

## Taboos with a twist

Female comic readies for toughest crowd

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The Gazette

*Wednesday, November 02, 2005*

Nabila Ben Youssef is courageous and funny - a good combination when you're an Arab woman performing stand-up comedy in Quebec.

Because not only is the comedy industry in this part of the world predominantly white, Western and male, but Arab stand-up comedy is a rarity.

"For someone to stand up and say what they think, freely, is unheard of in Arab culture," Ben Youssef said with a chuckle.

Ben Youssef performs her routine Friday and Tuesday as part of the continuing Montreal Arab World Festival. Even the title of the show - *Arabe et cochonne* - is provocative.

"The word *cochonne* comes from the word *cochon* (pig), a taboo word in Arab culture," she said. "The word shocks." As does, by nature, stand-up comedy. "Doing stand-up is almost like being naked onstage."

Ben Youssef has been performing in front of Quebec audiences for three years, but Friday's show will mark the first time she has done her stand-up routine in front of a predominantly Arab crowd.

"The Quebecois love to laugh. I've been well received. But in Arab culture we tend to hide our emotions. We don't explode with laughter. Performing for an Arab public scares me more."

This doesn't mean she plans to censor her material in any way.

"Nothing is taboo for me. I'll talk about anything," she said. "My show is as unabashed as its title. I believe it is time to talk about real things. And it's time to laugh out loud."

Ben Youssef worked with writer Pierre Sevigny to flesh out parallels between the Quebecois and Arab cultures in her material. She enjoys poking fun at stereotypes on both sides of the cultural divide.

"Some Quebecois still think of Arab women as submissive and repressed," she said. "I'm tired of it. I want to change that image."

Ben Youssef arrived in Montreal from Tunisia 10 years ago, with plans to continue her acting career. Then she heard about the Just for Laughs comedy school and her path took an abrupt turn.

"For my audition I showed up wearing an enormous wedding dress," Ben Youssef said. "I was a mail-order bride who had just arrived at the airport. I even wore a lamb draped around my neck - it was for the wedding reception."

Ben Youssef began her humour studies in August 2001. On Sept. 10, 2001 her improv professor, just for fun, asked her to write her name in Arabic on the chalkboard. She did.

On Sept. 11, 2001, she arrived in class to find "Arabs are s--t" written beside her name.

"It was difficult," she said. "But I found myself with a good group of young students who asked lots of questions and we were able to move on.

"Sept. 11 provoked so many negatives, but it also acted as a catalyst for positives. Arab women began to revolt in greater number. They began to speak out and say, 'I am not them (the extremist terrorist factions). I have a right to say what I think.' "

Ben Youssef has no family here. Her parents still live in Tunisia and don't know what she does for a living.

"They are devout Muslims and conservative," she said. "I left the country without their permission."

Only her sister in Paris knows Ben Youssef is a stand-up comic.

"My parents eventually accepted my acting," she said. "But I will never tell them about the stand-up comedy. It would shock them too much. I love and respect them and I want them to love me until the day they die."

Nabila Ben Youssef performs *Arabe et cochonne* Friday at

Alize, 900 Ontario St. E., at 8 p.m. and Tuesday at 8 p.m. at Studio Theatre of Place des Arts. Tickets cost \$17. For the Friday show, they are available at the door. For the Tuesday show, call the box office at (514) 842-2112 or contact Admission at (514) 790-1245 or [www.admission.com](http://www.admission.com).

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