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Romancing The Conflict

Sending up the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

In Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta, "The Yeoman of the Guard," the jester Jack Point sings, "I can trick you into learning with a laugh. ... Unpleasant truths are swallowed with a will. For he who'd make his fellow, fellow, fellow creatures wise, should always gild the philosophic pill!"

The comedy duo of Alex Zarben and Negin Farsad has certainly taken his advice to heart. Their newest work, "The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: A Romantic Comedy," directed by Bob Wiltfong, sends up the dispute through a series of sketches about key moments in Israeli-Palestinian relations. Gaby Alter provides the original music.

Zarben grew up in Port Washington, L.I., in a family that was very involved in Judaism. His mother, Jane Breskin Zarben, writes Jewish-themed children's books like "Let There Be Light" and "Baby Babka, the Gorgeous Genius." Zarben went on to study acting at Cornell, where he became involved with the university's sketch comedy group. Among the other group members was Negin Farsad, a Persian woman who became his long-term writing and acting partner.

Time Out New York last year said that Madame Funnypants, as Zarben and Farsad call themselves, "dodges the traditional perils of sketch to create scenes that are as unconventional and inventive as anything else you'll see on the local scene, but with the added bonus of actually being funny."

The play takes the characters of Daniel (Zalben) and Suha (Farsad) from the founding of the Jewish State in 1948 through the Oslo Accords in 1993. Each character is meant to personify his or her people. They have a one-night stand after they share a booth at the Geneva Convention, imagined as a trade show. But their romance turns sour when Israel gets statehood, and it deteriorates further in 1967 when the two characters, turned into rappers, battle it out in verse. Another scene shows Daniel as a kind of Frank Sinatra appearing before the Knesset to pitch for occupying more land.

"Audiences are more willing to accept an idea if cloaked in comedy," Zarben told The Jewish Week. He views sketch comedy as inherently subversive, in that "a really simple, funny idea can sneak into people's consciousness. We can say something incendiary but follow it up with jokes. This makes it more palatable for the audience."

Jack Point would be proud.



Love and politics: Alex Zarben and Negin Farsad star in "The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: A Romantic Comedy."

"The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict" runs every Friday at 8 p.m. at the People's Improv (154 W. 29th St.) from Sept. 16-Oct. 14. For tickets, \$8, call Brown Paper Tickets at (800) 838-3006.