



Rudolph Valentino

HENRY CLUZ

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GEORGE MELFORD'S PRODUCTION

"THE SHEIK"

WITH
AGNES AYRES and RUDOLPH VALENTINO

from the novel by EDITH PL. HULL
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It's a Paramount Picture

Mary



HOLLYWOOD'S BAD ARABS

Sleazy Princes, Greedy Sheikhs, and Evil Terrorists: How a De-Humanizing Ethnic Stereotype Persists

By Jack G. Shaheen

Is it easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for an Arab to appear as a genuine human being?" I posed this question forty years ago, when I first began researching Arab images. My children, Michael and Michele, who were six and five years old at the time, are, in part, responsible. Their cries, "Daddy, Daddy, they've got bad Arabs on TV," motivated me to devote my professional career to educating people about the stereotype.

It wasn't easy. Back then my literary agent spent years trying to find a publisher; he told me he had never before encountered so much prejudice. He received dozens of rejection letters before my 1984 book, *The TV Arab*, the first ever to document TV's Arab images, made its debut, thanks to Ray and Pat Browne, who headed up Bowling Green State University Popular Press. The Brownes came to our rescue. Regrettably, the damaging stereotypes that infiltrated the world's living rooms when *The TV Arab* was first released—billionaires, bombers, and belly dancers—are still with us today. In my subsequent book *Reel Bad Arabs* I documented both positive and negative images in Hollywood portrayals of Arabs dating back to *The Sheik* (1921) starring Rudolph Valentino. The Arab-as-villain in cinema remains a pervasive motif.

This stereotype has a long and powerful history in the United States, but since the September 11 attacks it has extended its malignant wingspan, casting a shadow of distrust, prejudice, and fear over the lives of many American Arabs. Arab Americans are as separate and diverse in their national origins, faith, traditions, and politics as the general society in which they live. Yet a common thread unites them now—pervasive bigotry and vicious stereotypes to which they are increasingly subjected in TV shows, motion pictures, video games, and in films released by special interest groups.

Reel images have real impacts on real people. Citing a 2012 poll, journalist William Roberts asserts

◁ Movie poster of the Hollywood film *The Sheik*, 1921. *Cinema Photos/Corbis*

that “Fifty-five percent of Arab American Muslims have experienced discrimination and 71 percent fear future discrimination,” including false arrests to death threats. After 9/11, as many as two thousand persons may have been detained, virtually all of whom are Arab and Muslim immigrants. Roberts goes on to explain that 60 percent of Americans have never met a Muslim, and that since 9/11, thirty new anti-Islamic hate groups have formed in the United States.

Nowadays, our reel villains are not only Arab Muslims; some Muslims hail from Russia, Pakistan, Iran, or Afghanistan; others are homegrown, both black and white American villains who embrace radical Islam. Given this new mix of baddies, no wonder we view Muslims far worse today than in the months after 9/11. In October 2001, an ABC poll found that 47 percent of Americans had a favorable view of Islam. As of this writing, only 27 percent of Americans view Muslims favorably.

Thirteen years have passed since the September 11 attacks. Regrettably, stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims persist, replayed and revived time and time again. Sweeping mischaracterizations continue spreading like a poisonous virus. One of the first lessons that our children learn from their media about Arabs, and one of the last lessons the elderly forget, is: Arab equals Muslim equals Godless enemy.

Indeed, there are some bad Arabs and Muslims out there—but that goes for people of all races and religions. No one group has a monopoly on the good and innocent. But this stereotype is so prevalent, so powerful, that people internalize it and, due to the absence of positive Arab and Muslim images in popular culture, cannot separate the reel from the real. You don’t tar an entire race or religion, hundreds of millions of people, based on the actions of a small minority.

From *Tintin* to *Taken*

The pre-9/11 Arab is the post-9/11 Arab: Reel Arabs appear as terrorists, devious and ugly Arab sheikhs, and as reel Muslims intent on terrorizing, kidnapping, and sexually abusing Western heroines. Even reel evil mummies return; this time they pop up in the United States. *Legion of the Dead* (2005), for example, is a low-budget, you-should-never-see-this horror film; it was so bad that I fast-forwarded through most scenes. The camera reveals an Egyptian burial ground, located not in the Egyptian desert but in the woods outside of Los Angeles. Here, the resurrected evil princess, Aneh-Tet, and her reincarnated male mummies go on a kill-them-all rampage; they melt some people’s faces, and terminate others with bolts of lightning.

