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GREECE FINDS NEW LOVE FOR STAND-UP COMEDY AMID ECONOMIC TRAGEDY

The cramped basement bar heaves with laughter as the young comedians take to the microphone, riffing on daily life in austerity-slammed Greece. This is one of a growing number of open mic nights to have sprung up in the past few years as audiences find stand-up comedy in the middle of economic tragedy. Ancient Greek dramatist Aristophanes—known as the Father of Comedy—was writing plays that lampooned the worlds of politics, art and philosophy as far back as 425 BC. But stand-up here is a new art form.

“ Sick and tired of talking about politics ”



Comedian Andreas Paspatis performs on October 6, 2017 during a stand-up comedy in a bar in Thessaloniki. — AFP photos



People react as they listen to a stand-up comedian.

“Ten years ago Greeks didn’t know what stand-up was,” says professional comic Andreas Paspatis, 28, the compere of the monthly Open Mic Thessaloniki, in Greece’s second-largest city. “When I was booking gigs back then we would call the bar and when we said we’re doing stand-up, 90 percent of them would ask, ‘What’s that?’”

In Britain, successful stand-up comedians have a certain status, appearing on television panel shows and often commenting on current affairs and writing newspaper columns. But, while Greek television features sketch and comedy shows, it has no stand-ups, and there are still only about 20 professionals in the country. Many people get their first taste watching foreign stand-ups on the internet, says Ira Katsouda, one of Greece’s few female stand-ups, whose own influences include cross-dressing Briton Eddie Izzard and philosophical American Louis CK. But the Greek crisis has also helped put stand-up in the spotlight and not just because of cheap production costs, says the 33-year-old, ahead of a sell-out show. “Stand-up comedy is blossoming here. I do believe the crisis has played a big role in this. ‘It’s a cheap form of entertainment and in these dark times—what I’m going to say is a cliché, but I’m going to say it—people need to laugh,’” she said.

Enough of politics
In her routine for “Gluten-free”, touring in theatres in Thessaloniki and Athens, Katsouda however steers clear of politics and says most other stand-up comedians do the same. “The audience is sick and tired of talking about politics,” she says. At the open mic night the air is thick with sweat, smoke and laughter as the 12 stand-ups try out new material on a young audience, who have paid three euros (\$3.5) entrance fee and, in many cases, make their drinks last the length of the show.

With ages ranging from 17 to 37 and just one woman among them, the stand-ups include a schoolboy, four university students, a lawyer, a male nurse, a teacher, an unemployed man and three professionals. When the compere Paspatis asks first-timers in the audience to clap, there is loud applause. It’s an enthusiastic and friendly crowd-heckling is still a foreign concept here. “I’m really pumped up,” says 17-year-old schoolboy Dimitris Marintios, nervously running through his lines before performing for the first time.

“I think it’s a great idea, a guy on the stage telling jokes, I think it’s super cool.”

‘Coping mechanism’

Young people may be struggling with close to 45-percent unemployment “but I’m not going to talk about the crisis because it’s not that funny,” he says. When he hits the stage however, he does have a skit involving fare dodging on the city bus. “When the inspector comes on we’re all stressed, I don’t mean only the ones without a ticket but also the ones with a ticket,” he tells the audience, to building laughter.

“I always have a ticket but I’m always stressed about the moment he’s going to come up to me... as if he’s going to say, ‘That isn’t a very good ticket!’” The Greek economy nearly collapsed in 2010 under a mountain of debt and it had to be bailed out by its eurozone partners three times to prevent it bringing down the single currency bloc. Athanasios “Cain” Samaras says that for people of his generation, talking about

everyday life inevitably involves talking about the crisis, or at least its effects.

He struggles to make a living as a professional comedian, and like many young Greeks survives only by living rent-free with his parents, which he talks about in his set, along with struggling to get by on a low budget, and the rage of biting into a croissant to discover there is no chocolate filling. “I grew up with the crisis. The moment I started to need money, it was there. So yes, it’s an influence, it’s life,” he says. “It’s very difficult (to be a stand-up) but I don’t want to give up, I’m only 25 and I’m a romantic.” But outside the venue, smoking a cigarette on the step, 21-year-old waitress and stand-up fan Mary Tseyrentzidou says she does not indulge romantic thoughts of a brighter future. “People my age are a little bit more nihilistic. We can’t have any romantic thoughts, we can’t live in the clouds, so this is a coping mechanism for us.” — AFP



A sign to repeal NYC’s Cabaret Law is seen posted at the Brooklyn venue Secret Project Robot.

