

# The Link

Published by Americans for  
Middle East Understanding, Inc.

Volume 45, Issue 1

Link Archives: [www.ameu.org](http://www.ameu.org)

January-March, 2012

***There is only one thing that makes a dream impossible to achieve: the fear of failure.***

**— Paulo Coelho, "The Alchemist"**

## Mirror, Mirror

By Maysoon Zayid

**M**y name is Maysoon Zayid. I am a Palestinian-American, comedian, actress, writer and producer.

When *The Link* asked me to write an article, I was excited to be in such a great publication. When they told me the topic, my excitement turned to dread. They wanted the article to be about me and by me. All I could think was, "How do I do this without sounding egomaniacal – and in less than 400 pages?"

The following is my story in three chapters! Please keep in mind I am a comedian first, foremost, and for life. Some facts have been changed to protect the innocent.

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—Photo by Leesa Brown

Maysoon Zayid on Countdown with Keith Olbermann.

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## About This Issue

Deheishe, on the outskirts of Bethlehem, is a refugee camp. The children here, as elsewhere on the West Bank, grow up under the longest military occupation in modern-day history.

Maysoon Zayid knows these children. And through her nonprofit organization, Maysoon's Kids, she knows how to help them.

The best medicine, it seems, is still laughter. In a 2009 interview with the Guardian of London, she noted: "These children are so strangled here. With comedy they can take the pain and channel it, get it off their chests."

In that same interview, Maysoon recalled asking one particularly troubled teenager, who had just gotten out of an Israeli jail, to tell the class about the worst memories of his time inside. Soon the boy was talking about the bad prison food, the awful smells, even the worst cellmates. Then something happened. Through a combination of comic timing and skillful storytelling his routine came together, and an evolution occurred. This "prison-skinny" boy went from fear, to bonding with the audience, to getting more open.

"That's what standup is," says the comedienne from Cliffside, N.J. "It humanizes you."

Somewhere in the pages that follow, Maysoon Zayid will tell us that she hates kids.

Don't believe her.

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One of Geoff Simons's most prized possessions was his library of over 5,000 volumes, representing just about every literary genre there is. When he was diagnosed with cancer a few years ago, he decided to write a book about his "intimate friends"

which, aptly, he called "Book." Only a few copies were printed, and the one he sent me from his home in England now occupies a proud spot in my home's far from imposing bookshelf.

More than 50 of the 5,000 books were ones Geoff himself had authored. Several of these have been adopted for university and college courses, and several have been translated into a dozen or so languages. He also penned hundreds of articles and reviews for the general and technical press, including three feature articles for *The Link*.

We talked often on the phone, although we never met. Next time you're in London, he'd say, we'll go to the pub and down a pint or two. It never happened.

So, when I received the news from his wife that my friend had died, I went to my bookshelf, took down "Book," proceeded to the fridge for a bottle of beer, and for the best part of the afternoon, I reacquainted myself with his cherished assemblage of friends.

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Due to AMEU's own limited shelf space, we are offering, on page 14, at substantially reduced prices, a number of books from our own research library.

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Finally, we invite our readers to visit our recently redesigned website: [www.ameu.org](http://www.ameu.org). Our initial website 15 years ago was an amateur creation of Bob Norberg. The professional redesign was done by another Norberg volunteer, Bob's son Jeff, who has assumed all site maintenance responsibilities. Among the features you will find on the site, in an easy-to-download format, are Maysoon Zayid's article, Geoff Simons's three articles, and, indeed, all of our articles going back to 1968.

**John F. Mahoney**  
 Executive Director

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(Continued from Page 1.)

## Survival of the Un-fittest

I was born on Labor Day. At the exact same time that my mom was going into labor, her doctor was getting drunk as a skunk at a picnic. Dr. R. had delivered all three of my sisters and apparently they had just slid out for him. He figured he could roll up completely wasted, deliver me, and be back in time for the ice cream. I came out fist first. Dr. Drunky panicked, and proceeded to display his homage to Jack the Ripper. He cut my mom six different times in six different directions. The first cut gave me my first breath, but I was still stuck. I couldn't take my next breath for another 3 minutes. Three. Full. Minutes.

Cerebral Palsy is not genetic. It's not a birth defect. You can't catch it. No one put a curse on my mother's uterus, and I didn't get it because my parents are first cousins, which they are. It only happens from accidents like what happened to me on that September 7th at Englewood hospital in NJ.

Cliffside Park, NJ is my hometown. I was raised there and I plan to be buried there. It's like Little House on the Prairie meets The Sopranos. It's one tiny square mile, predominantly blue collar Italian Catholic, and located 2.2 miles from Times Square NYC. Our claim to fame is that the George Washington Bridge, which connects Manhattan to Mainland USA, lets out in our town.

Growing up, there were only six Arabs in Cliffside, and they were all my family. Now, there are 20 Arabs in town, and they're still all my family. I don't think anyone ever noticed that we weren't Italian. (Note to reader: I look Italian.)

