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THE NEW GERMAN COMEDY SCENE

Diversity Means Laughs in Germany

By David Gordon Smith in Berlin

Unlike the US, Germany has never had many comedians from ethnic minorities. But now a new diverse wave of comedians is bringing new life to comedy in Germany -- while being keen to avoid pigeonholing.

Two Jews, a Turkish-German and an Indian walk into a Berlin bar. They get on stage and start telling jokes. The Germans in the audience double over in laughter.

The punch-line? Well, there isn't one. The truth is, Germany's comedy scene -- which has been growing rapidly in recent years with new venues, television shows and now a dedicated [comedy channel](#) -- has never been very ethnically diverse. But now, more and more young comedians from minorities are taking the stage.

And nothing is sacred. Ivor Dembina, a London-based Jewish comedian who has done gigs in Germany, jokes about Dachau. Poking fun at Turkish-Germans in the country is likewise no longer beyond the pale, at least for comedians who come from that community. Leaning on stereotypes about Germans and other nationalities reliably gets a laugh. And many of the gags go down well with Germans who might feel uncomfortable making such jokes themselves.

"I play with clichés about both India and Europe," says Indian-born comedian Sanjay Shihora. "As an Indian I can make fun of Hitler, which a German wouldn't do."

The process of getting more minority comedians on German stages is a slow one, though. Take the Jewish community. Jewish culture in Germany may be blossoming as the Jewish population climbs to a post-war high of over 200,000, but the number of professional German-Jewish comedians can still be counted on the fingers of one hand.

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James J. Kriegsmann Jr.

German Jewish comedy duo the Tadbros made jokes about the Holocaust while growing up.

Two of those comedians are the brothers Avi and David Toubiana, who perform under the name The Tadbros. The pair, originally from Düsseldorf but now resident in Berlin, has just completed a successful run of their first solo show, an Agatha Christie spoof called "Murder on the Panini Express."

However they say they don't do explicitly Jewish humor -- at least not yet. "I would compare us with the Marx Brothers," says David. "Everyone says that's Jewish humor, but it's not Jewish humor specifically, it's just humor. But it is influenced by Jewish humor in the way they talk and make jokes -- it's more about language. We like to do that as well, mixing up words and giving them different meanings."

Much of that, they say, comes from their family background -- especially insofar as sarcasm and black humor is "always a major part of Jewish families," as Avi says.

Part of that was coping with the legacy of the Holocaust. "We were the first generation who grew up again in Germany and we had to deal with it somehow," Avi recalls. "So we made jokes about it."

So are Germans ready for a renaissance of Jewish humor? Dembina thinks they are, based on his experiences during two recent comedy gigs in Munich.

"It felt like a great way of saying things have moved on and the Jewish people are back," he says. "And the Jewish humor went down well. I made one outrageous joke about (Nazi concentration camp) Dachau and it got a fantastic laugh. There was a great sense of relief at the comic ice being broken."

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The rise of minority comedians in Germany is, in many ways, only natural. Although Germany is ethnically fairly homogenous from, say, an American or British standpoint, more and more people from minorities are gaining prominence in the arts. Germany's hottest young director is the Turkish-German Fatih Akin, who shot to fame with his 2004 film "Gegen die Wand" ("Head On"). Jewish director Dani Levy, who is from Switzerland but lives in Berlin, is currently in the headlines because of his new [Hitler comedy "Mein Führer."](#)

Meanwhile Turkish-German authors such as Feridun Zaimoglu and Dilek Güngör are making names for themselves, while one of Germany's best known young authors, Vladimir Kaminer, is a Russian Jew. In the music world, one of Germany's biggest stars is Xavier Naidoo, who is of Tamil descent, while the burgeoning German hip hop scene features artists such as the Tunisian-German Bushido and Samy Deluxe, one of the few Black Germans in the public eye.



I. Marcus

Berlin cop Murat Topal is one of the new generation of Turkish-German comedians.

Many of Germany's new comedians come from the Turkish community, the country's biggest ethnic minority at some 3 percent of the German population of 82 million. A new generation of young Turkish-German comedians like Kaya Yanar and Kerim Pamuk delight in playing with stereotypes and humorously confronting German audiences with their ideas about the minority.

Pamuk feels that the new wave of Turkish-German comedians reflects an increasing self-confidence among young Turkish-Germans. "These people have the necessary self-esteem to carry it off," he said in a recent interview with the news agency DPA. "It's a question of emancipation, of being able to laugh and make fun of yourself and where you come from."

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Like Turkish-German comedian Murat Topal. As a policeman in Berlin's troubled Neukölln district, his job provides him with a rich stream of material for his shows. But Topal, whose father is Turkish and mother is German, doesn't want to be seen exclusively as a 'Turkish-German' comedian. "It's true that I have a Turkish background," he says. "But for me I wanted more to show the life of a cop from Neukölln and relate things that he experiences.

"But it also plays a role that I am partly of Turkish descent," he adds. "Of course you portray the characters that you yourself have contact with. Naturally if you have a Turkish background then sometimes you yourself play Turkish characters."

Or, if you're Indian, you play Indian characters. Shihora, who has lived in Germany for 13 years, has become a mainstay on the German comedy circuit because of his club Kookaburra, one of Berlin's top comedy venues. In his own shows, he'll slip into the role of the Indian rose seller, the Bollywood performer or the yogi.

And he welcomes the growing diversity of the scene. "In the United States and other places where I play, you have black comedians, Jewish comedians, Indian comedians, everything," he says. "I'm very happy that they're slowly coming more into the comedy scene here."