



Reel Bad Arabs

How Hollywood Vilifies a People



"Jack Shaheen is a one-man anti-defamation league who has exposed Hollywood's denigration of Arabs in most, if not all, of its films."

— Helen Thomas | *Distinguished Journalist and Author*

"Good documentaries can move you or inform you. Great documentaries can change your entire point of view. Reel Bad Arabs falls into the latter category."

— Faizan Rashid | *Film Critic, The Emirates Network*



Against the chaotic backdrop of ongoing war and conflict in the Middle East and rising fears of terrorism in the West, the makers of the critically-acclaimed documentaries *Peace, Propaganda, and the Promised Land* and *Edward Said: On Orientalism* have produced a powerful and important new film based on Jack Shaheen's best-selling book, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*.



Reel Bad Arabs takes a devastating tour of the American cinematic landscape, moving from the earliest days of silent film to today's biggest Hollywood blockbusters to reveal an astonishing pattern of slanderous Arab stereotyping. The documentary isolates and examines America's most persistent Arab caricatures, from over-sexed Bedouin bandits and submissive maidens to sinister sheikhs and blood-thirsty terrorists, providing striking insights into the origin of these images, their disturbing similarities to anti-Semitic and other racist and ethnocentrist stereotypes, and their resurgence and political resonance during key moments of crisis in U.S. history.



By inspiring us to reflect critically on the social and political consequences of Hollywood's long love affair with Arab villainy and buffoonery, *Reel Bad Arabs* challenges us in the end to envision counter-narratives that do justice to the complexity and humanity of Arab people, and the reality and richness of Arab history and culture.

SECTIONS:

[The Myths of Arabland](#) | [The Arab Threat: Mideast Politics & Hollywood](#) | [Terror, Inc.](#) | [Demonizing Palestinians & Muslims](#) | [The Only Good Arab...](#) | [Islamophobia](#) | [Getting Real](#)



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ALI BABA

THE MAD DOG OF THE DESERT

Reel Bad Arabs

How Hollywood Vilifies a People

QUOTES OF ENDORSEMENT

"This powerful and timely documentary will change the way you watch Hollywood movies."

Casey Kasem | *Radio and Television Personality*

"Jack Shaheen continues to be a piercing laser of fairness and sanity in pointing out Hollywood's ongoing egregious smearing of Arabs."

Howard Rosenberg | *Los Angeles Times TV critic*

"This taut, well-argued analysis of ethnicity betrayed shows us the power of Hollywood's movies to miseducate the senses—and, since the senses are its gateways, to distort the soul."

Camelia Anwar Sadat

"Jack G. Shaheen has long been a prophet in the Hollywood wilderness, writing from carefully documented scholarship that exposes the film industry's negative portrayals of Arabs and Muslims."

James M. Wall | *Senior Contributing Editor, The Christian Century*

"Caricatured villains are as vital to the movie business as car chases and shoot-outs. But the spotlight of derision shifts. When blacks were no longer shiftless jokes, the Asians no longer the Yellow Peril, and good Indians no longer had to be dead Indians, Arabs became the all-purpose bad-guys. Countless movies have portrayed them as loathsome lechers who terrorize, murder, and finally die in droves. In Reel Bad Arabs scholar Jack Shaheen exposes in appalling detail this nightmare side of the Hollywood dream machine."

Christopher Dickey | *author of Innocent Blood and Middle East Editor for Newsweek Magazine*

"For years, with rare passion and eloquence, Jack Shaheen has raised a constant, resonating voice on behalf of the Arab in America. An undaunted warrior devoted to righting the wrongs of distortion that have too long persisted, Shaheen has displayed unwavering dedication to the cause of fair play for ethnic groups who have suffered from misrepresentation by our film industry—Arabs most of all. For his courage in protecting the integrity of an entire people against the tides of prejudice in American mass culture, we are all deeply in his debt."

Asaad Kelada | *Director*

"The relentless cinematic assault on Arabs has been our culture's most insidious yet closeted disgrace-until now. [Reel Bad Arabs] casts a penetrating spotlight on the movies that have shaped our infinitely distorted and warped views of Arab and Muslim life."

