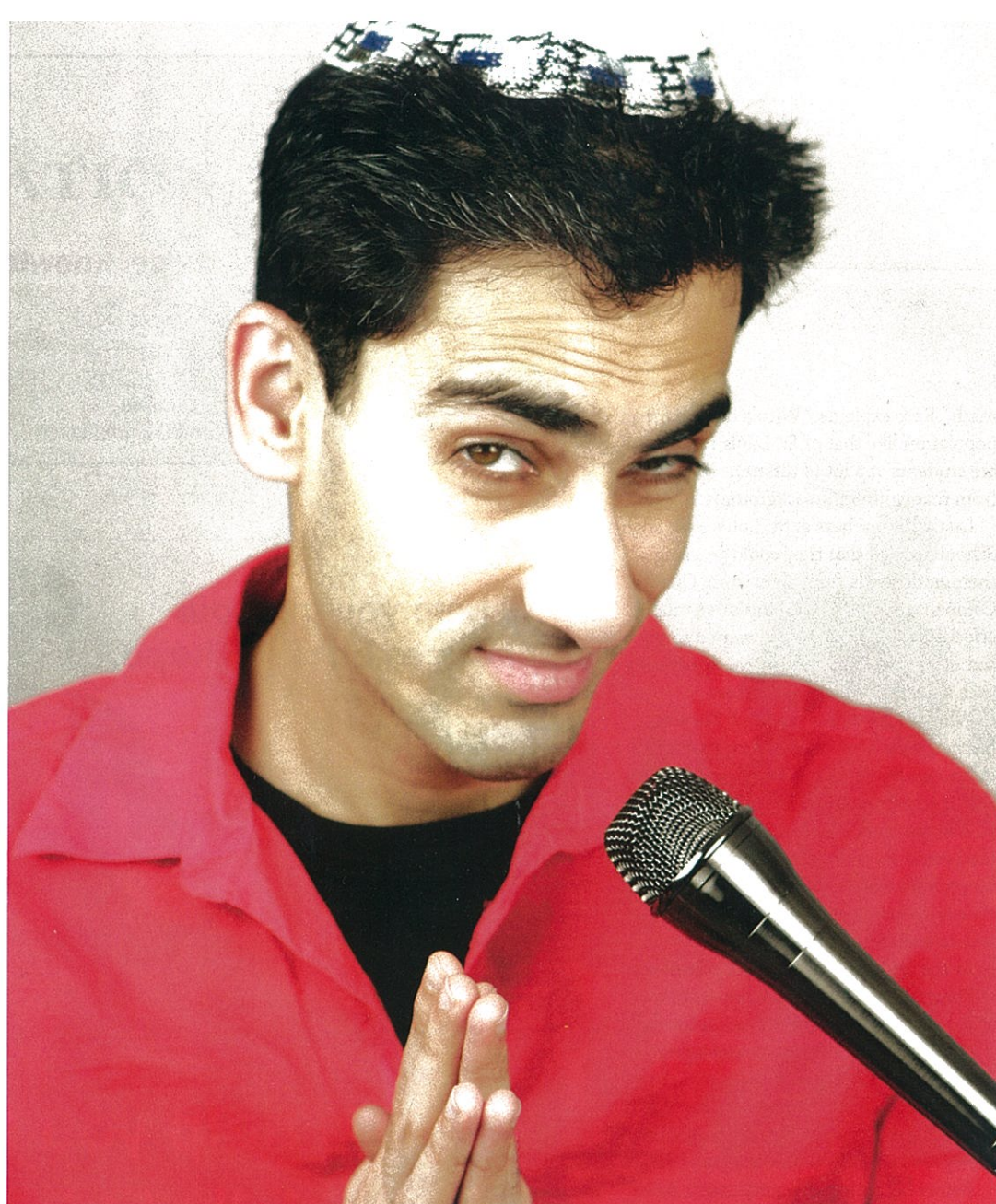


[DEPARTMENT]
ARTS

BY
MAGGIE
SOUCHERAY
SONNEK

Catch Samson Koletkar's comedy show at the festival. January 31 7:30 p.m. Recommended for ages 18 and up.



Ha Ha, Oy!

The Twin Cities Jewish Humor Festival comes to town this month.

