



ARTS & CULTURE

Palestinian American Performer Heals with Humor

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Palestinian American Amer Zahr wants to heal people through humor.

In 2015 he started bringing other Arab American comedians from the United States to perform across Palestinian cities including Nablus, Bethlehem and Ramallah.

Seven years later, Zahr's Palestine Comedy Festival is still going strong.

After the most recent performances in Jerusalem, he told the Reuters news agency, "Laughter is **therapy**...We need to show the world that Palestinians love to laugh, we love life, we love art."

Zahr and a group of seven other comedians performed at the city's Dar al-Tifel al-Arabi school. It was established by a Palestinian educator in 1948.

All the event's tickets were sold, said organizer Hani Kashou.

The jokes covered many subjects. Some jokes were about being questioned by Israeli border guards; some jokes were about Arabic language mistakes made by people growing up with Palestinian and American identities.

Bilal Sharmoug, who closed the show, had a joke about the reason he was big. Growing up, Sharmoug said, he mixed up the Arabic word for "bon appetite," which is sahtein, with sahnein, meaning "two plates".

Other jokes made fun of **stereotypes** of Arab traditions.

Comedian Reema Jallaq, for example, talked about being a "shibsheb survivor." This term refers to a method of punishing children by throwing **slippers** at them. When she heard the joke, Mei al-Bakri, age 14, said she laughed very hard.

"That was my favorite joke," she said as she stood beside her mother.

Seventy-year-old Nihaya Ghoul Awdallah is from Jerusalem. She said: "It was a great show... We thank them so much for bringing a beautiful smile to our faces and for allowing us to release our worries, our sadness and the difficult **circumstances** that we are in."

The comedy festival's first year included Egyptian American actor Ramy Youssef and Palestinian American comedian Mo Amer.

This year, all seven comedians were Palestinian.

Zahr divides his time between Nazareth and Dearborn, Michigan. He said: "We bring Palestinian and Arab Americans here to show that our people in America have not forgotten where we're from."

Zahr performed all five of this year's shows wearing a black T-shirt that had the word "press" on it. The shirt was a **tribute** to Palestinian American reporter Shireen Abu Akleh. She was killed during an Israeli raid in the West Bank in May.

"If she was here, she'd be laughing too," he said. "Comedy comes from **tragedy**. The pain and the suffering are exactly why we do this festival."

I'm John Russell.

Henriette Chacar reported on this story for Reuters. John Russell adapted it for VOA Learning English.

Words in This Story

therapy – *n.* the treatment of physical or mental illnesses

stereotype – *n.* an often unfair belief that many people have about all people or things with a particular characteristic

slippers – *n. (pl.)* a light, soft shoe usually worn inside

circumstances – *n. (pl.)* the conditions in which someone lives; the way something happens : the specific details of an event

tribute – *n.* something that you say, give, or do to show respect or affection for someone

tragedy – *n.* a very bad event that causes great sadness and often involves someone's death
