

STAGE NEWS

Arab-American Comics Offer Take on 9/11

When Things Get Seriously Funny

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By Lewis Beale

Dean Obeidallah was just an average American standup comedian, the kind who talks about car problems and relationships -- then 9/11 occurred. That's when Obeidallah, a New Jersey native whose father is Palestinian, began to incorporate Arab-American identity issues into his act.

"My evolution had a lot to do with my concern about my family," says Obeidallah, whose one-man show, *I Come In Peace*, runs Sept. 3-7 at the 45th Street Theatre. "You read about the anti-Arab backlash, and I became concerned. I wanted to show people a different side of Arabs than what they were seeing in the media. My show is a show about my personal journey from being a white guy to identifying as an Arab-American. But it's also about the struggles Muslim Americans have faced post-9/11."

I Come In Peace appears on a double bill with *Bootleg Islam*, writer Negin Farsad's comedy about a California-raised Iranian-American who learns about Islamic repression when she goes to Iran for a cousin's wedding. Not surprisingly, Farsad's comedic evolution is similar to Obeidallah's.

"After 9/11, I started coming into my own skin about being Middle Eastern and Iranian, and being privy to some intolerant views about Middle Easterners," says Farsad. "I began thinking I'm a comedian and don't write about this stuff, and I thought it would be a good time to tell stories about Iranians who aren't talking about war, and aren't angry."

Despite these feelings, neither Farsad nor Obeidallah has had particularly bad personal experiences in the post-9/11 world.

"I look like a pretty generic white guy," says Obeidallah, whose mother is Italian. "I don't have to raise the issue if I don't want to."

Adds Farsad: "I have it slightly easier than my brother and dad, who look more Middle Eastern than I do. I'm culturally Muslim, but don't cover myself, I drink wine. I'm definitely an average American."

Which is one reason why their shows have been well-received by American audiences. (Obeidallah's had a sold-out run at the recent New York International Fringe Festival).

"As a comic, I've never had a problem [with U.S. audiences] because I write from an American point of view," says Obeidallah. "A lot of the humor comes from my shock at seeing how people can perceive me and my family."

Says Farsad, whose show includes a riff on *The Golden Girls* - if they were Iranian - "I use a lot of American references to explain what's going on in Iran. It really helps ground things for people when you bring it down to the American pop cultural level."

No matter how different they might appear in subject matter, however, *Bootleg Islam* and *I Come In Peace* have similar objectives in mind. "For me, 9/11 was the biggest event that's changed my life," says Obeidallah. "I fear the anniversary could rekindle the fear that all Arab-Americans are terrorists, but even if not, this show is about defining ourselves in a positive way."

Farsad concurs. "We need to come in with some really good vibes leading up to 9/11," she notes. "We need to balance those feelings of extreme patriotism that sometimes get distorted into extreme sentiments."

Bootleg Islam and *I Come in Peace* will be at the 45th Street Theatre, 354 W. 45th St. (Between Eighth and Ninth Avenues), from Sunday, Sept. 3-Thursday, Sept. 7. Call 800-838-3006