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Arabian Knights

Four comics of Middle Eastern lineage come to Improv

By **La Rue V. Baber**
Staff Writer

COMEDY PREVIEW

What: Arabian Knights
When: 8:30 p.m. Wednesday
Where: Improv, 4555 Mills Circle, Ontario
Tickets: \$15
Information: (909) 484-5411

"What's so important about this show is information is put out there in a very funny way. You get them to laugh and then you slip them the truth: I've seen it move people. I've seen it inform people."

— **Sam Tripoli**
comic

The Arabian Knights are changing people's views, one comedy club crowd at a time. Maz Jobrani, Sam Tripoli, Ahmed Ahmed and Aron Kader formed Arabian Knights three years ago thanks to the vision of Mitzy Shore, owner of the Los Angeles Comedy Store where they perform on a regular basis.

"(Mitzy) did it as a gesture of peace. She had an epiphany that there was going to be a war between America and the Middle East. She said, 'God told me and when it happens Arabs are going to be even more misrepresented.' We all got chills up our spines. But she was right," Ahmed, 33, said by phone during a recent interview.

It's an understatement to say that being a Middle Eastern American isn't easy in today's turbulent times of war and hatred. But these guys aren't afraid to speak their minds and let humor bridge the gaps of prejudice, misunderstanding and anger.

"Our show allows us to show a side of American Middle Eastern upbringing and culture that our society isn't used to," said Ahmed, who was born in Egypt and brought to the states by his father when he was 1 month old.

"What's so important about this show is information is put out there in a very funny way. You get them to laugh and then you slip them the truth," the Armenian-Sicilian Tripoli, 30, said by phone. "I've seen it move people. I've seen it inform people."

And they've seen it lift the spirits of Middle Eastern Americans who are used to being the brunt of many comedians' jokes.

"I think the Arab community sees this as their show, whereas they get beat up enough on stage by other comedians. They kinda don't want to hear it. They want us to voice their opinions," Tripoli said.

"There's a Middle Eastern American audience out there of people like me who've grown up here, who are American, who listen to hip hop or whatever. And there was nobody to fill that void for them," said Jobrani, who was born in Iran and moved to the U.S. when he was 6.

That is, until the Arabian Knights formed.

But, Jobrani quickly added that the show is not just for Middle Eastern Americans. People of all ethnic backgrounds can appreciate their jests about life, family, love and growing up an American.

With such great success in Los Angeles, the Arabian Knights began touring the nation this year. Now they're packing clubs in New York, Washington, D.C., and most recently Irvine.

They've had some difficulty booking other states, though.

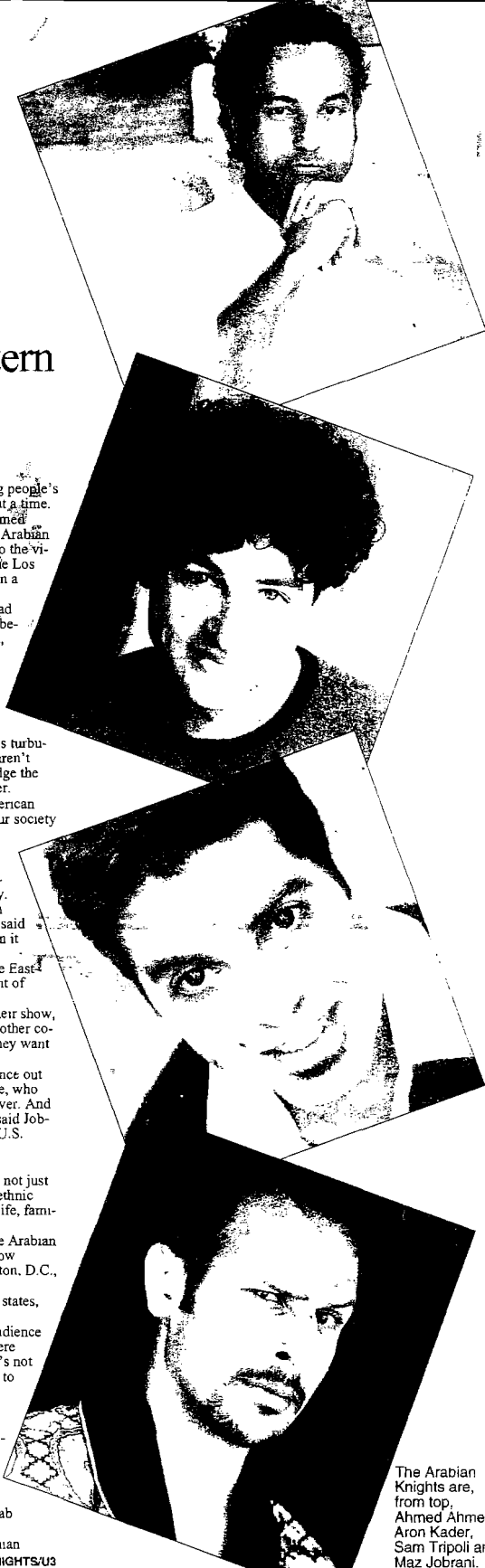
"Club owners don't know that there's an audience for it. It's probably like what black comics were going through when they were breaking in. It's not so much racism, but more like, 'Who's going to come see you?'" said Jobrani, who played Moly, the doughnut store owner, in "Friday After Next."

