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Many have mistaken David Merheje for a Jew. Many have mistaken Phil Shuchat for an Arab. Frankly, you really can't tell these players apart without a program. And that is essentially the point to Fun-da-Mental Differences: Middle Eastern Comedy Night, in which Arab and Jewish wits will attempt to prove that humour can't hurt in trying to establish common ground.

Merheje and Shuchat, along with Wafik Nasralla, Rasul Somji and Ryan Wilner, will take to the stage Nov. 15 at the Comedy Nest to fire their best shots, and the only casualties should be the result of split guts among the over-giggled in the audience. The evening is a benefit for the Montreal Dialogue Group, an apolitical association bringing Canadians of Palestinian, Israeli, Arab, Muslim, Christian and Jewish backgrounds together in dialogue.

Merheje, 26, was born in Toronto and is of Lebanese-Christian roots. Shuchat, 43, was born in Montreal and is Jewish. Merheje, with Nasralla and Somji, made his mark recently with the satirical revue We Ain't Terrorists. Shuchat hopes to make his mark in the coming revue We Ain't All Just Landlords.

Merheje - who when not performing We Ain't Terrorists has a Jewish comedy partner - believes Shuchat is on to something groundbreaking and brilliant with his revue. Shuchat, who often works in tandem with Nasralla in clubs across Canada, volunteers his services for the next We Ain't Terrorists show. "But God help me if I should bomb," quips Shuchat, whose uncle is a rabbi.

And let the games begin.

Lesley Levy of the Montreal Dialogue Group soaks up the repartee between Merheje and Shuchat, then elaborates on the genesis of Fun-da-Mental Differences.

"After the war in Lebanon, our group felt that the Jewish and Arab communities were more divided than ever and that the level of anti-Jewish and anti-Arab feelings in the country were more elevated than ever. Our mission is build bridges, not walls. What better way to do so than by making people laugh."

Merheje notes that it's only when he identifies himself as Arab-Canadian that people get on edge. "Most assume that I'm Jewish. But when I tell them my background, some start

looking at me strangely, mostly in non-Jewish, rural areas. I played in Kansas after 9/11. I was so naive. I went out and announced to the crowd: 'Is this the end of the world, seeing a Middle Eastern guy doing comedy in Kansas? What's next? NASCAR?' There was stone silence."

Ironically, the only time Merheje really got hassled over his nationality was by an Arab-American border guard. "He actually seized my joke book and started scrutinizing it."

"Yup," interjects Shuchat. "And now he's touring the land with (Merheje's) material."

Much of Merheje's act springs from his Lebanese-born dad. "He's lived in Toronto 40 years, has been very successful in business and still can't speak English. He keeps calling HIV, VHS."

The chrome-domed Shuchat states that his Arab girlfriend recently dumped him. "Her parents insisted that she have an arranged marriage," he says. "I told her my parents are Jewish, that they would arrange everything, but she wasn't biting."

"I guess I'm a crappy Jew," he adds. "My uncle (the rabbi) even sent me back my foreskin."

"Don't feel bad," counters Merheje. "I'm a crappy Arab. I play hockey and cheer for the Leafs."

"You what!?" hollers Shuchat, a Habs fan. "The real hostility in this country is not between Jews and Arabs or anyone else. It's between Habs and Leafs fans."

In an attempt to keep this exchange from breaking out into a full-blown hockey riot, mediator Levy tries to inject some levity: "This Israeli guy arrives in L.A. The customs official asks: 'Occupation?' To which the Israeli replies: 'No, just visiting.' "

Everyone's a comedian.

Fun-da-Mental Differences, Nov. 15 at 8 p.m. at the Comedy Nest, 2313 Ste. Catherine St. W., 3rd floor. Tickets: \$35 and \$100. Proceeds benefit the Montreal Dialogue Group. Call 514-790-1245.

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