

Fear and Laughing in the Occupied Territories:

Comedienne Maysoon Zayid Transforms Lives

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A young woman takes a seat before the microphone, flicks her hair, and surveys her audience. Shaking slightly, she introduces herself, "My name is Maysoon Zayid and I'm a Palestinian Muslim virgin with cerebral palsy from New Jersey... and if you don't feel better about yourself, maybe you should!" The crowd roars. Maysoon Zayid certainly ticks all the minority boxes in both the Arab and American worlds. She seems to derive strength from these apparent weaknesses, however, and successfully incorporates them into her career as one of the best Arab-American stand-up comedians. At a time when so many of her Arab-American cousins are trying hard to be taken seriously, perhaps Maysoon's willingness to ridicule her identity is what makes her so successful. Her jokes are sometimes shocking, often outrageously rude, and full of foul language. A particularly memorable anecdote describes Maysoon's experience of meeting the late PLO leader, Yasser Arafat, who suffered from Parkinson's, which meant he shook continuously. Maysoon's cerebral palsy means she, too, shakes, which some of her audience members have wrongly assumed is induced by drunkenness. As Arafat and Maysoon shook hands, they both trembled so much that they unintentionally started belly dancing. They never succeeded in shaking hands, although Arafat did manage to lick Maysoon's face.

Maysoon was born in the 1970s to Palestinian immigrants and raised in Cliffside Park, New Jersey. Original aspirations to become an actress led her to obtain a Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) in acting

from Arizona State University and to cameos in television shows like *Law & Order* and *As the World Turns*, but it soon became clear that she didn't fit the mold. She turned to comedy, giving free performances throughout New York City. She quickly began receiving positive coverage on the comedy scene.

Following the September 11th attacks in New York, negative images of Arabs abounded in the American media. Some of Maysoon's non-Arab friends asked if she had known the attacks were going to happen, while others stopped talking to her. Her sister, a UN employee, even received death threats. In response to the experiences of Arab-Americans, Maysoon co-founded and co-produced the New York Arab American Comedy Festival, which may be considered a creative form of political activism. The annual festival features Arab and Iranian comedians, whose stand-up act addresses prevalent stereotypes of both Americans and Middle Easterners and brings some much-needed positivity to the beleaguered Arab-American community.

One stereotype Maysoon dismantles is the image of the repressed, veiled Arab woman. "I feel it's a sense of duty - one of the motivations for my comedy is to bring a human face to Arab Muslim women", says Maysoon.¹ It seems laughter is more powerful than fear, for the festival continues to sell out each year, attracting an ethnically-mixed crowd. Maysoon was even told by an American member of the audience that he was surprised to encounter a Muslim woman he would consider sleeping with.

“I think that was supposed to be a compliment”,² Maysoon concludes with her trademark optimism, choosing to ignore the racism and sexism of the remark.

Maysoon’s activism stretches across the globe to Palestine, where she spent several summer vacations as a child. She was the first comedian ever to perform standup in Palestine, with performances in Ramallah, Jerusalem, Nazareth, Bethlehem, and Haifa. A graduate of the Hala Salaam Maksoud Foundation for Arab-American Leadership, she founded Maysoon’s Kids (website: <http://www.maysoon.com>) in April 2001, during the second Intifada, to assist the growing population of disabled children in the West Bank. Maysoon spends three months a year in Palestine, traveling between eleven refugee camps³ to run an art program for disabled, wounded, and at risk refugee children. The program benefits the local economy, as orphans are provided with Palestinian-made toys, shoes, diapers, and underwear. The program also supplies disabled and wounded refugee children with eye exams, glasses, computers, and prescription medicine. Maysoon’s Kids is expanding rapidly. Four former Maysoon kids currently receive full scholarships to Bethlehem University, and two more will be paid for in 2008. Funding for Maysoon’s Kids is raised partly through her comedy tours and partly from fundraising and donations on her website.

Maysoon has recently begun promoting education by providing tutors to enable Palestinian seniors to graduate from high school and find families to sponsor their college education in America. A natural consequence of such scholarships will be to humanize the Palestinian people in the eyes

of Americans and, hopefully, lead to a better understanding of the conflict, of which media coverage is so biased. Maysoon’s Kids also provided cooked meals to 90 needy families throughout Ramadan in 2007, lunch and milk for children at the centers, an occupational and play therapy room in Jelazon and, in collaboration with Playgrounds for Palestine, a playground in Silwad.

When I asked her whether her comedy might be seen as a way of bridging the gap between Americans and Arab-Americans, Maysoon replied: “No, I think of it as a way to put shoes on kids’ feet. I love doing stand-up, but my main goal is more about humanising than bridging” (M. Zayid, personal communication, August 23, 2007).

What is the secret of Maysoon’s success and her large Arab and Arab-American following? “Comedy is misery plus timing”,⁴ according to Maysoon. Her audience seems to be growing continuously, as is reflected by coverage on Al-Jazeera’s *Everywoman* program, ABC’s *20/20*, features on Comedy Central’s *The Watch List*, and in the upcoming Adam Sandler movie, *You Don’t Mess With Zohan*. She has also been hard at work in Los Angeles on her own feature film, *Little American Whore*, set to be produced by Kathy Najimy in 2008.

Maysoon is a testament to the strength and ability of disabled Arab women. Her humanitarian work and comedy are not only changing lives, but also opinions.

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ENDNOTES

1. Check Maysoon Zaid - Everywoman. Available at: <http://youtube.com/watch?v=uRPPoG66WE&feature=related>
2. ‘Check Maysoon Zaid: Standing up to Muslim Stereotypes’, MTV, Available at: http://www.mtv.com/news/september_11/stories/profile_maysoon.jhtml
3. The refugee camps are: Dheisha, Askar Ijdeed, Amiree, Kalandia, Jalazon, Silwad, Deir Ammar, Deir Abu Misheil, Khalil, Abu Deis and Lid.
4. Check Maysoon Zaid- ‘Finding Comedy in Ramallah’, BBC, Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/programmes/outlook/news/story/2007/06/070628_zaid_palestinianterritories.shtml