CLAIRE AVITABILE HAD ONE OBJECTIVE: Get people out of the house in January. After a little brainstorming, Avitabile, the director of performing arts at Sabes Jewish Community Center, decided on a humor festival. A Jewish humor festival.

"I dreamed it up," she says. "I have a lot of experience with the Minnesota Fringe Festival and the Twin Cities Jewish Film Festival. I like that festival experience. I like that people could come and sample different forms of comedy."

Avitabile channeled her theater connections and, through networking and brainstorming, launched the Twin Cities Jewish Humor Festival in 2010. "We had

27 performances that first year," she laughs. "We've since learned that less is more." Now gearing up for the festival's sixth year, Avitabile has gathered nine performances for what she describes as a two-week, Fringe-like festival of one-person shows, stand-up comedy, workshops, film and special events that celebrate Jewish contributions to the world of humor.

One of the most anticipated is a performance by magician, comedian and theater guru Dan Kamin. His one-of-a-kind event, "Funny Bones: The Comedy of Charlie Chaplin," takes a look at the iconic actor, both through the roles he played in film and the legacy he's left. The event includes a showing of Chaplin's short

film *The Pawnshop*, accompanied by a discussion and live performance elements. "Under my guidance, the audience will deconstruct the film," says Kamin. "We uncover the secrets and learn why the film is still funny 100 years later. You won't find any other films that have this effect. Silent movies have nearly vanished from [our modern] era."

Another sought-after performer, Samson Koletkar ("the world's only Indian-Jewish stand-up comedian") is preparing for his inaugural Minnesota winter experience. As a first-generation immigrant to the U.S., he brings a fresh approach to clean humor, with a global perspective. "Most people talk to me about my accent," he chuckles. "But I say, 'Actually, there are about a billion people who think you have an accent.'" During Koletkar's childhood, finding others who shared his heritage—Jewish, growing up in India—was rare. When he chose to pursue comedy, his parents were hesitant, as no other Indian Jew had blazed that trail—yet.

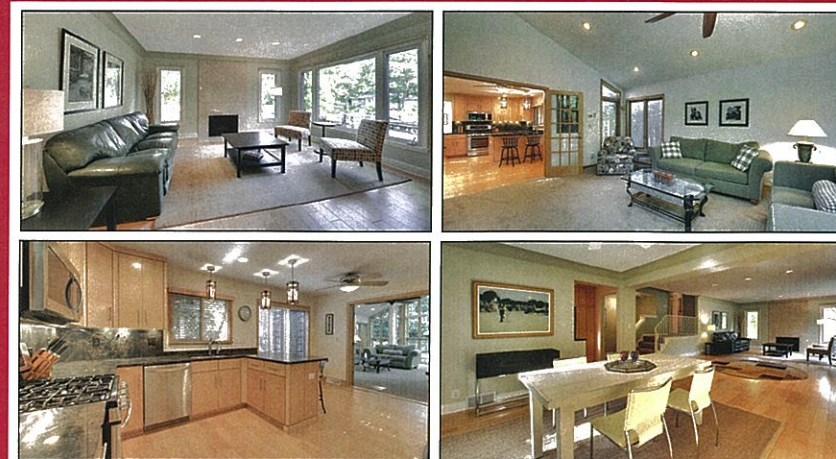
"My parents have since seen me do shows live." He adds with a laugh, "They say, 'As long as you're making people laugh instead of having them throw stuff at you, we're OK with this.'" As for preparing his material, Koletkar has a rough idea of what he'll say, but he notes that a lot depends on how the crowd reacts. "Sometimes something happens that takes the show on a different tangent," Koletkar says.

Claire Avitabile, who specifies the age-appropriateness for each show (Koletkar's is recommended for folks 18 and up), is OK with some ambiguity. "Comedy is the most subjective art form," she says. "I can't ask for a script to approve because comedians are writing jokes every minute. I can't ask to proofread content. People take the chance to come—but none of us are 100 percent sure what's going to happen."

Most festival events take place at Sabes Jewish Community Center in the heart of St. Louis Park. "I love this festival so much," Avitabile says. "When people come out of the theater, they're still laughing—remembering a joke or talking to their friends about the show. That glow—that's so rare to find in our world right now. It's nice to have a little moment of fun." //

PHOTO COURTESY OF SAMSON KOLETKAR

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