Renee Tajima-Pena | *Producer-Director, Sundance Award-Winning Film, My America*

"It came as quite a shock to suddenly recognize a form of racial stereotyping that is so widespread—yet somehow invisible—and almost as old as the cinema itself. Dr. Shaheen carefully documents an astonishing array of Arab villains, sheikhs, and maidens. Highly recommended!"

John Skillin | *Director, Audio Visual Services, Montclair Public Library*

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ABOUT MEF

The non-profit Media Education Foundation (MEF) is the nation's leading producer and distributor of educational videos designed to inspire students and others to reflect critically on the structure of media industries and the content they produce. Founded in 1991, MEF's mission is to answer the challenge posed by the radical and accelerating corporate threat to democracy.

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MEF is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and contributions are tax-deductible as allowed by law.

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Reel Bad Arabs

How Hollywood Vilifies a People

BIOGRAPHIES

SUT JHALLY | DIRECTOR

Sut Jhally is a Professor of Communication at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst and founder and executive director of the Media Education Foundation. He is one of the most popular teachers at the University of Massachusetts and is nationally known among college students for his videotape *Dreamworlds: Desire/Sex/Power in Music Video*, which received national press after MTV threatened him with a lawsuit over copyright infringement after the film's release in 1991. Over the ensuing 15 years, Sut Jhally has been the executive producer of more than twenty-five videos produced and distributed by the Media Education Foundation.

He is the author of *The Codes of Advertising*, *The Spectacle of Accumulation: Essays in Cultural Politics*, and co-author of *Social Communication in Advertising* and *Enlightened Racism*. He is also co-editor of *Cultural Politics in Contemporary America* and *Hijacking Catastrophe: 9/11, Fear & the Selling of American Empire*. He has written broadly on issues of popular representation and is regarded as one of the world's leading cultural studies scholar in the area of advertising, media, and consumption.

JEREMY EARP | PRODUCER

Jeremy Earp, the Production Manager at the Media Education Foundation, was the producer, co-writer and co-director of the documentary *Hijacking Catastrophe: 9/11, Fear & the Selling of American Empire*, and co-editor of the book by the same title. He also co-wrote the MEF video *Tough Guise*, and has written and coordinated the development of a number of MEF's study guides. Before joining the MEF staff in 2003, he taught at New School University and Parsons School of Design in New York City, and at the Art Institute of Boston, Northeastern University and the University of Massachusetts. Prior to teaching, he worked as a news and sports reporter for a daily newspaper outside of Boston. He holds a Master's degree in English from Northeastern University, and is currently pursuing a doctorate in Communication at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

JACK SHAHEEN

Internationally acclaimed author and media critic, Dr. Jack G. Shaheen, is a committed internationalist and a devoted humanist. A Pittsburgh native and former CBS news consultant on Middle East Affairs, Shaheen's lectures and writings illustrate that damaging racial and ethnic stereotypes of Asians, blacks, Native Americans and others injure innocent people. He defines crude caricatures, explains why they persist, and provides workable solutions to help shatter misperceptions.

Professor Shaheen has given over 1,000 lectures in nearly all the 50 states and three continents. Among those universities that have welcomed him are Oxford, Amherst, Brown, Emory, Harvard, the University of Southern California, West Point, as well as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the White House Truman Center. World capitols where he has spoken include London, Berlin, Paris, Prague, New Delhi, Cairo, and Istanbul. He has consulted with the United Nations, the Los Angeles Commission on Human Relations, the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, and New York City's Commission on Civil Rights. In cooperation with the United States government, he has conducted communication seminars throughout the Middle East.

Dr. Shaheen is the author of four books: *Nuclear War Films*, *Arab and Muslim Stereotyping in American Popular Culture*, *The TV Arab* and the award-winning book *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. His writings include 300-plus essays in publications such as *Newsweek*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Post* to chapters on media stereotypes in dozens of college textbooks.