The America I grew up in most definitely had racism but not in my small town. I have been in every single church in Cliffside Park. My friends would take me to midnight Mass on Christmas and show me off telling parishioners, "She's from where Jesus was born." We were never treated as an "other."

This was before 9/11 and before Rick Lazio thought it was appropriate to use hating Muslims as a campaign strategy. It is why the current rise of Islamophobia (or Islamic hate) has been so shocking

to me and why it needs to be combated by all non-violent means necessary. In the America I grew up in, folks had no problem with the fact that I was Muslim. They did, however seem very concerned that I would die during the month of Ramadan from fasting. I would assure them I had enough fat to live off for at least three months.

I had an incredibly happy childhood in New Jersey. When I was six, my father taught me how to walk. Most people with CP don't walk at all. My brain is literally damaged. Messages sent from my brain to my body go in all the wrong directions. For example, if you want to make a fist, your fingers bend and you make a fist. In my case, my mouth twitches, my leg wiggles, and eventually I make half a fist.

One of the best parts of having CP is the fact that I shake all the time. Try it, it's exhausting. People often think I'm drunk, which is really annoying, especially when I'm driving.

I've often been referred to as a "highly functional" disabled person. I'm not sure what that means, but I attribute it to my upbringing. My parents simply chose to ignore the fact that I was disabled. They treated me exactly like my three older sisters. If my sisters were mopping, I was mopping; if my sisters went to public school, they would sue the school and make sure I went to public school too. I couldn't ask for better parents.

I've never had conventional physical therapy. My parents couldn't afford it so they sent me to tap class. A veterinarian told my father if he couldn't afford PT, dance was the next best thing. It was the only physical therapy I did until 2006 when I started doing yoga. Yoga, the polar opposite of tap, is something I was never interested in because I associated it with hippies. A fellow actress convinced me to try it and it absolutely changed my life. I learned to walk by tap dancing but I learned to live by doing yoga. As boring as it is, the stretching has greatly reduced the pain and tremors associated with my CP. I could walk and dance, but before doing yoga I was never able to stand for more than a couple of seconds. Now I can stand on my head.

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I can also walk in heels. This baffles people; they can't understand why I would torture myself. It's very simple. I grew up in New Jersey and being chic is very important to us. All my friends wore heels and therefore so would I. My friends also spent their summers at the Jersey Shore. I did not. I spent my summers in a war zone.

## **Welcome to Palestine**

Before I ever went to Palestine, I knew Palestine. It was all my dad ever talked about. Every summer my parents would send us back to our village Deir Debwan to live with my grandparents; because my mom hated kids and my dad was afraid that if we didn't go to Palestine every year, we would forget our roots, and grow up to be Britney Spears.

The first summer I ever went, I was five. I packed all my favorite things: my wonder women underoos, my stuffed bunny Checkers, and my most favorite thing in the world—my Michael Jackson glove. I shouldn't have taken anything. My grandmother was like the Muslim Robin Hood—but instead of stealing from the rich, she'd steal from me and give every single thing I owned to the poor refugees. I spent days trying to explain to her that although I felt sorry for the poor starving refugees, I could not comprehend what use they would have for my sparkly glove since it wasn't even a pair.

Having my stuff stolen by grandma and learning the importance of charity was the fun part of Palestine. The not so fun part was having to deal with the Israeli army since I was five years old. I like to call it Jersey vs. the IDF. My first run-in was with Israeli airport security. Every summer my three older sisters and I would land at Tel Aviv airport. For those of you who don't know, there is no way to enter Palestine without crossing an Israeli border first. (Yes, I am aware of the Rafah crossing, but it's closed, like all the time.) The Israelis would search us with a fine toothed comb because four little girls traveling alone were obviously terrorists.

I had gotten used to being strip-searched at the airport, but when I was eight I was subjected to far worse. They beheaded my bunny, Checkers. It was not self-defense. It was murder. Checkers was a blue and white stuffed bunny with a beating heart that traveled with me. The Israelis could have easily x-

rayed Checkers to see what was inside of him, but instead they decapitated him and pulled out his heart. Then they handed him back in pieces. I will never forget dropping his head as I struggled to keep all his parts together. My grandmother, in an effort to console me, reattached Checker's head. Unfortunately, the cross-stitching queen of Deir Debwan had only red thread. The result was horrifying. That would be the first of many memorable run-ins.

When I was 14, both of my grandmothers passed away, and I refused to go back. I was 22 when I finally returned. My mission: to find a husband. My cover: working with disabled orphans in refugee camps.

For those of you who've never been to a refugee camp, they don't have horseback riding, arts and crafts, or roasted marshmallows. They have trash piled sky-high, sewage streaming through the streets, and narrow, winding alleys that make it impossible to tell where the shooting is coming from. And there are kids—millions and millions of bored, hungry kids. And I was going to be their Oprah. I'd bring them medicine, shoes, and Doritos, while simultaneously catching myself the most gorgeous refugee man ever. We'd fall madly in love, get married, adopt differently abled babies, and live happily ever after.

