I feel a real sense of burden sometimes when I do such shows. "It's rather like being pregnant...not that I have been pregnant...but the moment that baby is born, all the pain disappears and it's pure pleasure. "That feeling of bringing joy to audiences is one clearly reciprocated by the performers themselves. Speaking to three of the comedians after the opening

night of Akhtar's show while they were enjoying some downtime before the second gig, including Dubai-based Indian Nitin Mirani, Saudi Firas Alola, and Bahraini Yousif Taha, there seemed to be a genuine sense of surprise at the positive reception they received.

Mirani, who has been performing since 2006 and launched his own business brands Komic Sutra (translated loosely as "the art of being a 'komic'") and more recently Laugh Your Assets Off, said: "I've been asked to perform in Saudi a couple of times before this, and I didn't get a chance. "Honestly, I was pleasantly surprised by how open-minded the audience was, how receptive they were."

Alola, one of two Saudis who performed at the show (the

other being Omar Al-Kahily, who was unavailable for interview) and participated in gigs in the UK, repeated Akhtar's point that the Kingdom was still warming up to the idea of what stand-up comedy is.

He said when developing material for Saudi audiences, comedians avoid "touchy" subjects like religion and politics as well as keeping crudity to a minimum.

Discussing the audience at his first gig in the Kingdom, he said: "They were a little bit cold at first. "We had to warm them up a lot, and we had to engage with them directly rather than just deliver a stand-up routine. "But, eventually they did warm up to us and they welcomed us and the rest of the show was a hit."



A talented stand-up comedian cracks a joke leaving the audience in splits.



The jam-packed hall proves that stand-up comedy is gaining momentum in the Kingdom.



Nitin Mirani Omar Al-Kahily Imran Al-Aradi Firas Alola Baraa Abdullah

He claimed that the Middle East and Saudi Arabia in general was a good learning ground for developing comedy routines, because if a comedian could make a sensitive audience laugh, he can make anyone laugh.

Mirani, who along with fellow performer Imran Al-Aradi were the only two of the seven artists who perform stand-up on a full-time basis, described having to leave his job for comedy as a "leap of faith".

Alola and Taha still work full-time, but the former said rather than seeing comedy as a side-hobby, he saw his job as "the job on the side" to pay the bills.

Taha said the countries where the artists are based also play a part.

"My dad said, 'Look, you do your job and have this on the side, but don't put your stable income on the line unless you really feel like you've reached that stage (where you can do it full-time)."

"But I think for me, and especially where I'm from and how things have been in the last couple of years (in Bahrain), I think (stand-up comedy) is not at that stage yet (in terms of popularity)."

You get the feeling that both Alola and Taha were just happy to have a chance to perform while maintaining a stable source of income, at least until there were opportunities to perform regularly.

Although the trio's families were initially skeptical about their devotion to comedy, especially coming from backgrounds where such a career is probably considered an unconventional choice, they eventually warmed to the idea of making people laugh for a living and have even seen their children perform.

Mirani said: "One of my opening jokes, and this is a true story; my mother says, 'Oh beta (son), what are you doing with your life? Your father is working in a bank, your brother is working in a bank and you're doing comedy? You know people are laughing at you?'"

"But it's nice to break the stereotype and one of the quotes that I go by, is that most of our lives we try to fit in, without maybe realizing that we were born to stand out."

Alola was quick at this point to jump in with a Chinese proverb of his own that he believed summed up his path to comedy: "Often a man meets his destiny on the path he takes to avoid it."

When asked where that phrase came from, he responded in a deadpan manner with, "Kung-Fu Panda."

Being a stand-up comedian also appears to have its perks, especially in the workplace.

As Taha explained: "It (comedy) works a lot in terms of work and stuff."

"They'll (his colleagues) always be like, 'Oh Yousif, you're good at making people laugh, you go into the meeting, you make sure the clients are happy.'"

Mirani added: "This is how blessed we are. We do a show, we get paid, and then people come and say, 'God bless you, I had a great time.' "That's a win-win situation and when it comes to women, of course, women love a man



One-man band Mark Bechtold gives a virtuoso performance with the help of volunteers from the show.



Performers enthrall the audience by dancing to Bollywood hits.



Bollywood dance troupe D-Company get the audience going.



The troupe all set for their energetic performances.

with a sense of humor."

