

Deseret News **BETA**

Muslim comics hope humor will lead to understanding

By Joseph Walker, Deseret News

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For comedian Dean Obeidallah, the "The Muslims Are Coming!" comedy tour is more than a gig.

It's a passion.

"This is the most important thing I've done in my life," Obeidallah said during a recent telephone interview. "This is the first tour I've ever done

where the objective is not to make money. How can it be about money when the shows are free? The idea here is to truly make a difference and to have some impact on this issue."

The issue to which Obeidallah refers is simple, and yet surprisingly complicated: understanding. Specifically he and his colleagues in comedy are trying to help Middle America understand Muslim-Americans a little better, and not be afraid of them — especially those who've never actually met one.

"There are a lot of people in America who have never actually met a Muslim," said Obeidallah, who is part Muslim and part Sicilian (which, he says, explains his fondness for the term "Muslim Mafia." "So lacking actual experience, they tend to believe what they hear. And what they hear is often inaccurate."

"The Muslims Are Coming" is an attempt to rectify that.

"The goal of the tour is to make people laugh," said Obeidallah, who along with Negin Farsad, is co-producer of the tour. "I believe that in real comedy we find truth, and in that truth we find a way to talk about real substantive issues that mean something to us. If people can learn something while we entertain them, then I think we may have accomplished something."

But still, a comedy tour for which the shows are free?

"Yeah, I know," Farsad agreed, chuckling. "That's kind of insane."



But it's an insanity born of shared passion.

"Before I started doing standup I was a public policy analyst," said Farsad, whose ancestry is Persian. "So this really fuses my two great passions: comedy and social justice."

The idea for the tour was born in 2008. Obeidallah and Farsad had worked together post-9/11 with producer Max Brooks ("It's like the ultimate joke set-up," Farsad said. "A Jew, an Arab and a Persian") on Comedy Central's "The Watch List," where she said she and Obeidallah sort of "came out of the closet" as Muslim comics.

"A few years after that we bumped into each other and commented that Islamaphobia was totally dying down, that it had been kind of a momentary thing," Farsad said. "But then with the election of Barack Obama and the Park51 controversy in Manhattan we saw this re-emergence of extreme Islamaphobia, and when we saw each other again we decided that we needed to do something about this with the only tools we have at our disposal: jokes."

"We felt we needed to meet people — American to American," Obeidallah said. "So we designed a tour that includes comedy shows and meeting people in the streets and talking, appealing to them as fellow Americans. And we didn't want people to have any reason not to come see us — that's why we felt it was important to offer the shows for free."

They worked hard to come up with the funding they would need to do the tour with free shows. Then they set up the tour with stops in cities all around America, performing to packed houses in the evening and then going out on the streets to meet people and talk to them about what it means to be Muslim in America. The tour is being filmed as a documentary that will hopefully be used to continue their work in cities to which they are unable to go.

The tour also features Kareem Omary and Aron Kader.

"For me, doing the stand-up shows is great, but even though we always do a Q&A thing at the end of the show, our ability to really connect with people in that forum is fleeting," Farsad said. "Besides, we don't get a lot of people who come to the shows who hate Muslims. I mean, if they hate Muslims, they're not going to come to a show featuring Muslims, you know?"

"But the man on the street thing is more interesting," she continued. "People speak candidly about stuff like how they have heard that mosques are just training camps for jihadists and stuff like that. This is an eye-opening experience. It isn't that people are hateful, they just have bad information."

That misinformation is what the "The Muslims Are Coming!" tour tries to correct — even in Salt Lake City.

"We are really excited to come to Utah and talk to the large Mormon population there," Obeidallah said. "I think we have a lot in common. In some ways Mormons have been misunderstood like Muslims."

"Coming to Utah was like my number one goal," Farsad said. "I think there's a lot of coalition building that could happen there. Like we could say, 'A lot of people think Mormons don't have

a great position on the gay community, but hey, neither do we! And you guys restrict drinking alcohol, but hey, so do we! Let's have a party and not drink caffeine drinks!"

"The Muslims Are Coming!" free comedy tour stops in Salt Lake City on Saturday, Oct. 8. The evening performance will be held at The Complex, Vertigo Room, 536 W. 100 South at 8 p.m. For more information call 801-251-6115.

And during the day they'll be out on the streets of Salt Lake somewhere, conducting man on the street interviews for their documentary and trying to clear up misconceptions about Muslims.

Passionately.