Dr. Shaheen, an Oxford Research Scholar, is the recipient of two Fulbright teaching awards. He holds degrees from the Carnegie Institute of Technology, Pennsylvania State University, and the University of Missouri. He has appeared on national network programs such as *CNN*, *MSNBC*, *National Public Radio*, *Nightline*, *Good Morning America*, *48 Hours*, and *The Today Show*.

Among Dr. Shaheen's awards recognizing his "outstanding contribution towards a better understanding of our global community" are: The University of Pennsylvania's Janet Lee Stevens Award; the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee's Lifetime Achievement Award in recognition of "his lifelong commitment to bring a better understanding towards peace for all mankind"; and the Pancho Be Award for "the advancement of humanity." Pancho Be, a Mayan phrase, means "to seek the root of truth."

Shaheen has served as a consultant with film and TV companies: *DreamWorks*, *Warner Brothers*, *Hanna-Barbera*, and *Showtime*.

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FACT SHEET

- » The majority of Arab Americans are Christian. ¹
- » About 85% of the world's Muslims are not Arabs. ²
- » Arab countries include: Algeria, Bahrain, the Comoros Islands, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Turkey and Iran are not Arab countries. ³
- » Shaheen's research shows that, out of 1000 films that have Arab & Muslim characters (from the year 1896 to 2000), 12 were "positive" depictions, 52 were "even-handed," and the rest of the 900 or so were "negative." ⁴
- » 32% of Arab Americans reported having been subjected to some form of ethnic-based discrimination during their lifetimes, 20% reported having experienced an instance of ethnic-based discrimination since September 11, 2001. In addition, 45% of students and 37% of Arab Americans of the Muslim faith report being targeted by discrimination since September 11. ⁵
- » Prominent conservative commentators in the United States have voiced hostility towards Arabs. Bill O'Reilly has described Iraqis as a "prehistoric group" and "primitive." Michael Savage described Arabs as "non-humans" and "racist, fascist bigots" and advocated a nuclear attack on a "major Arab capital." ⁶
- » FBI data suggests a 1600% surge in anti-Islamic hate crimes in the days following the September 11, 2001 attacks. The research also found a similar increase in hate crimes against people who may have been perceived as members of Islam, Arabs and others thought to be of Middle Eastern origin. ⁷
- » A September 2006 Washington Post/ABC News poll found that 46% of Americans hold negative perceptions of Islam, 7 percentage points higher than after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The poll also discovered that a third of the respondents have recently heard prejudiced comments against Muslims. 1 in 4 openly acknowledges harboring prejudice toward Muslims. ⁸
- » An August 2006 Gallup poll found that many Americans — what it calls "substantial minorities" — harbor "negative feelings or prejudices against people of the Muslim faith" in this country. Nearly 1 in 4 Americans — 22% — say they would not like to have a Muslim as a neighbor. ⁹
- » While Americans tend to disagree with the notion that Muslims living in the United States are sympathetic to al-Qaeda, a significant 34% believe they do back al-Qaeda. And fewer than half — 49% — believe U.S. Muslims are loyal to the United States. Almost 4 in 10 — 39% — advocate that Muslims here should carry special I.D. ¹⁰
- » At least 3.5 million Americans are of Arab descent. Arab Americans live in all 50 states, but two thirds reside in 10 states; one third of the total live in California, New York, and Michigan. About 94% live in metropolitan areas. ¹¹
- » Arab Americans with at least a high school diploma number 85%. More than 4 out of 10 Americans of Arab decent have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 24% of Americans at large. 17% of Arab Americans have a post-graduate degree, which is nearly twice the American average (9%). ¹²
- » Similar to the national average, about 64% of Arab American adults are in the labor force; with 5% unemployed. 73% of working Arab Americans are employed in managerial, professional, technical, sales or administrative fields. Nearly half as many Americans of Arab decent are employed in service jobs (12%) in relation to Americans overall (27%). Most Arab Americans work in the private sector (88%), while 12% are government employees. ¹³
- » 82% of persons of Arab descent in the United States are U.S. citizens, and 63% were born in this country. ¹⁴

