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Muslim American comics' tour and documentary

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Beware, America. The Muslims are coming, and they look and act suspiciously like you.

Negin Farsad, an Iranian American stand-up comic from California, wears eye-catching mini dresses, curses liberally and has awkward sex talks with her mother (though hers sound more like alien encounters. Actual quote: “You had intergender flesh relations without the security of external safety product?”).



Such conversations, painfully private in traditional Muslim societies, are public fodder for Farsad and three other Gen X and Gen Y Muslim comics with whom she traveled to the deep South this past summer.

The tour, which later extended to Western states and included other Muslim comics, will form the backbone of “The Muslims Are Coming!,” a documentary film about Islamophobia in America that Farsad is working on with Palestinian Italian American comedian Dean Obeidallah.

The documentary, which includes interviews with comics such as Jon Stewart and Louis Black and commentators including CNN’s Soledad O’Brien, explores freedom of religion and what it means to be a minority in America.

Muslim American stand-up comedy is a relatively new phenomenon, the domain of second-generation immigrants who are American enough to satirize the Muslim American experience, said Obeidallah, who lives in New York City.

“We’re confident enough to do this,” he said. “An immigrant would be less confident to use comedy to try to challenge perceptions of who we are. We’re confident enough in being Americans and knowing what that means, that we can push against those who are exhibiting behavior which is less than consistent with the values of this nation.”

A major factor driving Muslim Americans toward comedy was the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. “There were no Middle Eastern comics before 9/11 that anyone knew about,” Obeidallah said. “The phenomenon really grew in the last 10 years, because of the [anti-

Muslim] backlash. I think a lot of people in our community started doing it as a form of political activism.” As they started appearing on national television, he said, “it spurred other Middle Eastern comedians to get involved.” Now, he said, there are about 10 full-time professionals and a growing number of aspiring professionals.

Going to the South, where anti-mosque demonstrations and anti-immigrant sentiment has made some Muslims feel unwelcome, the comedians hoped to break through some of the cultural walls that have arisen since Sept. 11.

The point was to see “how would people in the heartland take to us?” Obeidallah said. “Would we encounter angry people going, ‘Get out of here, you Muslims,’ or would they understand?”

Traveling through Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and Tennessee, they gave free performances in cafes, community centers and theaters. They set up tables in public places, with scripture-related guessing games and the opportunity for people to “Ask a Muslim” anything they wanted.

“I could kind of like Muslims, but why do you guys like terrorism so much?” some asked. “What do you think of 9/11?” was another common question.

On the whole, the public response was encouraging. While a few people drove by and yelled, “Go back to your country!” the one-on-one encounters tended to be positive.

“Most people are more open-minded and not that concerned about Muslims,” Obeidallah said. “It’s really the fringe that’s driving that narrative.”

Maysoon Zayid, one of the comics on the tour, said people were surprised to see that “I’m such a Jersey girl, I’m so accessible. . . . I think they are really surprised that I wasn’t this oppressed woman trying to convert people.”

The comedians acknowledged that they were unlikely to win the hearts of the most fervent anti-Muslim types.

“A show called ‘The Muslims Are Coming’ — people self-select to come see it,” Farsad said. “We’re never going to be able to touch the extreme haters. . . . We’re trying to affect the people in the middle, people with questions, the ‘persuadables.’ ”