

# ONE ARAB. ONE JEW. MANY LAUGHS.

Eskilsen, Erik . Boston Globe ; Boston, Mass. [Boston, Mass]04 Aug 2002: L.3.

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

There is a saying among comedians that "tragedy plus time equals comedy." But an unlikely comedy duo - a Jewish rabbi and a Muslim Arab-American - cannot wait to bring comic relief to audiences touched by the year's tragic events. As Jews and Muslims battle fiercely in the Middle East - and Arab-Americans are scrutinized in the aftermath of Sept. 11 - Rabbi Bob Alper and Egyptian-born Ahmed Ahmed are touring with a show called "One Arab. One Jew. One Stage."

At their performances, Alper introduces Ahmed, and the two comedians perform separate sets. According to Alper, a new bit brings them together on stage for a comic finale. Although the show's content is not political, Alper says that audiences are delighted just to see a Jewish and an Arab comic appearing together.

In that effort, both comics draw heavily on personal experience - with similar results. Although self-deprecating, culture-conscious humor is central to the Jewish comic tradition, Alper sees parallels in Ahmed's material. "A lot of what Ahmed talks about is similar to the Jewish experience," he says. "Being first generation and being stereotyped by the larger community and being a minority - all those issues."

## FULL TEXT

### COMEDY

There is a saying among comedians that "tragedy plus time equals comedy." But an unlikely comedy duo - a Jewish rabbi and a Muslim Arab-American - cannot wait to bring comic relief to audiences touched by the year's tragic events. As Jews and Muslims battle fiercely in the Middle East - and Arab-Americans are scrutinized in the aftermath of Sept. 11 - Rabbi Bob Alper and Egyptian-born Ahmed Ahmed are touring with a show called "One Arab. One Jew. One Stage."

They will perform two Massachusetts shows - at the Lenox Town Hall today and Congregation B'nai Jacob in Longmeadow tomorrow.

Alper, a native of Providence, had been a practicing rabbi in Philadelphia before launching his comedy career in the late '80s. "I served congregations for 14 years, and I always used a lot of jokes and funny stories in my sermons," he says. "So basically I've had a total of 30 years of experience performing in front of a hostile audience." Alper still conducts high holiday services in Philadelphia, but since relocating with his wife to East Dorset, Vt., in 1990, he does comedy full time.

He calls himself "the only practicing clergyman doing stand-up comedy . . . intentionally."

Ahmed's comic pedigree is more traditional - or at least more secular. His family emigrated to the United States shortly after he was born, and he grew up in a predominantly Arab-American neighborhood in Riverside, Calif. Heading to LA at 19 to pursue acting, he landed a string of stereotypical Arab roles - "terrorists, cab drivers, sleazy princes, and stuff like that" - before turning to stand-up nine years ago.

After Sept. 11, he began receiving media attention as one of the few Arab comics on the circuit today. Alper caught Ahmed's act on the television show "The View" after the rabbi's West Coast publicist, Gia DelliGattia, came up with the idea for the tour.

At their performances, Alper introduces Ahmed, and the two comedians perform separate sets. According to Alper, a new bit brings them together on stage for a comic finale. Although the show's content is not political, Alper says that audiences are delighted just to see a Jewish and an Arab comic appearing together.

"It's an opportunity to laugh for a couple of hours - period," he says, "and, in particular, to laugh away tension and to be surprised. I think people are surprised when they see this pairing." Ahmed calls the show "a gesture of peace."

The tour venues - primarily synagogues - are a radical departure for the 32-year-old Ahmed, a regular at Hollywood's famed Comedy Store. "I was actually a little timid and scared to do the shows at first," he says. On stage, his main challenge is to adapt his routine to a more strait-laced crowd than he is used to.

"I don't curse. I don't do any edgy material. I don't get into politics. I try to do my material very delicately," he says.

He must also contend with the fact that synagogue audiences are not drinking alcohol. "You just have to get people to laugh under the circumstances," he adds.

In that effort, both comics draw heavily on personal experience - with similar results. Although self-deprecating, culture-conscious humor is central to the Jewish comic tradition, Alper sees parallels in Ahmed's material. "A lot of what Ahmed talks about is similar to the Jewish experience," he says. "Being first generation and being stereotyped by the larger community and being a minority - all those issues."

Ahmed concurs, sort of. "Jews and Muslims have more in common than any other religion ever, if you think about it," he says. "Both Jews and Muslims don't eat pork. We don't celebrate Christmas. We both use 'ccchhh' in our pronunciation. And we're both hairy creatures of God."

Ahmed also appreciates the urgency of presenting Arab-Muslim culture in a positive light. "I'm trying to humanize who I am and my culture through humor - not trying to make fun of it," he says. "It's all about delivery. It's all about the intention you're trying to get across. A lot of comedy is just heightened reality."

Alper sees Ahmed's routine as an opportunity for greater cross-cultural understanding, especially for Jews. "In the Yom Kippur prayer book, one of the sins we mention is xenophobia," he notes. "As a rabbi, I don't want Jews falling into the trap of stereotyping other people, of hating other people because they belong to a certain racial or religious group. And this is a way of presenting Jewish people with a Muslim Arab who is warm and affable and friendly and funny."

For Ahmed, the battle against Arab stereotypes is complicated by the very notion of an Arab comic. "I think we're missing more funny Arabs," he says. "Being Arab and being a comedian these days is a very new and fresh thing for people. I think people are still trying to get their hands around it and figure out if it's OK."

The Arab community may be the most perplexed of all, he adds. "They're the last to catch onto stuff. They're afraid of it. They don't think it's OK to talk about themselves. That's the job that the comedian has."

### Illustration

Caption: Comedians Bob Alper (left) and Ahmed Ahmed use their acts to help break stereotypes associated with Jews and Arabs.

## DETAILS

<b>Subject:</b>	Multiculturalism & pluralism; Arabs; Jews; Comedians
<b>Location:</b>	Massachusetts
<b>People:</b>	Alper, Bob Ahmed, Ahmed
<b>Publication title:</b>	Boston Globe; Boston, Mass.
<b>Pages:</b>	L.3
<b>Number of pages:</b>	0
<b>Publication year:</b>	2002
<b>Publication date:</b>	Aug 4, 2002
<b>Section:</b>	Arts / Entertainment
<b>Publisher:</b>	Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC
<b>Place of publication:</b>	Boston, Mass.
<b>Country of publication:</b>	United States, Boston, Mass.
<b>Publication subject:</b>	General Interest Periodicals--United States
<b>ISSN:</b>	07431791
<b>Source type:</b>	Newspapers
<b>Language of publication:</b>	English
<b>Document type:</b>	Feature
<b>ProQuest document ID:</b>	405474336
<b>Document URL:</b>	<a href="https://cobalt.champlain.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/one-arab-jew-many-laughs/docview/405474336/se-2?accountid=40345">https://cobalt.champlain.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/one-arab-jew-many-laughs/docview/405474336/se-2?accountid=40345</a>

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**Last updated:** 2017-11-10

**Database:** ProQuest Central

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