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SUGGESTED RESOURCES

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- Americans for Middle East Understanding** www.ameu.org
- Council on American-Islamic Relations** www.cair-net.org
- Institute for Middle East Understanding** www.imeu.net
- Islamic Human Rights Commission** www.ihrc.org
- Islamic Society of North American** www.isna.net
- Middle East Desk** <http://middleeastdesk.org>
- Middle East Media Research Institute** www.memri.org
- Muslim American Society** www.masnet.org
- Muslim Student Association** www.msa-natl.org
- USC Center on Public Diplomacy: the Middle East Project** uscpublicdiplomacy.com/index.php/newsroom/memp_main
- Washington Report on Middle East Affairs** www.wrmea.com

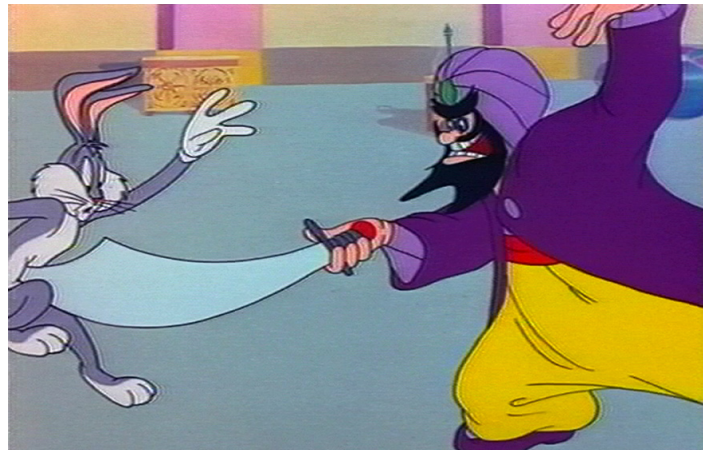
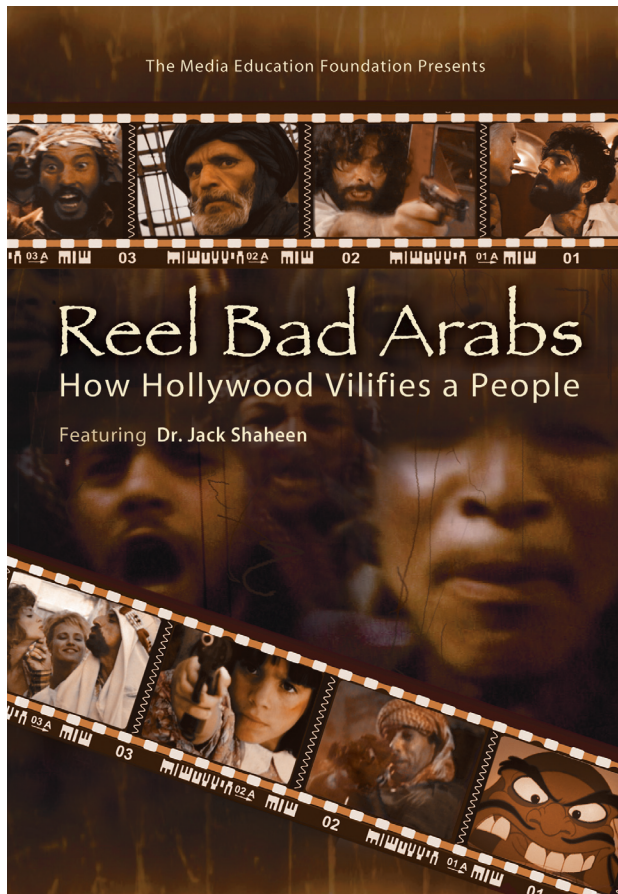
Reel Bad Arabs

How Hollywood Vilifies a People

"REEL BAD ARABS" IMAGES



Dr. Jack G. Shaheen





Reel Bad Arabs depicts Hollywood bias against Arab people

By Mary Nammour

DUBAI — “The Reel Bad Arabs is all about the way the image of Arab people, especially Muslims, has been tarnished in Hollywood cinema over the past 100 years,” says Dr Jack Shaheen, the scriptwriter of the 55-minute documentary, during his meeting with Khaleej Times on the sidelines of the second day of the Third Annual Dubai International Film Festival.