In his children’s movie, *The Adventures of Tintin* (2011), Steven Spielberg falls back on the familiar Arabland setting, filling it with not-so-nice characters, especially the Arab hagglers in the souk. We also see reel dense and disposable robed guards patrolling a palace that is ruled by a weird, bearded Arab sheikh called Ben Salaad.

Arab, Afghan, and Pakistani Muslim villains appear in films such as: *Taken* (2008), *Taken 2* (2012), *Iron Man* (2008), *Killer Elite* (2011), and *G.I. Joe: Retaliation* (2013). I found *Iron Man* difficult to watch because so many reel dead Arab bodies littered the screen. *Elite* displays all-too-familiar slurs. Here, reel Arabs appear as dysfunctional, mute, and unscrupulous “camel jockeys.” One of Hollywood’s ugliest reel sheikhs ever, an oily Omani potentate who kidnaps and imprisons the Western hero, is tagged the “old sheikh bastard.”

One-liners and scenes having nothing to do with Arabs continue to prowl silver screens. My friend Chuck Yates who taught at Earlham College called my attention to Seth MacFarlane’s *A Million Ways to Die in the West* (2014), a film with Western movie clichés that takes gratuitous jabs at Arabs, like Mel Brooks’s 1974 film, *Blazing Saddles*. In *Saddles*, Brooks links robed Arabs brandishing rifles with a long line of bad guys, notably Nazis. *Million Ways* contains two “Arab” scenes that merit our attention. One scene shows a principal character expressing relief that he has no Arab ancestry. But “the real howler,” observes Yates, “is in the gunfight showdown at the end. Here, our hero stalls for time by telling his opponent that he can’t fight until after he recites the Arab Muslim death chant, and then proceeds to holler a long string of gibberish.”

About five minutes into the entertaining children’s movie *Nim’s Island* (2008), we see the young heroine reading *My Arabian Adventure*, a book by her favorite author, Alex Rover. Abruptly, the camera cuts to the desert where five armed Arab bandits hold Alex, the Western hero, hostage. Alex, sitting blindfolded atop a camel, his hands tied behind his back, asks, “How am I going to die? Will it be by my captives’ guns? Or will it be death by thirst?” The Arab leader chuckles, “A special hole, just for you! Ever heard of the pit of spiders!” Alex smiles, then hops off his camel and trounces all five armed Arabs. End!

Critics were unanimous in praising Matthew McConaughey’s Oscar-winning role in *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), and rightfully so. He gives a sensitive, sympathetic performance as a man stricken with AIDS who overcomes numerous obstacles in order to help AIDS patients get the medication they need. Critics, however, failed to note the blatant defamation of Arabs by McConaughey’s character. Seven minutes into the film, he and his cowboy pals take a break from working at the rodeo. They sit, smoke, and discuss possible future employment.

Friend: You think any more about [going to] Saudi Arabia? They need guys over there.

McConaughey character: Fuck no! Why would you want to go and work for a sand nigger, anyway?

Friend: Because they pay five times as much, that’s why.

McConaughey character: They got hot ass over there?
Friend: It's a Muslim country; you can't fuck the women.
McConaughey character: That takes me right out, then.
[The three men laugh.]

Homeland and Islamophobia

Critics contended that the 2014 fall line-up on prime time TV would be the most diverse ever. They cited ten new shows that would feature Asian, African American, and Latino characters in leading roles. ABC Studio's executive vice president, Patrick Moran, boasted, "Maybe other networks are now rethinking diversity, but for us it always felt that's what the world looked like, and it's just a more contemporary approach to have more diversity reflected in our shows."

ABC's Moran and TV critics did not mention the absence of Arab American characters. Nor did he or any other TV executive say that since 1983 the major networks—ABC, CBS, NBC, and now Fox—have not featured an Arab American protagonist, ever, in an ongoing series.

So, I will break this silence by sharing with you TV's shameful history regarding its evolving portraits of America's Arabs. Before 9/11 they were basically invisible on TV screens. As far as most TV producers were concerned, Arab Americans did not exist. Only Danny Thomas in the *Make Room for Daddy* series (1953–1965) and Jamie Farr in *M*A*S*H* (1972–1983) could be identified by their Arab roots.

