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# Will the Real Funnymen Please Stand Up?

## A group of young humorists is set on building an English-language comedy scene in Moscow – and they're not kidding

By Alastair Gill

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Denis Nikolin (left) uses the 'awkward and weird situations' he encounters every day as material for his jokes. **VLADIMIR RUBANOV**

Ever hear the one about the Russian and the Croat who set up an English stand-up comedy group in Moscow? For Denis Nikolin and Igor Mondae this is no joke. The two young comedians, joined by 10 other aspiring funnymen from around the world, are establishing a bona fide English-language stand-up scene in a city where stand-up culture has yet to really take root.This is despite Moscow's large expat community and recent visits by big-name acts such as Dylan Moran, Eddie Izzard and Jimmy Carr.

English Moscow Comedy (EMC) was founded last September by Nikolin, former art director

for expat bar Jim ‘N’ Jack’s, and Mondae, a Croat who has been living in Moscow for four years.

The two have been instrumental in developing Moscow’s English-language stand-up scene, which began around three years ago when budding comedians started to take advantage of open-mic evenings to test their skill.

Nikolin has been doing stand-up sets for three years now, while Mondae started in Oct. 2014 when friends encouraged him to try after attending several open-mic evenings as an audience member.

Now, after numerous shows in English, he feels that even when he performs in his home country, the differences in humor and language mean that he only feels comfortable delivering a set in English: “I feel funny in English, but not in Croatian,” he says, adding that UK comedian Ricky Gervais is his biggest influence.

The 12 members of EMC have seen their popularity grow to the extent that, where initially their shows were attracting 20-30 people, they can now count on a regular audience of 40-50 at weekends.

Spurred on by this success, EMC is now attempting to take things to the next level. Last year some of the group did a three-country tour of the Balkans and U.S. comedian and EMC member Blake Brown performed at Edinburgh's Fringe Festival. The group is now preparing for its first full-length show in Moscow.

Titled “Comedy Heroes: The Big Stand-Up Show,” the evening, which takes place on April 1 at the Dom Kino movie center, will feature six EMC comics performing 15-minute sets. The event will showcase the best of the material each of the comedians has developed over the last few years.

While EMC's shows usually draw plenty of expats, the audiences also include a healthy number of Russians, who Nikolin describes as “fans of comedy, people who don’t have a very good level of English but understand comedy.”

Is there such a thing as “Russian stand-up”? Not really, according to Nikolin. “We had something different in the Soviet Union, we had monologue artists like [Arkady] Raikin, [Mikhail] Zadornov... and this was like some sort of stand-up,” he says, adding that the fall of the USSR effectively spelled an end to this genre as a comic form: “Everybody wanted to copy the West – but humor was different back then.”

Stand-up has taken a long time to develop in Russia compared to the rest of Eastern Europe, partly because of a failure to understand the conventions of the genre.

“Sometimes it happens that we have 50 people in the room and maybe 10 of them know what stand-up is, another 10 have seen it on TV or YouTube and a lot of people are not even

familiar with the genre itself," says Mondae. "They know it exists, they know people come up to the mic and say some jokes, but they don't understand the culture of stand-up – what is a set-up, what is a punchline, what is the host's job, who is a heckler?"

This lack of familiarity means that often Russian audience members who challenge the comedians are not even aware that they are heckling. As Mondae explains, many "just heckle and don't know they're heckling because they're just random people that don't know what's going on."

"We have workshops to help each other, because some people were very natural at dealing with hecklers, and others were not," says Blake Brown, a U.S. comedian and EMC member.

"Because you have to keep control on the stage. If you let the audience take over, then you're done."

**Embed:**

The diverse nature of their audiences means that EMC has to take a one-size-fits-all approach to both humor and to the kind of material they deliver – the result of a process of trial and error that at times has been frustrating.

"People's ability to understand humor here is limited. I started with one liners and very short jokes, puns, wordplay and so on, but it doesn't go well with non-native speakers, because if something goes over their heads, it's really hard for them to catch the point," says Mondae, who started off by doing Jimmy Carr-style one-liners before finding that they didn't go down well with local audiences.

"They like to hear a story about a foreigner living in Moscow way more than they like to hear just a sentence and a punchline that they will or won't get depending on their level of English and knowledge of pop culture," he says.

EMC's comedians now base their sets on observational comedy and storytelling, taking inspiration from everyday life and situations that are specific to Russia and Moscow: "If you're doing stand-up in Moscow, you need to have a metro joke," says Mondae. Gags about marshrutki and clapping on planes are also part of the "starter pack" for any budding English-language stand-up comic in Moscow.

"Every single thing can be turned into a joke. We always keep an eye and an ear open for any situation that can potentially be something funny," says Arun Khurana, who is from an Indian family but has lived all his life in Moscow.

"You wouldn't believe how many awkward and weird situations I encounter every day," says Nikolin. "I'm trying to humorize them. At first it was like a kind of therapy for me."

For EMC, there are no taboos, but the group decided early on to put restrictions on what Nikolin calls "cheap tricks" — jokes about politics, gender, sexuality, and religion. "We

want to be fair and ⊠correct to everyone — not to insult anyone, not to put anyone on the ⊠spot, not to make anyone feel uncomfortable. Our job is to make people ⊠laugh, to make people feel good and happy," says Mondae.

"We⊠ don't censor anyone, but people don't generally talk about politics or ⊠religion that much – not because we think it's something that cannot be ⊠mentioned or joked about, but in this current atmosphere it's not going ⊠to be received well, so why waste your time and why offend someone?"

At the full-length show on April 1, Nikolin, Mondae, and Khurana and Brown will be joined by Russian Gleb Tugushev and Italian Cristiano Righi. The comics are optimistic that the event could be the start of something big for the group.

"If⊠ this is a success, it will show that this is not a hobby, not just ⊠something that's happening in Moscow – this is the real deal," says ⊠Khurana. "This is something that can be a great foundation to build ⊠upon, and I think people will definitely be taking it more seriously ⊠after that."

If all goes well, that's the only thing audiences will be taking seriously.

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