The movie, based on my best-selling book *Reel Bad Arabs*. is quite ground-breaking, as it reviews 1,000 movies, from the earliest time to our present time in Hollywood cinema, which vilify the entire Arab people by a slanderous stereotyping. I wrote my book in 2001, long time before 9/11, but the attacks on the World Trade Centre came to emphasise the need to counter this form of anti-Arab prejudice,” he added.

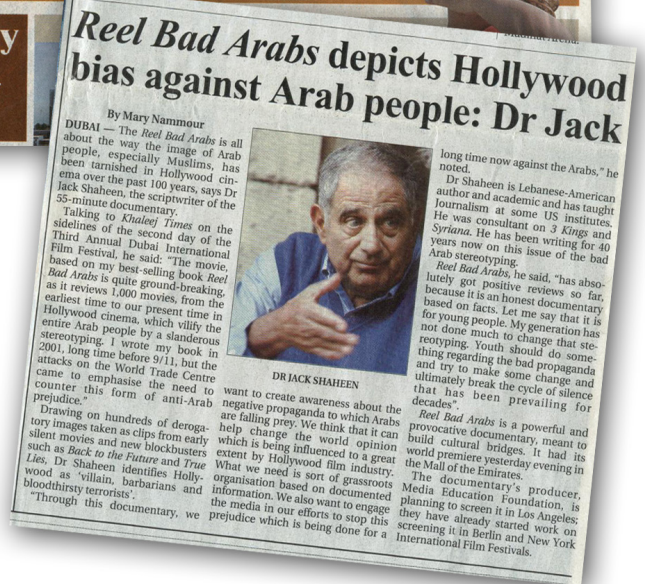
Drawing on hundreds of derogatory images taken as clips from early silent movies and newer blockbusters such as *Back to the Future* and *True Lies*, Dr Shaheen identifies Hollywood as ‘villain, barbarians and bloodthirsty terrorists’.

“Through this documentary, we want to create awareness about the negative propaganda to which Arabs are falling prey. We think that it can help change the world opinion which is being influenced to a great extent by the Hollywood film industry. What we need is sort of grassroots organisation based on documented information. We also want to engage the media in our efforts to stop this prejudice which is being done for a long time now against the Arabs,” he noted.

Dr. Shaheen is Lebanese-American author and academic and has taught Journalism at some US institutes. He was consultant on *3 Kings* and *Syriana*. He has been writing for 40 years now on this issue of the bad Arab stereotyping.

Reel Bad Arabs, he said, “has absolutely got positive reviews so far, because it is an honest documentary based on facts. Let me say that it is for young people. My generation has not done much to change that stereotyping. Youth should do something regarding the bad propaganda and try to make some change and ultimately break the cycle of silence that has been prevailing for decades.”

Reel Bad Arabs is a powerful and provocative documentary, meant to build cultural bridges. It had its world premiere yesterday evening in the Mall of the Emirates. The documentary’s producer, Media Education Foundation, is planning to screen it in Los Angeles; they have already started work on screening it in Berlin and New York International Film Festivals.





“Hollywood conjures up all kinds of impressions — glamour, fame, fortune — but what is really fascinating is the darker underbelly of the this industry of illusion. Several films showing at DIFF take a look at the other side: **Hollywoodland**, starring Ben Affleck, and **Reel Bad Arabs**, which examines how US cinema misrepresents a people.”

“...DIFF has another film up its sleeve which looks at Hollywood. And this time it's not about the glamorous side of it. Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People is a film whose title speaks for itself. It's a documentary based on a book by Jack Shaheen, by the same title, that became some sort of an event itself a few years back.

Besides being the only film in history to use the word “vilifies” in the title, it's also the first film to deliver the lowdown on how Hollywood has misrepresented Arabs since silent cinema. It looks at how Hollywood has stereotyped the Arabs through out history showing them as villains, untrustworthy and very, very dim.”