By the way, I hate kids. The first time I ever walked into an orphanage this thing ran up and hugged me with a Fraggie puppet growing out of its head. I mean, you could pet it, and it would giggle. So I decided I would work with teens. I went there like an idiot thinking I could be Michelle Pfifer from *Dangerous Minds*. I was going to teach them theater and they were going to stop throwing rocks. When I got there I realized these kids didn't need art, they needed shoes.

In April of 2001 I founded Mayssoon's Kids, a not-for-profit charity funded primarily by my friends on Facebook and Twitter followers. Our mission was to address the needs of the growing population of disabled children in the West Bank.

We don't give people money, we're very much hands on to "teach a refugee to fish." Due to the political climate, I am not allowed to travel to Gaza, which is why we work exclusively in the West Bank.

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Past projects include art and wellness programs, summer camp lunches, eye exams and glasses, Mommy classes, providing physical therapy equipment to rehab centers, tutoring seniors preparing for college, and providing shoes clothing and milk locally made for orphans.

In June of 2011 we were proud to have our first Maysoon's Kids university scholarship recipient graduate with a Bachelor's in Social Work from

We also partnered with Playgrounds for Palestine, an incredible organization that builds playgrounds in the Occupied Territory for children who would have absolutely nowhere else to play. It is the realization of the basic human right to play. Our goal was not only to build a playground, but to build one that was completely disabled-accessible. We found a local builder and built it outside of the Silwad disabled center. I chose Silwad as the location for the playground because they excelled in



**Making puppets with the deaf in Deheishe Refugee Camp.**

Bethlehem University. Currently we are partnered with three different organizations. Our first partnership is with the Friends Quaker School in Ramallah. Friends is currently the only school in Palestine that mainstreams differently abled children. Otherwise they are left to glorified babysitting U.N. facilities where they learn nothing. It is our goal to provide scholarships that cover the entire K-12 education of a differently abled student with no other financial means to attend. Our dream is that schools all over Palestine will mainstream, but for now we just want to get as many kids into Friends as possible.

teaching their student population rather than just playing them Bugs Bunny videos. The students also cross-stitched me a Pokeman Squirtle, but that in no way swayed my opinion. We are hoping to build a second accessible playground in Yatta, an impoverished suburb of Hebron that has another exceptional disabled center. Our final partnership is with the Bethlehem orphanage.

I have seen the landscape of Palestine change drastically over the past 30 years. The beaches I went to as a child with my grandparents are no longer accessible to Palestinians. The wall was built

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before my eyes. I remember crossing Kalandia and having to step over the first concrete block and thinking, "Why is this here? This is so annoying." I had no idea that only a few years later Ramallah and Bethlehem would be completely cut off from Jerusalem by this crazy thing that is three times the height of the Berlin Wall.

One of the fringe benefits of the wall is that it comes with checkpoints. Checkpoints are like being stuck on the longest line at Disney but there's no ride at the end, and there's a fairly good chance you're going to encounter violence. I have been shot at at a checkpoint, but not hit. Which makes all the difference.

That was my second run-in with the Israeli army. When I first used to cross the checkpoints I was totally obnoxious and fought with the soldiers over the injustice. I mean they weren't going to hurt a differently abled American, were they? March of 2003 everything changed. Rachel Corrie a blond-haired, blue-eyed American was run over by an Israeli bulldozer and I immediately stopped sassing soldiers.

I also spent many months living under curfew. Curfew means if you go outside you get shot. I got stuck eating peanut butter and Cheerios for three whole days once. My stomach was a mess. I am forever grateful that I didn't have Twitter at the time because I would mostly definitely be in political prison if I did.

My most recent run-in with the Israeli army was in June of 2006. I was flying back to New York to do a show that night when Israeli security held me for three hours. I was strip-searched and left to bleed on myself in a wheelchair that I use for travel. The woman in charge who refused me access to my belongings was named Inbal Sharon.

I will never forget her name because she proudly gave me her card. I am an American citizen who holds no other allegiance. A simple Google search shows that I am absolutely not a security threat. Yet, I was forced to board the plane with nothing but my passports and a credit card and denied access to sanitary products. Onboard, the Continental stewardesses gave me their clothing. It was beyond sickening and yet I go back every Christmas, every summer, every chance I get. I have no choice.

One thing that drives me insane is the way the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is portrayed in the media. Let's simplify the whole thing. The issue is bigotry and oppression. The solution is equal rights for everyone. The theory that these people can't coexist is ludicrous because they already do. The majority, yes the majority, work together, study together, hitch-hike together and even date. The only issues are those who insist on religious exclusivity and, being heavily armed, denying freedom to everyone else. And that, my friends, is why they're fighting.