Perhaps they were better off being invisible. Soon after the September 11 attacks, TV programmers did make America's Arabs and Muslims visible, vilifying them as disloyal Americans and as reel threatening terrorists. They surfaced in numerous popular TV shows as villains, intent on blowing up America. As I point out in my 2008 book, *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11*, as viewers we were bombarded with images showing them as clones of Osama bin Laden.

The vilification process began with the Fox TV series *24*, and the 2002 CBS TV movie *The President's Man: A Line in the Sand*. Other TV series expanded on and embellished the stereotype: shows like *The West Wing*, *Hawaii Five-0*, *NCIS*, *NCIS Los Angeles*, *Tyrant*, *Homeland*, *The Agency*, *Sleeper Cell*, and *The Unit*. Regrettably, most film and TV critics remained silent about these dangerous new images.

An Israeli presence on American TV helped solidify the stereotype. CBS TV producer Donald P. Bellisario led the way. Bellisario also demonized Arabs and Muslims in his successful series, *JAG* (1995–2005). In 2005, the producer introduced an Israeli heroine, Mossad agent Ziva David, to his highly rated *NCIS* series. In the series, David, the only full-time Israeli character on American mainstream television, wore a Star of David and an IDF uniform jacket to show the "military influence" on her character.

Like some episodes of *JAG*, some *NCIS* episodes also advanced prejudices, showing David and her friends trouncing Arab baddies, in America and in Israel. Bellisario might easily have squashed stereotypes by adding a heroic Arab character to his series, an agent named Laila Rafeedie, for instance. David and Rafeedie could be friends, working side-by-side with the *NCIS* team to solve murders and catch the bad guys.

Then there's *Homeland*, which remains Islamophobic in its basic structure. Most of the Arab and Muslim characters in this series are villains, linked to terrorism. As journalist Laila Al-Ali said in the *Guardian*: "Viewers are left to believe that Muslims/Arabs participate in terrorist networks like Americans send holiday cards." Also, Islam is vilified; when a captured American marine is tortured instead of turning to the Islam of peace, he embraces Hollywood's stereotype, the Islam of violence. The Showtime series functions somewhat like *24*, providing a means for the national security state to publicize fantasies of an Arab Muslim terrorist threat.

The FX channel's much-hyped filmed-in-Israel series, *Tyrant*, displays some of the most racist anti-Arab images I have ever seen on American television. The series pits Arabs against Arabs. Consider the first episode: After a twenty-year absence, Barry (Bassem) Al-Fayed and his all-American family return to the mythical Arab nation, Abbudin. Bassem feels obligated to see his father, Khaled, who rules this violent nation, and to attend his nephew's wedding. Immediately, ominous music underscores the action and the camera reveals Khaled's other son, the bare-chested, stupid, ruthless, and "insane" Jamal. He brutally rapes a woman in her home while her family sits passively, unable to prevent the abuse. Later, at his son's wedding, Jamal violates his son's new wife, his own daughter-in-law, by breaking her hymen with his fingers in the bathroom and showing the blood.

Almost all of *Tyrant*'s Arab characters are backward, barbaric types. Or they are rapists. Or they are warmongers. Or they are rich and spoiled. The show even depicts an Arab child as a murderer. Repeated flashbacks show Khaled the dictator directing his men to kill scores of unarmed women and men. As the massacre ends, Khaled orders one of his sons to shoot dead a helpless man begging for mercy; when the boy refuses, his younger brother does the deed. Week after week, the series fueled anti-Arab sentiment.

Tyrant's executive producers Gideon Raff and Howard Gordon were responsible for Showtime's *Homeland*, and they also worked together on Fox's *24*, so I was not entirely surprised. But I am dismayed that many TV reviewers gave the series a thumbs-up. The Hollywood Reporter wrote, "The plot is stirring and entertaining." The *Boston Herald* called *Tyrant* "the most engrossing new show of the summer." At least *TIME* panned it: "[*Tyrant*] fails badly... [Arab characters] sneer, suffer, and read ridiculous dialogue."

In 2012, “a small group of creators and industry types has built a pipeline between Israel and the Los Angeles entertainment world nine thousand miles away,” writes journalist Steven Zeitchik. The first-ever Israeli-made drama—*Dig*—was sold directly to series (the USA network) for U.S. audiences. *Dig* focuses on Peter, an American FBI agent stationed in Jerusalem. A press release states: “While investigating the murder of a woman, he stumbles into a two thousand-year-old conspiracy embedded in the archaeological mysteries of the ancient city.” Nir Barkat, the city’s mayor, is pleased that *Dig* is being filmed in Jerusalem. He was also pleased with the Brad Pitt film *World War Z*, in 2012. In *Z*, the film’s characters and subtitles repeatedly state, incorrectly, that “Jerusalem is the capital of Israel.”