22 LETTERS COMMENT
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VoicesToday

STRAIGHT TALK

Fusionist **Mustafa Alrawi** says the region's media should hit back at Arab vilification by the West's media factory

Rewrite Arab role on the world stage

Proper drainage is the key

Too public a convenience

Road madness at a new low

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Rewrite Arab role on the world stage

With high-profile and populist deals such as DIC's move to buy Liverpool football club, coupled with growing international recognition, such as His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE, and Ruler of Dubai's nod from the *New York Times* this week as entrepreneur of the year – it seems Dubai has firmly taken its place in the zeitgeist.

It can only be good for the UAE and the region as a whole. Finally, it seems Arabs may begin to be thought of as more than just oil and guns in the West. But suspicion lingers that the road ahead still won't be a smooth one.

The Western press – especially in Britain – are notorious for their build-them-up, knock-them-down attitude. And they like to create easy-to-recognise heroes and villains for their markets.

Can we expect a wave of bad press in the wake of Dubai's success? Count on it.

With the DP World deal earlier this year and subsequent hammering in the United States, and continuing accusations of a poor record on human rights and migrant workers, Dubai has already had more than its fair share of negative publicity.

And now that isn't just buying buildings and stakes, but also cultural institutions abroad, the gates of xenophobia should be pushed a little further ajar.

It's not solely an anti-Arab thing. It's a rally cry. The Japanese have also had to put up with it for years now from America. But Arabs get to play the villains every time, it seems.

Professor Jack Shaheen – who has spent his life cataloguing and exposing Hollywood's bias against Arabs in TV and film – feels that the inherent danger of this is that it goes hand-in-hand with government policy. The continued dehumanization of Arabs in movies such as *True Lies* and even children's classics like *The Black Stallion* makes it easier for the United States to sell and execute actions like the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

While Hollywood certainly draws from real life, Professor Shaheen argues in his book *Reel Bad Arabs* – showing in documentary form at this week's Dubai Film Festival – that one of the only villains that has endured is the Arab and that there is an institutional bias motivated by an overriding political agenda.

continued on back

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EMIRATES TODAY

December 14, 2006

But what does that mean for somewhere like Dubai and the UAE in general? A state attempting to buck a popular stereotype that supposedly serves a crucial purpose. Will it be easily relinquished? Unlikely. Examples such as the DP World furore showed it won't turn anytime soon.

But as we become bigger players on the global scene, we will be confronted time and again with the same old accusations. Anytime an Arab individual, company or country attempts to rewrite their part and take a role other than "terrorist number 1," expect a fierce backlash.

We should hit back equally hard. Running a well-oiled PR machine is not beyond us, but what continually undermines our efforts is the fundamental weakness of the media and press in this region.

For all the obvious reasons, print, TV and radio is not producing anything close to the quality Hollywood churns out, year after year.

Take *24*, for example. Despite being a TV show that continually vilifies Arabs and Muslims, it is still enormously popular with Middle Eastern viewers. Why? Because it's damn good television.

Arabs spend too much time worrying about what they're going to print, broadcast and produce to realize that this only distracts from the fact that the way we print, broadcast and produce is all wrong.

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www.timeoutdubai.com, Volume 6, Issue 49
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Reel Bad Arabs

Sut Jhally, US/2006

'Over-sexed Bedouin bandits, submissive maidens, buffoons, barbarians and blood-thirsty terrorists': Sut Jhally's big screen treatment of Dr Jack Shaheen's best-selling book looks at the depiction of Arabs in Hollywood over the past 100 years. MW

***Reel Bad Arabs* depicts Hollywood bias against Arab people**

Reel Bad Arabs | Sut Jhally | US/2006

'Over-sexed Bedouin bandits, submissive maidens, buffoons, barbarians, and blood-thirsty terrorists': Sut Jhally's big screen treatment of Dr. Jack Shaheen's best-selling book looks at the depiction of Arabs in Hollywood over the past 100 years.