## **The American Dream**

I have always loved comedy. I watched Carol Burnett, I Love Lucy, and Candid Camera religiously. As a child I would listen to Fraggles on a scrambled HBO channel I didn't get, but could clearly hear. One day, when Fraggles finished, it was followed by a comedy special called "Bill Cosby Himself." To this day, I have never heard a more flawless set. But Cosby was definitely not my first exposure to comedy. Cosby was my first experience with stand-up. Soon I was reading comedy books. My Mom gave me Bombeck's, "If Life Is a Bowl of Cherries, Then Why Am I in the Pits?" to read on a flight to Palestine when I was 10. Yes, 10. I still love that book. Eventually, I graduated from books to tapes, and that's when I heard Adam Sandler for the first time.

I have no idea where I got his tape from but my favorite part was Adam Sandler acting out what it would sound like if various members of society going about their normal day were suddenly senselessly beaten. The series of bits was aptly titled "The Senseless Beating of..." If you have never heard these tapes, you must find them because they are beyond hysterical, though I cannot explain why. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine that years later I would get to work with him or that I would end up becoming a comic myself.

I went to college during the time of Affirmative Action. I got a sweet scholarship deal to Arizona State University because I fit every quota: ethnic, female, and disabled - the whole package. My parents agreed to let me go because my uncle lived in Arizona, and they knew the dry heat would be really good for my CP.

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I went to ASU to become a lawyer. My plan was get a BS, study international law at Columbia University, and then free Palestine. First semester freshman year, I had to take an art elective. I was incensed because it's such a waste of time. I mean, who needs art to free Palestine? I asked around to find the easiest, least time-consuming art class. All of the Honors kids that lived in my dorm (yes, I lived in the Honors dorm because I am a proud life-long geek) said, "Take acting. It's a ridiculous class where you get to be a tree or an ice cream cone."

I signed up for the class, and the next morning I was in the Dean of Fine Arts Office changing my major from International Law to Acting and thinking, "Oh My God! My mother is going to beat me to death with a slipper!"

My older sisters, in order are: a Loan Officer at a bank, a Doctorate in Pharmacy, and the Woman Who Speaks on Behalf of Palestine at the United Nations. Acting was beyond black sheep. The best thing about Arizona (and there were very, very few good things about it), was that famous people like to retire there and teach at ASU so they can use the pool. As a result I ended up with Marshall W. Mason as my acting mentor, one of the greatest New York directors in history. He had had a desk full of awards and was a beyond brilliant teacher.

I was like the pet lemur of the theater department. Everybody loved me. I did all of the less-than-bright theatre students' papers for them, and I got A's in all of my classes—and theirs. Every time I played Laura from "The Glass Menagerie" my teachers would weep. But I had one recurring problem: every semester, I would audition for the ASU theater season, and every semester I wouldn't get cast. I was confused how I could get A's in all my acting classes but couldn't even get the role of Girl #2 in the school play.

Finally, my senior year, my big break came. ASU announced that the main stage play would be "They Dance Real Slow in Jackson." It was a play about a girl with CP. I was a girl. And I had CP. When this role came along, I started shouting from the rooftops: "I have Cerebral Palsy! I'm finally going to get a part! Free at last, free at last, Thank God Almighty I am free at last!"

I didn't get the part. Sherry Brown got the part.

I went to the head of the theater department, hysterically crying, as if someone had just shot my cat, and asked her why. She claimed I couldn't do the stunts. All I could think was, "Excuse me? If I can't do the stunts neither can the freakin' character!" This was the role I was literally born to play, and they give it to this non-palsy actress! I confronted Sherry Brown and explained to her that this was worse than doing blackface and that she should give me back my part or everyone in the world would hate her. She started crying and blubbering and acting like she was the victim. I was furious and I wasn't alone. The next day the drama kids flipped out. They love any chance to fight injustice and be dramatic. A full-on riot broke out on campus in my honor led by none other than my arch-nemesis, Sherry. Suddenly she was Captain of Team Palsy, and on that day we coined the term, "Cripface."

I graduated and moved back home to New Jersey. Marshall Mason, still the greatest teacher ever, introduced me to his founding partner at Circle Repertory Theatre, Tanya Berezin, who became my acting coach. She wasn't just my acting coach, she also coached the New York City soap operas. Why is this important? Well, my life-long dream has been to be on General Hospital, and here I am a year after graduating college sitting at the Daytime Emmys between Barbara Walters and Susan Lucci. My very first TV appearance was as an extra on "As The World Turns." My friend Terri had gotten me the gig. I assumed I would be promoted from Diner diner to wacky best friend, but that never happened and I remained a glorified piece of furniture, also known as an extra.

