

Office Envy & Booze & Art of the Con

Sneaking
away from the
office for a
midday workout
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Jon Stewart on the Nile

Comedian Bassem Youssef tests Cairo's sense of humor in his wildly popular program modeled after *The Daily Show*. By Willem Marx

Photograph by David Degner

Etc. Television

The studio lights come up, illuminating a stenciled graffiti panda behind the anchor chair, and the former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed ElBaradei, bounds onto the stage. The one-time candidate for Egypt's presidency seems to have buffed up and grown taller, while the eyes behind his familiar tortoiseshell frames are today an unexpected blue. Stagehands stand around giggling and snapping photographs as the impostor is revealed; his laugh is unmistakable, loud, high, and infectious. ElBaradei is in fact television host Bassem Youssef in makeup and a bald cap. He quickly hushes the chuckles, adjusts his lapel microphone, sits down, and addresses camera two in ElBaradei's quiet, measured tone.

It's the fifth of seven impersonations Youssef has done during a 14-hour day of filming for an upcoming episode of his TV show. For a man who claims to be new to the art of mimicry, he seems to be doing a pretty good job. His take on a Salafi presidential candidate is sufficiently bearded and intense, while the arrogance and evasiveness of a former Hosni Mubarak lackey is uncannily accurate. The camera operators regularly snort in recognition.

In the past year, this 38-year-old cardiothoracic surgeon with his brand of aggressively sarcastic and quirky humor has become the runaway success of the new Egyptian media landscape. What started as a handful of YouTube webisodes following Mubarak's ouster has, tens of millions of views later, turned into a fresh kind of programming for the Middle East's largest TV market. His show, *Al Bernameg (The Program)*, now appears thrice weekly on Egyptian satellite broadcaster ONtv. By next season, he hopes it will run five nights a week.

"In Egypt and the Arab world in general," Youssef explains from the makeup artist's chair between takes, "you had these really serious talk shows, or the slapstick, farce, ha-ha stuff. I can't be placed in either category." He looks down at one of two cell phones and ignores an incoming call before continuing. "Our aim is to inform but also to entertain people."

That mission statement could well belong to Jon Stewart, and Youssef clearly enjoys the comparison. "I love the guy," he says of *The Daily Show*'s host. "And I always dreamed of actually having his kind of model in Egypt." Youssef has even picked up some of Stewart's comedic tics, including the mug of mock befuddlement in response to clips of talk show blowhards.

Youssef's take on the country's twisted politics has become a water cooler fixture for Egypt's latest generation of cynics. "Right now people wait for the show to listen to our opinion, and that's very important," he explains. "But I hope next year they can actually wait for our show to listen to the news," if—as is planned—the show broadcasts live.



Youssef (in blue and green) with his team of writers, many of them unpaid interns

According to Hani Sabra, an Egypt analyst at the political research firm Eurasia Group, Youssef's ambitions go hand in hand with his hard-charging approach. "I think what he does right now, it's quite daring," Sabra says from New York. "He mocks the military leadership of Egypt, he mocks all the politicians, and I think that this was not something that was tolerated under the Mubarak era."

Although Youssef's broadcast has proved hugely popular among the country's younger viewers—he estimates most of his audience is under the age of 30—it has its share of critics. "Even my mum has turned against me," he says. "She thinks what I'm doing makes people more angry, though partly she's scared because she's seen media people targeted."

He says his host network, ONtv—owned by Egyptian billionaire Naguib Sawiris—backs him all the way. Despite receiving several far more lucrative offers from around the Gulf since his online show took off last year, he and his executive producer did not hesitate in their choice of satellite network ONtv for their first season. "I fit in perfectly," Youssef says. "It's the only channel that's been consistent with its politics, that's been for the revolution since Day One."

One of the station's news anchors, an elegant woman with long dark hair, pops into the makeup room. Youssef's forehead is being dabbed with a prayer spot—the sign of religious devotion visible on many devout Muslims—for the next segment. Youssef turns to her, soliciting support for his views about ONtv with mock seriousness. "We are against Islam, we do not want Egypt to be stable, we are the dogs of Naguib Sawiris, right?" She smiles and nods, and Youssef looks back at the mirror. "It's the same accusation as 'liberal elite media' in the States," he sighs.

Youssef's network is "the only channel ... that's been for the revolution since Day One"

Youssef will observe
Stewart firsthand during
a June New York visit



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audience

Although ONtv took a financial risk on the popular newcomer and his satirical program, it's likely the network will turn a profit on its modest investment—"we got half the budget we asked for," he says—in this first season. Youssef proudly says his show is unique in the Middle East for selling advertising directly against its online content. A partnership with YouTube earns ONtv \$1 for every 1,000 unique views online, and Youssef's producers are hoping for 50 million views by the end of the season in April. Blue-chip companies such as Coca-Cola advertise during the broadcast, which helped *Al Bernameg* become the top-selling show in Egypt during the critical Ramadan period, when Muslims traditionally spend the evenings at home with their families and viewing figures correspondingly spike.

By U.S. standards, the show's production budget is tiny, and this appears to frustrate Youssef, who was using his own money to hire the makeup artist. "I'm very cheap, by the way," he told me after I commented on the expense of his buying a whole new wardrobe for the show. "I don't like paying a lot of money on stuff ... at all ... never." He looked into the middle distance. Comedic pause. "Jon Stewart wears Giorgio Armani. I've seen that in the credits."

Youssef spends much of the week at a friend's apartment-turned-makeshift-office high above the teeming downtown traffic of Cairo. Here he and his team work on scripts for the shows, which are filmed back-to-back every Saturday at ONtv's studio, which is half an hour's drive outside the city. The majority of his writers are interns, and though they often work late into the night, there is no money to pay them. According to Mohamed Khalifa, a 27-year-old graduate of the Toronto Film School who is also the *Al Bernameg* studio director, the young people work for free because



Youssef made up
as former presiden-
tial candidate
Mohamed ElBaradei

of Youssef's energy. "He's good at what he does. He is a perfectionist. He loves it," Khalifa says.

One year after his first online episode, Youssef has become such a popular TV personality in Egypt that the invitations for conferences and media appearances are beginning to overwhelm him. Yet his grueling schedule—he just spent 10 days filming in Tunisia—will be worth the trouble, if he is able to raise "a whole generation for a new kind of media."

In the car back into Cairo late at night, the only light comes from Youssef's iPhone as he sits in the back seat and catches up with a day's worth of texts, e-mails, and Facebook messages that have flooded in. At the same time, he talks absentmindedly about the fractious and partisan media environment in post-revolutionary Egypt, describing his shock at "how people believe the most stupid things ever." He pauses, aware of my notebook. "Let's just say I'm annoyed at how the ignorance of the people is being used against them." Having treated protesters at one of several makeshift hospitals in Tahrir Square last year, he has unimpeachable revolutionary bona fides. There are few indications, though, that he will return to regular surgery in the near future.

While Youssef seems hesitant to rabble-rouse, he feels compelled to ridicule, provoke, and cajole as part of his job. The overwhelmingly positive audience response to his broadcasting persona has blossomed into a loyal weekly following, he says. "It's like me waiting for Jon Stewart, like, 'Hey, what's Jon going to say about that?'"

This June, Youssef may get a chance to find out. He and his team plan to visit New York to spend a couple of days behind the scenes at Comedy Central, shadowing their counterparts at *The Daily Show*. **B**