Trying to fight reel bias

By Mahmood Saberi
Staff Reporter

Dr Jack G. Shaheen was more than pleased that *Reel Bad Arabs*, a documentary based on his book of the same name, was a sell-out at its world premiere here in Dubai.

“This will play an extremely important role, given the concept of this film festival, which is building bridges,” he said. The 48-minute short got a full house at the Mall of the Emirates and there was a long line of people trying to get in.

“There was a lot of buzz afterwards. We are thrilled and energised,” said Michel Moushabeck, president of the Interlink Publishing Group, publishers of *Reel Bad Arabs*.

Shaheen hopes that one of the theatres here picks up the film and screens it for a week. “It needs to be available to the mass audiences,” he said about the documentary that details the “nightmare side of the Hollywood dream machine.”

The professor bemoaned the fact that nothing has changed since his groundbreaking work was published in 2001. He said the negative images of Arab on commercial TV have increased. “American Muslims are portrayed as a threat to the country. This feeds into the paranoia, the Patriot Act, the rounding up of people; anybody who looks Arab, be it a Sikh or an African American.”

Shaheen pointed to a recent incident where Imams were taken off a plane. “It is regrettable, just because they said ‘Allahu Akbar, God is Great.’” “Stereotyping in entertainment is not harmless. It is much more effective than in blatant propaganda films.”

Moushabeck further believes that the film industry has largely been “democratised” as a result of technological changes. “If you have the talent and the brains, you can easily make a film with a \$3000 (Dh11,000) camera and software,” he said. But getting the film distributed is another story, he said, because of the massive control by conglomerates and the lack of funding for independent distributors. “We have done our best, but it takes many hands,” said Shaheen, when asked what Arabs are doing to counter the propaganda.

Hollywood hit maker

MEET BARRIE OSBORNE, PRODUCER OF THE MATRIX AND OSCAR-WINNER

By Cheng Chan
Staff Reporter

It's not everyday you get to pick the brains of the man behind some of the most celebrated films of the last few decades. Which is why DIFF's Conversation With Barrie Osborne was too good an opportunity to miss.

Having masterminded major box office hits including *Apocalypse Now*, *Knave Off*, *The Matrix* and *The Lord Of The Rings* series, the New Yorker has earned his place as a key player in Hollywood.

Speaking of his work, he said: "For me the thrill of making movies is the fact that you go to different places and you work with different people and tell different stories — each time you start a new movie, it's like starting a whole new career."

When asked what makes a good producer, he said it was important to build trust, particularly between the director and financiers.

"I see my role as trying to make the film as good as it possibly can be with what we have, and I try to defend the director's point of view because the story has to have one point of view," he said. "Keeping the balance between what he wants to do and helping him achieve that within the boundaries of a budget is quite a test."

He said: "The most important thing is to make a film relevant to the audience so that they can feel the emotion and experience the drama in the screenplay through the main characters."

Among his many anecdotes during yesterday's 90-minute session was an occasion when *Knave Off* director John Woo wanted to use a dog for the final scenes, close to deadline. Having advised Woo to take out a scene earlier in the film, which he later regretted, Osborne spent a sleepless night after writing so to the bad idea.

"I knew he was a man of his word so I went over to John and I asked him, 'I don't mean you have to cut

the dog, I mean if you want them, you have to promise that they won't hold us up on schedule," said Osborne. As it turned out, the pig-govs caused no delay.

Meeting deadlines is always one of the biggest challenges for any producer. Osborne remembered heated discussions with Peter Jackson on *The Lord Of The Rings* when the director insisted on cutting out a scene just a day before the film was due to premiere.

"Peter was pushing this in the last minute and the pressure was immense," said Osborne. "I knew Peter and I would gladly work with him again but those tensions and that push against all advice of what the deadline are, it creates a natural conflict."

"You need that sort of relationship in order to survive the conflict and will come out as a friend."

Osborne's future projects include teaming up with Laurence Fishburne to make a film adaptation of Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*.

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BARRIE OSBORNE, The Lord of the Rings producer knows how to balance creativity and deadlines.