Dejected after 19 months as an extra, I asked Tanya what I should do. She recommended that I become a comedian. She had been in the business for a really long time and in her experience non-perfect women only get cast from doing comedy. I thought about it and she was right. Whoopie Goldberg, Rosie O'Donnell, and Mimi from the Drew Carey Show had all gotten their start in stand-up. I decided why not and immediately signed up for a stand-up comedy class at the world famous Caroline's on Broadway.

God forgive me, I cannot remember my teacher's

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name, but he was excellent. Not only did he teach us the basics of comedy, but also he got me up on stage within the first week. It was required for class. Anyone who has ever done comedy will tell you going to Open Mic is like waterboarding—survive that and you can survive anything.

The class ended with us performing live at Caroline's on Broadway to a packed audience of friends and family. My section was filled with soap stars and Italians. Boy can Italians laugh. I remember talking about Riverdance causing me seizures and how Mormons were just Muslims who had gotten confused. The club owner was so impressed I ended up being hired for a gig at my very first performance. The gig was driving famous comics from New York to New Jersey to do shows. In return I got 25 bucks and seven minutes to open for them. I will never forget the look of horror on Bill Michaels face when he realized that a girl with Cerebral Palsy was driving him at break-neck speeds down the New Jersey Turnpike

I also don't know the name of the man responsible for me meeting my comedy partner in crime, Dean Obeidallah, a moment that totally changed my life. It's not because I can't remember it, it's because the kid changed his name so many times. I met him in my acting class with Tanya and I believe his name was Adam Greenberg, and then it was Adam Green, then Hunter Green, then Adam Hunter. I never had the heart to tell him there was an MTV VJ with that name because he had already printed up his headshots.

Anyway this Green guy ran a comedy room at Gladys's Hamburger Harry in Time's Square and invited me to do a set. It was my 3<sup>rd</sup> show ever. I was sitting, waiting to go on, in front of our massive audience of nine, five of whom were Swedish and didn't speak a stitch of English, when Dean walked in. I instantly knew he was Arab because I can sense those things. We exchanged e-mails and that was that.

I didn't see Dean again until one year after 9/11 when he e-mailed me out of the blue saying that the Network of Arab American Professionals was putting together an Arab-American comedy show. He suggested me because apparently I was the only other Arab he knew. The first show sold out and

there were people wrapped around the block for the second. We were totally in shock and had no idea there was such a market for Arab-American comedy.

Al Martin, who ran The Improv at the time and now runs Broadway Comedy club in New York City, saw the potential and told us we could come back any time. To this day, ten years later, we still do the Big Brown Comedy Show at Al's club. The show features "others," which means anyone who's brown, regardless of faith, and is hosted by Aasif Maandvi from the Daily Show.

After a couple of years of doing the Arab comedy thing, Dean hunted down our counterparts in L.A. The Arabian Knights were a Palestinian, an Iranian, and an Egyptian. They were doing what we were doing on Broadway, on the Sunset Strip. We decided to do an East Coast meets West Coast show in Washington, D.C. at the D.C. Improv. The lineup was Maz Jobrani, Aron Kader, Dean, me, and some Egyptian guy. The guys from L.A. went on to become the Axis of Evil comedy tour and Dean and I became guest comics with them all over the country.

I had been performing for almost three years at that point. The majority of my gigs were Arab student groups at universities and banquets. The Arab-American banquet circuit is fierce. Within two years of my first show I was performing for two thousand people at the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee convention in Washington, DC. I became a road warrior, traveling up to forty weeks a year. I drove to gigs everywhere, from Detroit to Florida, by myself. To this day I'm amazed a serial killer never ate me.

One of those tour stops landed Dean and me in Washington D.C. on July 4, 2003. I remember the date because there were fireworks. We sat by the pool and came up with the idea of creating the New York Arab American Comedy Festival. Dean felt like as comics we were getting the best press in the Arab-American community, so why not draw attention to the fact that we're not all terrorists by having a festival.

We had no idea how much effort it took to plan a festival. The first year it was a nightmare finding performers. We were begging actress's boyfriends to do the show. The New York Arab American Comedy

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Festival premiered in November 2003 to sold-out audiences. What started out as a three-day fest is now a weeklong event attended by thousands. Now in its eighth year, it features a Who's Who of Arab-American performers from film, television and Broadway. Instead of searching for people we now have to turn them away. A whole generation of young Arab-Americans, who never thought of getting into the arts, did so because it was a platform to showcase their writing, acting, or comedy skills. Dean and I have proudly volunteered from day one. It is definitely one of the things I am most proud of. It has become way bigger than Dean and me and the level of talent is exceptional.

In 2006 we took the festival to California and became the go-to website for Hollywood casting directors seeking Arab actors. They cast "Munich," "The Kingdom," "Sex in the City," "Law & Order," and "You Don't Mess with the Zohan" off our website, [www.arabcomedy.org](http://www.arabcomedy.org).