All-American Muslims

Despite the negative images discussed here, many positive developments are also taking place. Several impressive TV series and documentaries focused on Detroit and Dearborn’s Arab Americans and Muslim Americans, successfully exposing the impact of injurious stereotypes. The programs also underscored how America’s Arabs and Muslims—from football players to law enforcement officers—are pretty much like other Americans who contribute much to the greater society.

In November 2011, the TLC channel began telecasting its reality show *All-American Muslim*. Eight episodes of this critically acclaimed series focus on five Muslim American families from Dearborn. Though the series was short-lived, it inspired a nationwide conversation about what it means to openly practice one’s religion; it also revealed the discrimination America’s Arabs and Muslims sometimes face. For example, in December a special interest conservative group, the Florida Family Association, called on advertisers to boycott the series, calling it “propaganda that riskily hides the Islamic agenda’s clear and present danger to American liberties and traditional values.” Most sponsors stayed with the series, but the hardware store Lowe’s, and the travel planning website Kayak.com, pulled their ads. There was some concern that the reality series would be taken off the air. But the series was not canceled. In fact, the advertising time for the remaining episodes sold out.

Commissioned by Detroit Public Television, producer/director Alicia Sams explored the diversity of Arab Americans in her 13-part Emmy Award-winning series, *Arab American Stories* (2012). Each half-hour features three short films, directed by independent filmmakers from around the country, profiling a wide variety of ordinary Arab Americans. Episodes focus on people such as Father George Shalhoub of Livonia, Michigan, who turned St. Mary’s Antiochian Orthodox Church into a positive force for its churchgoers; Diane Rehm, a national radio host of *The Diane Rehm Show*; Fahid Daoud and his brothers, whose chain of Gold Star Chili restaurants

began in Cincinnati and spread throughout southern Ohio; researcher and radiologist Dr. Elias Zerhouni; hip-hop artist, poet, and activist Omar Offendum, who offers contemporary messages of cultural understanding; and Hassan Faraj, a Lebanese-American butcher whose dedication to his work and family inspired a local theater company to write a performance piece about him.

One year later, PBS telecast three one-hour episodes of *Life of Muhammad*, hosted by the noted journalist and author Rageh Omaar. The series gave viewers fresh and timely insights into the Islamic faith by focusing on Muhammad's life, from his early days in Mecca, to his struggles and eventual acceptance of his role as prophet, his exodus to Medina, the founding of Islam's first constitution, and finally to his death and the legacy he left behind. Some of the world's leading academics and commentators on Islam—British novelist and historian Tom Holland, Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali, and Georgetown University professor of religion John L. Esposito—spoke about Islamic attitudes toward charity, women, social equality, religious tolerance, and Islam's timely role in the world today.

Some episodes in the commercial TV series, *Robin Hood* (2006–2009), show Robin wielding so-called “Saracen” weapons, such as a recurve bow and a scimitar. The series offers heroic images of an Arab Muslim woman. The British-Indian actress, Anjali Jay, is featured as Djaq, one of Robin's loyal “Merry Men.” Numerous episodes show Djaq helping Robin and his friends bring down all the villains.

Two commercial networks acted responsibly, shelving series loaded with stereotypes. In March 2014, The Walt Disney Company, parent company of ABC and ABC Family, canceled *Alice in Arabia*, a series about Arab kidnappers who oppress women. The plot is worth noting: an American teen is “kidnapped by her Saudi relatives and whisked off to Saudi Arabia, where she is kept as a prisoner in her Muslim grandfather's home.” Alone in Saudi Arabia, “she must count on her independent spirit and wit to find a way to return home while surviving life behind the veil.”

A Disney spokesperson stated that the series was canceled because “the current conversation [with the Arab American Anti-Discrimination Committee and other organizations] surrounding our pilot was not what we had envisioned and is certainly not conducive to the creative process, so we've decided not to move forward with this project.” This explanation is pure fluff. If I ever meet the CEO of The Walt Disney Company, Robert Iger, I will ask him if ABC would even think of doing a similar series like *Alice in Africa*, *Cathy in China*, or *Marie in Mexico*? If not, why consider *Alice in Arabia*?