Right after 9-11, the four had the most difficult booking gigs. Some even changed their stand-up routines.

"After 9-11, I literally was really afraid to do my act," Kader, 30, said. "For almost a week, I just didn't mention that I was an Arab and I tried to do other jokes."

Kader, who grew up in Utah with a Palestinian

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The Arabian Knights are, from top, Ahmed Ahmed, Aron Kader, Sam Tripoli and Maz Jobrani.

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father and Mormon mother, said he lost a little confidence while trying to do other jokes. So he quit hiding and whipped out his best Arab jokes at his next gig and it worked. People needed the comic relief and they appreciated his viewpoints, he said.

Tripoli experienced different feelings after 9-11.

"The four of us weren't getting a lot of spots at a lot of the clubs (after 9-11). People didn't want to put us on stage," Tripoli said. "But I felt that was the time to be on the stage the most."

With unfailing perseverance, the Arabian Knights continue to

help others to see that being of Middle Eastern descent doesn't make them evil.

"What I'm doing, I feel, is to say look at me, I'm not offensive, I'm not rude. I'm not angry all the time. I'm just an American guy who happens to be Arab," 29-year-old Kader, the most political of the four, said. "Hey, we're not all immigrants. We're Americans just like you. And, we have political opinions about it."

Ahmed said he was going to do something else besides stand-up comedy to help distill people's views of Middle Eastern Americans.

"I'm trying to break down stereotypes," Ahmed explained. "In order to do that, I've decided to do a reality show titled 'Middle Eastern Eye for the Midwestern Guy,'" he joked.

Jobrani said, "We'd like for people to come see the show, laugh and then as they're leaving, subconsciously go, 'Wait a minute, that guy was a Middle Eastern American and he was funny. They're not all bad.'"

The four comedians will perform at the Ontario Improv Wednesday for one night only. They each will spend between 20 and 30 minutes with the audience.

All four live in the Los Angeles area and pursue acting and comedy. Tripoli, who got into comedy about nine years ago, has his own Comedy Central Premium Blend show coming on Jan. 23.

Jobrani, who performed at his first paid comedy gig in a side room of a strip club without a microphone, said he'd love to

play a doctor or cop role with his regular American accent and not play a stereotypical angry Middle Eastern/terrorist.

Aside from auditioning for TV and movie roles, Ahmed said he'd like to someday perform live on the Gaza strip.

"I want to take comedy right into the heart of where it's all going down," he said.

Kader, who does a lot of voices and impressions and likes to make fun of George Bush, said he's trying to audition for everything: movies, TV shows, comedies and dramas.

"Hopefully Doritos will hire me to be the next spokesman ... so I can make some money and buy a pool," Kader joked.

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