I didn't only tour the United States. In 2002, I began performing stand-up comedy in Arabic in the Middle East. Some people say that I'm the first person to ever perform stand-up in Palestine. I'm not one of those people. I always believed that someone else did it first even if I've never heard of him or her.

The first time I did stand-up in Arabic was in Bethlehem in 2002. Sadly there is no video record of this show. All I have to show for it is a blurb in a November 2002 issue of *This Week in Palestine*. I was volunteering at Ibdaa in Dheisheh Refugee Camp, and everyone kept asking me what I did in my real life, to which I would respond, "I tell jokes." No one believed me so I decided to do a show.

I performed at an arts center, Dar Annadwa, to a packed house of the Bourgeois of Bethlehem as well as a handful of refugees who had ventured out. They laughed, I had a blast, and I had no idea I was doing something so different.

A couple of months later, I partnered with the A.M. Qattan Foundation to do a show in Ramallah. This was publicized. This wasn't just friends. It was the middle of the Intifada and during on-and-off curfews.

We held the show at Ashtar Theatre. People sat on the floor because it was so packed. From the stage

of Ashtar I made fun of then-President Yasser Arafat, who at the time was under siege at his nearby compound. I had no idea I was being risqué or saying anything that would get me in trouble. See, that's part of the job of a comic. We talk about things no one else does. Nothing is off limits. So it didn't occur to me that I couldn't talk about the government or that I shouldn't use words like, *sharmuta*. [*Whore, slut, bitch* – Ed.]

I performed completely uncensored because the idea that there would be censorship never occurred to me. At the end of the show I got a standing ovation. As I was leaving, a guy walked up to me and said, "You know they're going to have you killed for saying that." I asked him, "Who?" and he laughed. I thought he was kidding. I had never heard of Naji al-Ali. [*A Palestinian cartoonist, noted for his political criticism of Israel, who was mortally shot in the face in London in 1987.* – Ed.]

Two years later Dean joined me in Ramallah for a huge outdoor show at the Qattan Foundation. This time there were reporters. They asked us what the biggest difference was between doing comedy in New York City and doing comedy in Ramallah. My answer, "New Yorkers get stuck in traffic, here people get stuck at the checkpoint."

In August 2008, Dean and I did our first major show in Amman, Jordan. I had performed there before but I guess I had been under the radar. We did the show to a sold-out crowd and at the end the censors descended upon me mercilessly. I was told I could not joke about the government even though the prince himself said I could. We were also told we could not talk about Palestinians being the majority, and we could not under any circumstances say the word *sharmuta*. I was shocked. At first I refused until I was informed that that meant I would not perform. The audience was there, so the show must go on.

Censorship did not stop in Jordan. It became standard. Nowhere was it worse than in Egypt. While doing a show there in 2009 I was physically attacked by the Minister of Tourism (a woman by the way) and banned from ever performing in the country again. Why? What was my big transgression? I did a joke about Egypt Air being so filthy that it made my lice get fleas. That's it. Banned for life. (I

am hoping to go back to Egypt, now though, because I heard there's a new government.) Every time we would be told by the censors the list of what we could and couldn't say, I would tell the comics, "You've got to come to Palestine, there's no censorship there. You can say whatever you want, but not at the Israeli airport." One by one they performed there and saw for themselves.

American reporters would say to me, "You could never say these things in front of Arabs, they would kill you," and I would say, "Not in Palestine. In Palestine you can say anything, and I have."

Freedom of speech began to come under siege in the Holy Land. Article after article was popping up about journalists and artists being shut down and even arrested. I became more adamant than ever that comedy must remain uncensored. I was given the unique opportunity to introduce stand-up to my generation in Palestine. No one ever told me what to do, and they certainly weren't going to start now. What was the point of all these revolutions in the Arab Spring if we would have less freedom?

On Valentine's Day 2011, I performed four shows for the Freedom of Comedy Tour that featured local comic Adi Khalefa. The first show was at the Ramallah Friends School. It was a sold-out fundraiser for the Maysoon's Kids/Friends' Inclusive Scholarship Program. At that show all the jokes were halal (permissible), not because someone told us to do so, but because as comics sometimes we choose to self-censor depending on the audience. This was obviously a family show and we wanted them to have fun. The second show was held at a pub, also in Ramallah. It was a totally different. Nothing was off limits. Not Saeb Ereket, not sharmuta. We said everything we wanted and more. I was thrilled that comedy in Palestine remained uncensored.

While touring the Middle East an interesting side project organically sprung up. Aron, Dean and I began teaching stand-up comedy workshops anywhere we had a show. The idea was to show local audiences that stand-up comedy is universal, and that it can be a fantastic form of non-violent resistance.

When we first started teaching the workshops the concept of stand up was completely foreign to our attendees. The learning curve was out of control

and monthly stand-up comedy shows quickly popped up in Beirut, Amman, and even Tahrir Square in Egypt.