Disney was criticized for its portrayal of one of Hollywood's most ruthless sorcerers, Jafar, in their 1992 animated film, *Aladdin*. So why did Disney resurrect Jafar in the ABC 2013–2014 series, *Once Upon a Time in Wonderland*? Here, the evil magician

terrorizes and kills people: Jafar freezes some, then turns them into dust. Not surprisingly, no heroic Arab characters appear in *Wonderland*. When, if ever, will Disney cease vilifying Arabs? Will a Disney spokesperson ever say: “We are sorry for advancing prejudices. Disney is a family network; we care about children. We are not in the business of demonizing a people, a religion, and a region. This will never happen again.”

Weeks after *Alice* was axed, Fox unexpectedly canceled one of their well-publicized, 13-episode series, *Hieroglyph*. Set in ancient Egypt, *Hieroglyph* was about palace intrigue, seductive concubines, criminal underbellies, and divine sorcerers. “We wanted to do a show about deceit, sex, intrigue in the court, and fantastical goings-on—no better place to set that than ancient Egypt,” said Fox entertainment chairman Kevin Reilly.

Yet, Egyptomania persists. In 2015, Spike TV plans to telecast a series about King Tut. The programs will “dramatize the royal soap opera that surrounded the throne in 1333 BC.” And in 2016, Universal will release *The Mummy*, yet another reboot of their profitable Mummy franchise.

Desperately needed is an increased, positive Arab American presence on commercial television. As I have repeatedly said, the major networks—ABC, CBS, NBC, and now Fox—have not featured an Arab American protagonist in an ongoing series. Instead, what the networks have done is to vilify them. The time is long overdue for a much-needed corrective.

But there have been a few, faint glimmers of light. In July 2011, Turner Classic Movies (TCM) took a positive step and confronted the stereotypes head-on in their series, *Race and Hollywood: Arab Images on Film*. As curator, I helped select the films that were telecast twice weekly over an eight-day period. I also served as the series guest expert, discussing at length with host Robert Osborne all thirty-two “Arab” features, five shorts, and several cartoons.

One year later, various PBS stations across the country telecast Michael Singh’s absorbing, controversial documentary about reel Arabs, *Valentino’s Ghost* (2012). Then there is producer Chelsea Clinton’s excellent 34-minute documentary, *Of Many* (2014), which offers a creative view of relationships between Jews and Muslims at New York University. Her film focuses on a developing friendship between Rabbi Yehuda Sarna and Imam Khalid Latif, leaders of their religious communities at the university.

Credit goes to the producers of TBS TV for the network’s successful sitcom, *Sullivan & Son*, which regularly features comedian Ahmed Ahmed as Ahmed Nasser, an American Arab Muslim. And AMC’s short-lived 2013 detective series, *Low Winter Sun*, also merits recognition. The series featured as one of its main characters a tough, brilliant cop—an Arab American woman named Dani Khalil. Actress Athena Karkanis played Khalil.

Finally, one outstanding documentary meriting special attention is Rashid Ghazi's *Fordson: Faith, Fasting, Football* (2011). Winner of numerous awards, *Fordson* follows a predominately Arab American football team from a working class Detroit suburb struggling for acceptance in post-9/11 America. The camera focuses on team members, their families, and their coach as they prepare for their annual big cross-town rivalry game during the last few days of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Ghazi's film advances racial and religious tolerance. It should also help young viewers, even non-football fans, to understand that they and *Fordson's* Arab American students are pretty much alike. Hillary Clinton called this film "a great documentary and a great story." After Michael Moore watched it, he said, "I want everyone in America to watch this film." Me too, Michael.

And the Winner Is...

Here are some mainstream Hollywood features that reveal decent Arab and Muslim characters. Two are outer space dramas. For example, in *Gravity* (2013) we see American astronauts exploring outer space. One very brief scene, however, features astronaut Shariff. He utters only a few words before an accident occurs, killing him. Including Shariff was probably a tip of the hat to the Egyptian-American scientist, Farouk El-Baz. Dr. El-Baz worked with NASA on the first moon landing.

Prominently featured in *Ender's Game* (2013) is Alai, an Arab Muslim boy. Early on, some youths begin to pick on Alai, but the protagonist steps in and protects him. Final frames show the bright, talented Alai at work with his fellow crew members. Those who previously harassed him now accept him, and Alai bonds with the protagonist.