Editorial

Good morning sunshine

By Mohammed Roudas
I've never been so busy in my whole life. Doing everything from supervising the competition and making sure everything fits in places just the way they need to, to supervising the two daily editions in Arabic, and a whole lot in between. All of this plus answering those phone calls that start: "Hello... didn't you resign my voice?"

Also inside

Princess Haya at DIFF P4

Critic's Choice P7

Profile: Hani Salama P8

Quote of the day

"I started out getting coffee for people. You learn what your skills are and you pursue your strengths, and that leads you to become a director or a cameraman or a soundman or a producer."

Barrie Osborne, Oscar-winning American producer

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THE DRIVING FORCE BEHIND THE NEW DOCUMENTARY THAT REVEALS HOLLYWOOD'S STEREOTYPING OF ARABS

On set to expose injustice to Arabs
Dubai International Film Festival

Rachel McArthur talks to Reel Bad Arabs author Jack Shaheen about the documentary he inspired, which unmasks the vilification of Muslims in the movies.

Jack Shaheen - author of the book Reel Bad Arabs - was approached to write a screenplay for the documentary of the same name.

One of the most important programmes in the Dubai International Film Festival is that of Operation Cultural Bridge, which celebrates Dubai's unique position as a cross-road between East and West, Arab and non-Arab, and Muslim and non-Muslim.

Initially inspired by the festival's Honorary Chairman, His Highness Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al Maktoum, Operation Cultural Bridge returns for its third year with a great selection of films, one of which is Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People.

A 47-minute documentary inspired by award-winning author Jack Shaheen's best-selling book of the same name, Reel Bad Arabs examines the slanderous Arab stereotypes – from cinema's earliest days to contemporary Hollywood blockbusters that feature machine-gun wielding and bomb-blowing "evil" Arabs – produced by America's Dream Factory for the past 100 years.

It is a groundbreaking documentary – the first ever to look at this issue. Just as the book was groundbreaking in being the first book to look at the issue," Shaheen explains.

"It's not a documentary that has a political stance – it's pro-justice and pro-human."

Shaheen – born and bred in America, but with Lebanese roots – has reviewed more than 1,000 films over the past 20 years, documenting offensive stereotypes, and shows how the image of the "dirty Arab" has re-emerged over the past 30 years, even as other groups have more or less successfully fought to eliminate the use of racist stereotypes.

"In the United States, people are much more sensitive to the African-American [black] and Hispanic stereotype and so levels of discrimination [towards these groups] have been reduced," he says.

"However, with Arabs and Muslims it hasn't yet, and it's time we stopped. This is a call-to-action movie. This will help prevent these discriminatory acts. The reason these acts continue is because they are still

continued on back

On Set to Expose Injustice to Arabs

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EMIRATES TODAY

December 13, 2006

being shown in the entertainment industry.”

Shaheen was approached to make the movie by the United States’ Media Education Foundation – a 15-year-old non-profit organization that produces and distributes documentaries that educate and inspire critical thinking. He went on to write part of the script with two other writers – Sut Jhally and Jeremy Earp – and even made a point of adding movies released after his book was published.

“We added post-9/11 films because we wanted it to be extremely timely, but most of the writing was done by the director [Sut Jhally]. However, as we were doing the narration, we were changing the script as we went along,” Shaheen explains.

“What’s extremely important about the documentary is that it will have a profound impact on whoever sees it, because the visuals are so devastating, are so evil and so horrific that anyone – even someone who is prejudiced – cannot help but be moved by the fact that for over a century, Hollywood has been vilifying all things Arab.

“As a result, we had what I consider to be a brilliant documentary designed to bring about change to this injustice. The more support that comes to the Media Education Foundation, the more people will see this film – and we want the film to be shown particularly in the Arab World and the United States.”

“And one of the most important steps is that if Oliver Stone, Laurence Fishburne and Richard Gere each walked away with a copy of the documentary and watched it and put a public stance on the issue,” he adds.

“They’re guests here and I think they need to be made aware of it, and they are people of influence. We’ve exposed the injustice and now it’s time for other people to join in and put a stop to this horrible portrayal of Arabs.”