Ballet to end NYC’s dancing prohibition

Dancing is technically illegal in thousands of bars, clubs and restaurants in the city that never sleeps, but New York campaigners are finally in sight of getting the law overturned. The “cabaret law”, passed in 1926, requires public spaces that sell food and drink to acquire near impossible-to-obtain permits to authorize dancing indoors. Those without the permit can be fined. Repeat infractions risk bar owners losing their license to sell alcohol, which could in turn lead to bankruptcy.

Yet fewer than 100 of New York’s more than 22,000 bars, restaurants and clubs have the elusive permit, which is granted after mountains of Kafkaesque paperwork and jumping through prohibitively expensive hoops that Brooklyn councilman Rafael Espinal says unfairly discriminate against small business owners.

“It’s just ridiculous,” says the indignant 27-year-old Democrat in his basement

office. He wants to repeal the law, which could be put to a vote in the New York City Council as early as December. “Let’s finally get this law off the books so that we can go after the real problem, whether it be noise, crime, unsafe conditions,” he snorted. “Let’s not go after dancing.” Espinal and pressure groups such as the Dance Liberation Network say the law has been used historically to crack down on neighborhoods with large minority populations such as African Americans, Latinos and the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) community.

Racist

Passed initially to assert control during the time of Prohibition, some historians say its true goal was the closure of Harlem jazz bars in the 1930s, ‘40s and ‘50s to stop whites and blacks mixing. In the 1970s and ‘80s, it was used to close establishments frequented by the LGBT community as it fought for its rights. In the 1990s, mayor Rudy Giuliani used the law to get tough on clubs in his fight against crime.

Today, it is little used, but detractors say it is invoked as an excuse to shut down premises considered undesirable. One recent casualty was Andrew Muchmore, a lawyer who owns a bar that hosts live music in Williamsburg, Brooklyn’s hippest neighborhood. One night in 2013 when a group of customers were making noise outside, an inspector fined Muchmore \$200 under the cabaret law.

When he went to pay, the office couldn’t find the docket. But Muchmore went to court anyway, charging the law violated the “sacred” First Amendment of the US Constitution, which guarantees freedom of expression. “I was bothered by the principle that such a law could exist in America and that offended my sensibility as an American,” Muchmore told AFP. “I did not feel comfortable that that could exist in the 21st century in New York of all places,” he said.—AFP



Rachel Nelson, Co-Founder of the Brooklyn venue Secret Project Robot poses for a picture at Cuckoo on October 20, 2017 in New York. — AFP photos

Revolutionaries to supernovas: Glamour names women of 2017

It’s been one epic year for women, a notion definitely not lost on Glamour magazine as it named US Rep Maxine Waters, 27 key facilitators of the Women’s March on Washington and astronaut Peggy Whitson among its women of the year from the worlds of politics, entertainment, fashion, business and more.

The other winners announced Monday, ahead of a Nov. 13 gala in Brooklyn, New York, are actor Nicole Kidman, singer Solange Knowles, Syrian refugee Muzoon Almellehan, late-night TV host Samantha Bee, supermodel Gigi Hadid, Dior’s first female creative director, Maria Grazia Chiuri, and “Wonder Woman” helmswoman Patty Jenkins.

Cindi Leive, Glamour’s editor-in-chief, called them “wildly diverse changemakers” who reflect this “tumultuous and electric year for women.” All will be on hand for the magazine’s annual awards night, with a summit featuring Chelsea Clinton, Laverne Cox, Cecile Richards and other past winners performing for earlier the same day. This year’s honorees will be featured on multiple Glamour covers and in a spread for December. A look at some in the Class of 2017:



(From left) Samantha Bee, Italian designer Maria Grazia Chiuri, Gigi Hadid, director Patty Jenkins, and bottom row from left, actress Nicole Kidman, singer Solange Knowles, Rep Maxine Waters and astronaut Peggy Whitson, who are among Glamour’s Women of the Year Honorees. — AP

THE REVOLUTIONARIES

Listening especially to the strong voices of young women after Hillary Clinton’s popular vote win but Electoral College loss to Donald Trump. Glamour called the impact of the Women’s March massive, along with an outpouring around the globe.