Opening and closing frames of the entertaining medieval film *George and the Dragon* (2004) focus on Tarik, a likeable and courageous, dark-complexioned Moor. Tarik's heroics remind me of another reel good Moor, Azeem, who was played by Morgan Freeman in Kevin Costner's *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991). Both Tarik and Azeem save the protagonist's life, and they help bring down the film's villains.

One main character who aids the protagonist in *Non-Stop* (2014), a thrilling who-is-trying-to-blow-up-this-plane movie, is an Arab Muslim character, Dr. Fahim Nasir. At first, some passengers think Dr. Nasir is the villain, which brings to mind the Arabs in the film *Flightplan* (2005), directed by Robert Schwentke, with Jodie Foster. In this movie, some passengers tagged the Arabs as the bad guys before they were cleared of any wrongdoing.

There was an increased Arab presence at the 2014 Academy Awards ceremony. Nominated films focused on the people of Egypt, Palestine, and Yemen. Jehane Noujaim's compelling movie, *The Square* (2013), documenting Egyptians struggling

for freedom, was up for Best Documentary Feature. Sara Ishaq's moving film *Karama Has No Walls* (2012), which focused on Yemen's revolution, was nominated for Best Documentary Short Subject. The Academy again recognized Hany Abu-Assad by nominating his *Omar* (2013), a tragic love story about Palestinians resisting the occupation, for Best Foreign Language Film.

Though none of the three nominated "Arab" films received an Oscar, the nominations reveal a positive trend: Arab filmmakers and others are creating fresh films dealing with topical issues. Films such as Emad Burnat's *Five Broken Cameras* (2011), Susan Youssef's *Habibi* (2011), Elia Suleiman's *The Time That Remains* (2009), and Abu-Assad's *Omar* focus on Palestine and how the Israeli occupation impacts Palestinians, young and old.

To their credit, some Israeli filmmakers also expose the occupation's telling effects on innocent Palestinians. I highly recommend Eran Riklis' *Lemon Tree* (2008), and Yuval Adler's *Bethlehem* (2013). And from the director of *The Syrian Bride*, Eran Riklis's *Dancing Arabs* (2014) is a well-intentioned movie about coexistence. Riklis focuses on a young Arab trying to find his place in Israel.

Filmmakers from the United States, Canada, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon are also in the mix. Nadine Labaki's thoughtful *Where Do We Go Now* (2011) examines events occurring after the country's civil war. Labaki's protagonists, several bright Lebanese women, peacemakers all, plot to defuse religious tensions between the village's Muslims and Christians. In Cherien Dabias's new film, *May in the Summer* (2013), the protagonist looks forward to being married in Amman and being reunited with her Christian family there. But her strong-willed mother does not want May to wed a Muslim man. See the film to find out whether May can control the situation.

Then there is Haifaa Al-Mansour's critically acclaimed *Wadjda* (2012), the first feature ever directed by a Saudi woman. This modest story about a young girl and her bicycle warms one's heart, and was shot entirely in Saudi Arabia. Nabil Ayouch's gripping *Horses of God* (2012) follows four boys from the slums of Morocco who, sadly, become suicide bombers. And there is also Canada's Ruba Nadda's feature, *Inescapable* (2012). This intriguing story set in Syria—a police state filled with not-so-nice intelligence officers—concerns a Canadian Arab's quest to find his adult daughter who has gone missing while traveling in Damascus.

I found Rola Nashef's *Detroit Unleaded* (2012) to be a terrific feel-good story about an Arab American couple in love. Their on and off courtship warmed my heart. Nashef's friend, Suha Araj, also came out with a charming short film, *The Cup Reader* (2013). Then there's Sam Kadi's *The Citizen* (2012). Kadi's compelling story concerns a Lebanese immigrant who arrives in the United States the day before 9/11. Kadi

shows us what happens to this kind man, who loves America, when fixed prejudices rule the day. In John Slattery's *Casablanca Mon Amour* (2012), two students take a road trip and visit several Moroccan villages. Along the way, they meet a variety of hospitable Moroccans and see some captivating scenery.

Axis of Evil

I have been friends with Axis of Evil comedians Maz Jobrani, Dean Obeidallah, and Ahmed Ahmed since we first met, years ago, at a conference in Washington, DC. Back then, they were struggling to make a name for themselves in show business. Directors and agents had warned them that unless they changed their names they would be relegated to playing three types of roles: terrorists, sleazy princes, and/or greedy oil sheikhs. But Ahmed refused, telling journalist Andrew Gumbel: "I'm never going to change my name. It's my birth name, my given name."