In December of 2008, Dean partnered with the Amman municipality to create the Amman Comedy festival. The festival brought huge names like Russell Peters and Gabriel Iglesias to Jordan. It also featured Arab comics from all over the globe. I headlined the first all-Arabic language stand-up comedy show in Amman in Jordan's history at the second comedy Festival. It remains one of my top three shows.

I was on my endless tour, when I got a call from Adam Sandler's casting director for the movie, "You Don't Mess with the Zohan." Sandler had seen my stand-up and really liked the way I joked about my father so he decided to write me a part in his movie. I went in and read for the part of Dahlia, which was eventually played by Emanuel Cheriqui. The casting director claimed she loved me but they always do and I knew I would never get the part. Three months later, while sitting at my friend's house in Hebron in the West Bank, I got a call from Happy Madison Productions, saying that the director, Dennis Dugan, wanted to see me. I freaked out because I was in Palestine and he was in California.

I told the Assistant, "Listen, I'm really sorry. I'm in Palestine, but I could fly back and be there in 2 days, or I could do something by satellite." I think he felt bad for me because it was obvious I was about to cry, so he connected me to Dennis Dugan. We chatted for about 5 minutes, and then they told me I had the part. There I was, in the middle of Palestine, being given the chance of a lifetime by one of the most famous Jewish comedians of all time. You can't make this stuff up.

We started shooting in the summer of 2007. My first day on set was inconceivable. I walked onto the Warner Lot and into what was known as the video village where actors would hang out before going on set. I walked in and saw Adam Sandler, Kevin James, Kevin Nealon, Rob Schneider, and Dana Carvey. I was in comedy heaven and the best part was I wasn't even dead yet. Adam introduced me to the other comedians with a glowing review of my standup. Working with Sandler is easily one of the best experiences of my life. He is an excellent teacher, a generous humble funny man, and has the best catering

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in the world. I also got to work with Robert Smiegel the legendary SNL writer and Fonzi from "Happy Days." Ten years later Tanya's strategy of doing stand-up so I could make it in Hollywood had come to fruition. A year later I got to walk the red carpet at the premier of our movie at Mann's Chinese Theater. And that is my true Hollywood story.

During my time at Zohan I also got to meet my all time most favorite musical obsession ever, Dave Matthews. I walk on set about a month into shooting and Adam tells me, "Hey, you like Dave, right? He's here today." I think he's kidding because he's Adam Sandler. Later I walked on set, saw the video monitor, and realized he was not kidding. Dave Matthews, the man I followed to 193 shows, the man I swore to my friends I would someday meet and become friends with and tell all about the injustice in Palestine, was now on the other side of the camera.

I was thrilled to pieces that Karina, one of the greatest makeup artists ever to live, had done my makeup that day. When Dave was done shooting his scene, Adam turned to me and said he wanted to personally introduce me because he knew how much I loved Dave. He gave me an amazing introduction and Dave said my name. I started bawling as if someone hit my cat with a machete. I fell to pieces. It was obvious that Dave thought I was special. One of the makeup girls, Kathleen, tried to save me. She offered to take our picture. Dave put his arm around me, which caused me to crumple, and he had to hold me up. I was eventually put in time-out.

Driving home from the set, I was livid. I had the chance of a lifetime and I cried. I don't cry unless something heavy falls on me, yet I had turned into a blubbering mess. And now everyone hated me. The next day I walked on set and I saw his tour bus. Dave saw me and in true Zohan magical fashion Dave Matthews sang my name. We hung out the rest of the shoot together and I got to tell him all about Palestine. Months later Dave was in Jersey for a concert and I called him, knowing he would never answer, except he did because Dave Matthews is the best and dreams do come true.

Somehow through this insane journey I have ended up in some spectacular places. I was invited by the legendary Tim Sebastian to Doha, Qatar to debate women being superior to men on the BBC. I

was Riz Khan's final guest on AJE, a station he helped launch. I was a delegate representing the great state of NJ at the 2008 Democratic National Convention where Barak Obama was nominated. It was astounding I was chosen since I was a Hillary Clinton delegate. I'm assuming it was yet again one of those cases where I fit every quota and they had to pick me. Nevertheless, I was blessed to bear witness to that moment in history. I got to tap dance on Broadway with *Arabs Gone Wild* and attend Sundance. The moment that stands out the most however, was performing for the man who floats like a butterfly and stings like a bee, has Parkinson's and shakes just like me—Muhammed Ali. It is also the only time my father has seen me perform live.

In 2011 the most random thing that could happen did. I became a full-time contributor on Countdown with Keith Olbermann. Before I ever appeared on Countdown I had watched Keith Olbermann, but not religiously. I was, however, fully aware that being on Countdown was a huge deal. I will never forget walking into 30 Rock. It was another one of those moments like stepping onto the Warner Brothers lot. This was better because not only was I at 30 Rock, but it was Christmas. From the windows of the Countdown studio I could see the entire Rockefeller Christmas tree. I'm obsessed with Christmas since I come from the place where Christmas was born. I am referring of course to Palestine not New Jersey, just to be clear.

