



WEEKEND ENTERTAINMENT

THEATER

'Bootleg Islam' unveiled

Negin Farsad's one-woman comedy is based on her travels to visit family in Iran

By **Nina Metz**
Special to the Tribune

"Saturday Night Live" was recently criticized for its over-reliance on pop culture material. Too much Britney Spears, not enough politics.

The same cannot be said of the fourth annual Sketchfest, which wraps up a two-week run Sunday evening with the provocatively titled "Bootleg Islam." The one-woman show is from writer-performer Negin Farsad, a 28-year-old Iranian-American whose comedy is based on her travels to Iran.

Born in the United States and raised in Palm Springs, Farsad found herself straddling an uncertain divide during her youth. "I had to live this ridiculous double life," she explained recently in a phone interview from her home in New York. She was referring to the competing influences of her immigrant parents and her American surroundings.

There were frequent trips over the years to visit family in Tehran, but it wasn't until an extended stay in 1999 for a cousin's wedding that she found inspiration for "Bootleg Islam," which first premiered as part of the 2004 Fringe Fest in New York.

With a sharp, Janeane Garofalo wit, Farsad offers a different view of a culture burdened by stereotypes for more than two decades.

"All you see on CNN are these dirty people wandering the streets with rifles, these barely bathed Muslims. That's not an accurate picture at all — Iranians are very educated, and many of



As a child, Iranian-American Negin Farsad felt she was living a double life.

the women are professionals. My cousin is an architect."

Mistaken impressions aside, the Bush administration has labeled Iran as part of the "axis of evil."

Farsad said her childhood impressions of life in Iran were along the lines of, "This is so weird and cool. Yeah, bust out that chador." But as an adult, she said, "I felt the gap between me and my cousin who was getting married. There she was, 23 and a virgin. And then there was me, saying things like, 'Yeah, I got wasted last week and totally [had sex] with this dude.'"

And as she explains in the show, if you're in need of a headscarf-compliant outfit, the scarf department at Macy's isn't going to cut it: "I settled on a navy blue bedsheet from the Martha

Stewart Collection at Kmart. I figured the Muslim clerics wouldn't mind 120-thread count."

Other family members in Tehran figure prominently in the show, including an uncle who invites her over one night for a round of drinks made from bathtub gin — technically, the consumption of alcohol is illegal in Iran though it often happens behind closed doors — and a "closeted-yet-overtly-gay-wedding-planner-cousin."

Perhaps not surprisingly, Farsad's show has had some detractors.

The show's Web site has crashed on a number of occasions. "I've been getting these crazy viruses that are coming from the United Arab Emirates."

And then there are the radio interviews, one for BBC World Service that aired in Iran not too long ago.

"They were, in my opinion, relatively innocuous interviews. The show is implicitly critical of the Islamic Republic [of Iran], but it's not focused on that."

But afterward, Farsad received worried calls from her relatives. "They were like, 'You basically can't ever come back until there's a regime change.' The ministry monitors these broadcasts for names, so I guess I'm on some list for immediate arrest if I ever show up in Iran."

"I mean, come on," she said. "It's a comedy." "Bootleg Islam," 5:30 p.m. Saturday at the Theatre Building Chicago, 1225 W. Belmont Ave. Tickets, \$12; 773-327-5252.