After years of setbacks and frustration in Hollywood, all three comedians and a growing number of other Arab American comics found a way to avoid being typecast as stereotypical reel bad Arabs. They moved forward and began using comedy to fight against discrimination. Instead of remaining silent, they spoke up—and told jokes. They used stand-up comedy to make the case for Arab and Muslim inclusion in the American "public square." When asked why comedy, Ahmed said, "We can't define who we are on a serious note because nobody will listen. The only way to do it is to be funny about it."

Iranian-American comedian Maz Jobrani loved Tony, John Travolta's character from *Saturday Night Fever*. However, casting directors wanted him for Muslim stereotypes. Jobrani told his agent, "No more terrorists. I don't need to play these parts. It just feels icky. It does. You feel like you are selling out."

It's pretty much the same story with Dean Obeidallah. He, too, refused to take parts that demeaned his heritage. Instead, he successfully launched himself with his own material, offering more positive images of Arabs and Muslims. He was featured prominently in the 2008 PBS special, *Stand Up: Muslim American Comics Come of Age*.

All three comedians have had thriving careers at premier stand-up venues, in the United States and abroad. Their live comedy performances are available on DVD and Netflix. And all three made impressive independent features and documentary films. The first was Ahmed's thoughtful and entertaining documentary, *Just Like Us* (2010). The film shows Ahmed and his fellow stand-up comedians being well received by audiences from New York to Dubai; especially moving are Ahmed's scenes with his Los Angeles family.

Jobrani's comedy specials *Brown & Friendly* (2009) and *I Come in Peace* (2013) show highlights from his stand-up comedy special live performances here and in Stockholm. In 2013, Jobrani also produced *Shirin in Love*, a pleasing, independent

romantic comedy focusing on the attraction between the Iranian protagonist, Shirin, and her non-Iranian mate.

That same year, Obeidallah, along with Negin Farsad, produced, directed, and starred in the documentary *The Muslims Are Coming!* (2013). Familiar names like Jon Stewart and Rachel Maddow appear, offering insightful commentary that exposes and contests discrimination. We also see ordinary Americans, from Arizona to Alabama, interacting with Obeidallah's comedians before and after they perform in several major cities. Closing "Hug a Muslim" frames are especially memorable.

Finally, the Detroit area is the setting for Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady's documentary, *The Education of Mohammad Hussein* (2013). The film offers compelling insights into a post-9/11 America that struggles to live up to its promise of civil justice for all. The documentary focuses on a tightly knit Muslim community in the Detroit Hamtramck neighborhood. Here, American Muslim children attend a traditional Islamic school—leading their faith and patriotism to be scrutinized. We see what happens when the children and their neighbors meet the Koran-burning Florida preacher Terry Jones: his hate-rhetoric fails to provoke them.

Not so long ago these up-and-coming young filmmakers were struggling artists, just beginning their careers. Some were only thinking about making films; others had just written rough drafts. Yet despite all the obstacles they faced, they went on to direct and produce inventive independent films—films that challenge racial, gender, and religious stereotypes, films that make us laugh and think at the same time.

Stereotypes and Steelworkers

I wrote *The TV Arab* to help to make unjust Arab portraits visible. Along the way, I discovered painful lessons about what happens to people—be they Arab, Asian, African, Hispanic, or Jew—when they are continuously dehumanized. So, I tried to save readers like you from being subjected to these heinous stereotypes, writing that "a more balanced view of Arabs" was necessary, and that unless we counter this stereotype, innocent people will suffer. And, sadly, they have.

We still have a long way to go. No matter. I have a deep and abiding faith that young storytellers from Arkansas to Abu Dhabi will eventually shatter damaging portraits, image by image. Artists will lead the way, creating inventive, realistic Arab portraits. I recall the wisdom expressed by Vaclav Havel, former president of the Czech Republic, in his book *The Art of the Impossible: Politics as Morality in Practice*, "None of us as an individual can save the world as a whole... But each of us must behave as though it was in his power to do so."

My optimism is always renewed by going back to what I learned growing up in Pittsburgh. As I wrote in *The TV Arab*, "In Clairton's steel mills I shared sweat with

men of many ethnic backgrounds. Mutual respect prevailed. Steelworkers can wipe out stereotypes. So can writers and producers.”

Writers and producers, actors and directors, you and I—we still can wipe out stereotypes; it's in our power to do so.

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