That is what I remember most from my first episode of Countdown—the tree. I walked in all done up, like I'm going to the prom, ready to meet Keith. Instead I was shuffled into a room with just me and a TV monitor that had me on it. It got worse. The chair I sat on rolled out from under me and when I asked for a different chair, the cameraman looked at me and said, "5, 4, 3, 2, and we're live." So now I'm sitting on a spinning rolling chair watching myself slowly roll out of the screen. I had to grip the desk I was sitting at with both hands just to stabilize myself. I did not let go until the interview was done.

I remember very little from that interview other than gripping the desk and telling Keith Olbermann how much I loved that Christmas tree. That was also the day I learned the importance of using my arms when I speak on television. I was wearing a black

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turtleneck and because my arms were frozen in position holding me in the shot, I appear to have no arms. It was an absolute nightmare.

When I got home the Internet was abuzz about my appearance on Countdown. Everyone had the same question, "What is wrong with her?" Here's the thing, this was my first TV experience discussing anything but me, which means Cerebral Palsy never came up. The crowd went nuts. Access Philly even wrote an article saying that rarely do you see a disabled person talking on TV about anything other than being disabled but that night on Countdown it had happened. I was groundbreaking and didn't even know it.

of my appearance I found gems like "Yo she retarded?" "Why is she tweaking, yo?" and my favorite, "Poor thing. What does she suffer from?" At one point, some genius suggested we add Cerebral Palsy to my job description. They wanted it to read "screenwriter, comedian, palsy." I declined and let the insane that go party on Twitter continue guessing my affliction while secretly praying they would someday figure out Google.

Unbelievably Countdown invited me to return. This time I was in-studio face-to-face with Keith, and the crew had kindly taped down my chair. In a strange twist of fate I ended up being Keith Olbermann's last in-studio guest at MSNBC. Luckily when he moved to Current he took me with him. In



**Maysoon Zayid  
with her father  
Musa (left) and  
Muhammed Ali.**

Here's another thing I didn't know: people on the Internet are scumbags. They say children are cruel but I was never made fun of as a child. My bridesmaids were the same girls who were my best friends at age five. They never made fun of me. Neither did the kids in Palestine. I'm not sure why, but no one ever did. Suddenly on the Internet my disability was fair game. In the comment section of the online clip

June of 2011 I landed my first official non-extra non-documentary TV gig. It's amazing to be part of something that big from the very beginning. After my first appearance on Countdown I had signed up for Twitter so I could read all the mean things people were saying about me. Instead I found that Keith Olbermann had a rabid huge following and I was part of something bigger than I ever imagined. I was

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reading my name in press releases alongside names like Matt Taibbi, Michael Moore, and Donald Sutherland. I was given someone to do my hair and makeup. I'm convinced that my obsession with hair and makeup is what keeps me from ever being nervous on air. This is the ideal gig for me. It combines three of my favorite things: comedy, politics and makeup. I also absolutely love the challenge of having to come up with new material on the spot. This is the news, so sometimes I don't even know the topic until an hour before we go live. It's exhilarating. The situation at Current TV is also ideal. Keith has given me complete freedom to say anything on my mind. I really can't imagine a better crew or mentor and hope I remain at Current for years to come. Maybe even on my own show.

Today I continue to tour, produce the comedy festival and appear on Countdown. As for what comes next, my passion project is a movie that I wrote called "Law." I wanted to write something that challenged the image Hollywood had created for people like me. I wanted a differently abled character who wasn't healed or pathetic, an Arab who wasn't a terrorist, a Muslim who wasn't belly dancing or wearing a burqa, and a story line that made sense and mattered.

I decided to write a comedy about a small town dance teacher who happens to be disabled, Arab, and Muslim; but those things are the least of her problems. The script was chosen by the Sundance Middle East Writer's Lab. One of the main challenges is convincing producers that the lead character must be played by a disabled actress, preferably me. I am sick of seeing able-bodied actors in disabled roles, from Daniel Day Lewis to Claire Danes.

One of the things I hope to change in the future is the acceptability of using Cripface. Cripface is when an able bodied actor does the worst job possible pretending he's disabled for a role. Then said actor is given an Oscar. This needs to be changed. It is as insulting as blackface. There are amazing disabled actors for these roles, why not give them a chance? I have decided to independently produce it because, as Tanya Berezin said, "Hollywood's not big on casting ethnic disabled fluffy people." I am pretty sure that when I win my Oscar that will change. Until then, I'm just going to keep telling jokes and fighting the good fight for Palestinian equality.

*Author's note: If you had enough time to read this entire article, please consider volunteering for Maysoon's Kids at [www.maysoon.com/charity](http://www.maysoon.com/charity).*

**Author Maysoon Zayid and friends at the orphanage in Bethlehem.**



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