Mirani, Taha and Alola all felt the market for stand-up comedy had the potential to become lucrative in the Middle-East due to increasing acceptance of the profession in the region and also thanks

to corporate organizations increasingly expressing an interest in hiring comedians for their events.

When asked what would be their ultimate gig, Taha replied: "It would be doing gigs across much bigger mar-

kets, bigger countries, places where you actually go and sell out shows in the UK, Europe, and in the US, with a bunch of comedians."

Alola said: "If I can actually come up with a 30-minute skit that a six-year-old and

a 60-year-old would receive with the same kind of fervor and enthusiasm and still get the same kind of laughs for as long as possible."

For Mirani, who has been in comedy for a lengthy amount of time, it was about expanding his brand by opening up Komic Sutra venues all over the world and providing a stage for new talents, as well as continuing to open for famous comedians such as Eddie Griffin.

At that point it was time to say goodbye to the three artists as they prepared for the closing show that night.

They, along with their fellow artists, were a hit with routines that felt fresh and refreshingly not crude at all.

However, Bahraini artists Imran Al-Aradi and Baraa Abdullah felt the audience took a longer time to warm up than guests at the previous night's show and offered their thoughts afterwards on why this happened, in the process revealing a lot about the dynamic between the comedians.

Al-Aradi said: "There was a massive difference between the audience last night and the audience today."

"But that's where the challenge lies. The comedian should know his audience, so this is where we adapt or change our material, to adapt to the audience that is in front of us."

Abdullah, a relative newcomer to stand-up, agreed with Al-Aradi, adding that it was a learning experience in terms of how to adapt to an audience that was not very receptive.

"Imran went there and what he did, he asked, 'How many Saudis do we have here? Do we have Pakistanis? Do we have Bahrainis?'"

"He worked his way out. It was a learning experience for me. I learned a lot from Imran and the other comedians."

Al-Aradi said the only information they had about the audience was that it would be a mixed crowd and he said that represented a challenge because there were so many different nationalities to engage with.

He said it would be easier to cater a show to an audience where there was just a group of Indians, for instance.

With such a mixed audience, on the other hand, it was important to improvise more and not stick to a certain routine, he said.

Abdullah said: "This will be my seventh show and I always thought that what we just needed was written material, to be sketchy like it's a play and go on stage, do your jokes and that's it."

"But apparently that's not true at all. You have your jokes, but you really need to engage with the audience."

He also said that delivering feedback during the show was extremely important, adding that he was telling the other artists what the audience was like and helping them to adapt their material accordingly.

Al-Aradi said the best way to engage with any audience was to have a routine that spoke about basic factors such as gender.

"Regardless of what nationality you are, you are either going to be married or you have married friends or at

least aware of the concept of marriage.

"And then that's when you start customizing your jokes. For example, my joke about arranged marriages and the Pakistani culture."

"It's making sure you have material that can be used in front of any nationality or any kind of audience."

Abdullah admitted to being nervous before the first night and laughingly admitted that it took a message from Al-Aradi to calm his nerves.

Al-Aradi said: "It's exactly like when someone enters a boxing ring and they're going to fight against a very strong opponent, so I loosened up (Abdullah's) shoulders and I said, 'Alright man, they're there to laugh, you're there to fight, make sure you win.'"

Abdullah said the feeling of performing had gotten him "addicted" and he wanted to continue to develop, while Al-Aradi said he was in the process of rebranding himself as a comedian online and also had a couple of acting jobs lined up.

One thing is for sure. On the basis of the talent and sensitivity displayed by these comedians, stand-up comedy in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf has a bright future.

Rehman Akhtar's tips on being a stand-up

- 1 It's ok to make gentle fun of cultural differences between people, but never focus too much on just one nationality or ethnic group. The aim is to leave people amused and entertained - not feeling victimized.
- 2 Enjoy yourself on stage and look like you want to be there. Enthusiasm and nervousness are equally contagious.
- 3 Don't tell the audience about a character. Show them by becoming that character. Ability to act and mimic accents is a huge advantage for a comedian.
- 4 When performing with other comedians, be respectful of the team requirements. No single artist is bigger than the group of comedians that make a show successful.
- 5 Practice makes perfect, so use all opportunities to get stage time. After a show, always ask for honest feedback from people you trust. Learn to accept constructive criticism as a path to continual improvement.