“Vastly more women turned out for the march, not just in Washington but the marches around the world, than anyone expected,” Leive told The Associated Press in a recent interview. “There were so many hundreds of women who were involved in the organization and planning of these marches, but 27 key leaders and organizers really devoted the lion’s share of their time between Election Day and Inauguration Day.” In all, an estimated half a million made their way to Washington, where maybe 200,000 had been expected, and 5 million more gathered everywhere from Australia to Antarctica.

GIGI THE SUPERNOVA

The first time Gigi Hadid bubbled to the surface was on the reality show “The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills.” Modeling since she was around 3, she went from a Guess campaign at 17 to supermodel five years later, racking up numerous magazine covers, editorial gigs and runway shows, along

with fashion collaboration with Tommy Hilfger and an upcoming cosmetics collection with Maybelline. As Glamour writes, Hadid didn’t just take off, “she took over.”

At 22, Hadid has a 36-million strong following on Instagram and a megaplatform that could easily have been wasted. Instead, she has spoken out about gun control and marched with sister Bella to “bravely” protest Trump’s signing of an executive order that suspended immigration to the US from seven Muslim countries. Their father, real estate developer Mohamed Hadid, was born in Palestine and their mother, Yolanda Hadid, emigrated from Holland in her teens. “When I started working in fashion, it was like, Gigi, the all-American. I was very much that ‘girl next door,’” she told Glamour, “but if you read my interviews, I always talk about my parents’ cultural backgrounds.” Leive called her “incredibly wise beyond her years.”

SOLANGE BREAKS IT OPEN

With a Grammy win and a groundbreaking album, “A Seat at the Table,” Knowles is living her truth in abundance. The record, released late last year, takes on some key issues: racism, cultural

appropriation, activism and empowerment among them. “She’s such a fantastic and inspiring example of somebody who has always chosen not to do things the easy way,” Leive said. “Her sister is Beyonce. She could have become a pop star in any number of ways but she decided to really focus on her own personal vision of art.”

Knowles told the magazine that she worked on “A Seat at the Table” on and off for three years, at one point spending three months writing songs in tiny Patoutville, Louisiana, soaking up the pride, resilience and traditions of the regional culture. She worked in a house on a sugar plantation, feeling a closeness to her ancestors and feeling a “constant state of reflection.”

Part of her goal was to reclaim and change her own narrative, she said, “whether it was people challenging who wrote what on my album, whether it was about some editor commenting on my hair in a story or someone feeling like they were entitled to space in my life. I needed to unfold, reveal and discover my truth.” — AP

Oscar-nominated Iranian director challenges Trump to watch her film

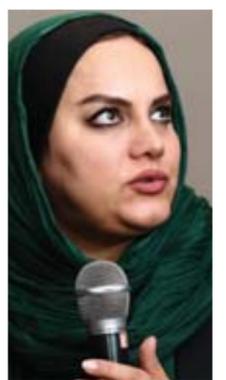
Iran’s first Oscar-nominated female director has challenged President Donald Trump to watch her film to see if its portrayal of ordinary Iranians’ experience of war and revolution will change his views of her country. The US president has called Iran a “terrorist nation” for involvement in conflicts in the Middle East, and derided an international deal that scrapped sanctions on Iran in return for curbs on what many in the West believe was a nuclear weapons program.

Narges Abyar’s Farsi-language film “Nafas” (Breath) follows a young girl, Bahar, living through the changes that follow Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution and the start of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980 with her impoverished family. Her greatest fear is losing the chronically asthmatic father who is bringing her and her three brothers and sisters up on his own, and

she spends much of her time making sure that he is still breathing. Bahar’s devout grandmother, far from being kindly, punishes her for refusing to go to Koran school.

The film and Abyar’s Oscar nomination have angered hardline conservatives in Iran’s establishment, who call the Iran-Iraq war the “Sacred Defence” and consider the movie anti-Islamic. “Three thousand (Iranian) children were killed during the war. Why should I not show all these?” Abyar told Reuters in an interview. “This film promotes peace.” She said it could also “help American society ... to understand that Iranians are not terrorists, as claimed by some politicians”. “Trump is using the language of threat against Iran ... what will he think if he watches Nafas? Will he continue to threaten Iran?”

“I wish I were a boy”— Reuters



Narges Abyar