

DETROIT METRO TIMES

“IDIOT BOXING” TV COLUMN: MUSLIM TV COMEDIES

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Be ye not afraid, or hesitant: Apparently it is all right – encouraged, even – to laugh at funny Muslims on TV situation comedies.

Nowhere in North America is that reassurance needed more than Metro Detroit, particularly in and around Dearborn, home to the largest concentration of Arab-speaking people outside the Middle East. You see, a nano-trend is developing in prime time that's both encouraging and perplexing to many of us who can't find Mecca on a map.

It began last season in Canada, of all places, with the gentle, loopy comedy *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, airing at 8 p.m. Wednesdays on CBC, seen in this market over Windsor's Channel 9. The humorous struggles of a small Muslim community in the fictional prairie town of Mercy as they work to co-exist with their skeptical neighbors (and with each other), *Little Mosque* became the surprise hit in CBC's lineup. Imitation being flattery, the fish-out-of-water theme was spun into a U.S. version called *Aliens in America* at 8:30 p.m. Mondays on The CW (Channel 50), featuring the disarmingly delightful Adhir Kalyan as a Pakistani exchange student named Raja whose arrival whips the village of Medora, Wis., into a frenzy.

By themselves, these series represent a giant step forward in media imagery. These are not your 24-type Muslims, vicious jihad extremists; these are everyday people living life with all its foibles and trying to gain acceptance in their greater communities. What a concept. Because the very notion is so new to TV, however, a nagging thought arose: What if this is tantamount to how African Americans feel about *Amos 'n' Andy*? Fun is being poked at people's *religious beliefs*. Given the sensitivities of the times, how do Muslims feel about portrayals like these?

Thanks to the phenomenal cooperation of Kim Silarski, director of communications for the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, *Idiot Boxing* invited a diverse group of Arab Americans to the museum to view an episode of each show and discuss their reactions. Our panel:

- Sarah Bassal, a 2005 psychology graduate of the University of Tennessee and an educator at the museum. She worked briefly for CNN in Atlanta and recently began wearing the *hijab*, the traditional Muslim head covering;

- Her sister, Susan Bassal, a UT law school graduate who worked for CNN Washington and co-hosts a show for young Arab Americans on satellite television called *What's Happening*. Like Sarah, Susan now wears the *hijab* fulltime. "I've had my tires slashed at Wal-Mart," she says.
- Ron Amen, a retired Wayne County Sheriff deputy who conducted the in-service cultural sensitivity training required of every officer. A Dearborn native and "third generation Muslim American," he has been facilities manager for the museum since its opening;
- Mona Amen, Ron's wife, a Lebanese Muslim who works for the mayor of Dearborn Heights;
- Warren David, president/CEO of David Communications, a Dearborn PR and marketing firm specializing in the Arab Islamic market. A third-generation Arab American of Lebanese-Syrian descent, David launched the community Web site ArabDetroit.com in May;
- Fay Saad, administrative assistant at the museum. Born in Lebanon, she was raised in East Dearborn, where she and her husband raised their four children;
- Said Deep, a former reporter at one of Detroit's daily newspapers who now works in public affairs and product development for Ford Motor Company and sits on the Dearborn City Planning Commission and other city agencies. A Lebanese American, Deep maintains the Web site deepsaidwhat.com on Dearborn news and issues;
- Catherine Deep, Said's wife and the only non-Arab American in the group. A West Virginia native, "I did not know an Arab or Muslim person until I met my husband," she says. "So all of this, and all of Dearborn, is still very new to me."

We began by watching a significant episode of *Little Mosque* titled "Ban the Burka," as a mysterious woman arrives in Mercy dressed head-to-toe in a traditional burka garment, revealing only her eyes, and sends shock waves through the town. "I found the show actually kind of entertaining," Said remarked, slightly surprised.

"It's a very funny show," Ron responded. "I think it's pretty well written and I think it's a great idea for Muslims to be able to poke fun at themselves on television. We've seen our Jewish cousins doing this for many years, and they've made a lot of money in the process!"

Susan said she felt an affinity with the woman who was deemed different because she chose to be covered. "I went to college not wearing the hijab, and when I started wearing it in law school it was like I had a big hump to get over," she said. "You start wearing this and all of a sudden there's a barrier, like 'Where did you come from?' I remember my neighbor telling me, 'Someone came to your house, but they were American,' as if to say that I'm not.

“It’s like I have to make people understand I’m normal, I’m just like everyone else. And I think that’s what so great about this program. It humanizes us. You have characters in normal settings, having conversations, going through everyday issues like we all do. When was the last time you saw someone wearing a scarf or burka on TV without referring to a terrorist?”

Added David, “The last time I was invited to a screening was the late ‘80s, and it was (the NBC terrorist TV-movie) *Under Siege*. I remember coming out and a reporter asked me what I thought. I said, ‘I feel like I’ve been raped.’ And they aired that comment like it was news. We’ve really come a long way when you can see a program like this that really humanizes a culture, a society. I think it’s the greatest thing, because it really makes a positive statement. It shows people have lives like everyone else, that they can make fun of each other, they can joke. I think that’s what it’s all about.

“I think the Arab standup comedian thing kind of started all of this after 9-11, and this is kind of a piggyback on all of that. I hope there are more programs like this.”

We then viewed the pilot for *Aliens in America*. From the focused silence in the room, the timely laughter and the sighs of satisfaction, it was clear the reaction was overwhelmingly positive. “It’s a different theme than the first,” David noted. “It deals a little bit more with racism and prejudice, whereas the other one (*Little Mosque*) is more accepting, more integrated into the society. This one is much more about the differences and it really plays on that, but I think it plays on it in a very positive message.”

Ron, who already had seen episodes of both series, said, “This one seems to be a little more cutting edge. With the language, and they’re dealing with matters of sexuality. I think these kinds of programs can go a long way toward getting other Americans to see that we’re mainstream, that we’re all Americans.”

Ironic then, Catherine observed, that *Little Mosque* is produced and set in Canada. “That’s a good point,” Said agreed. “Being Canadian makes it very different automatically. It’s like a gentler show. I wonder if that’s the Canadian way versus the American way?”

“I think the Canadians are more accepting,” said David. “If you go to Canada, especially to Toronto, you feel it’s a much more multicultural society. It (*Aliens in America*) is from an American standpoint. It’s how Americans think of Muslims.”

“The one criticism I have,” said Ron, “and it’s a mild one, is that on both shows, all of the (Muslim) characters are Indo-Pakistanis. I think if they really wanted to take a bold step forward, they would introduce an Arab, possibly even an Arab Shiite. Then they would really be trendsetters.”

Sarah described an exhibit at the Arab American National Museum in which people on the streets of Ann Arbor were interviewed about their initial reaction when they see a Muslim person. “Automatically, through the media, a lot of people think that ‘Arab’ and ‘Muslim’ are the same, when in fact 65 percent of Arabs in America are Christian,” she said. “I always get that when I’m giving tours here. People don’t understand the difference.”

“Which is why,” Said responded, turning to Ron, “I disagree to your point that an Arab is needed in either show. Because I think there is that perception that if you’re Arab you’re automatically Muslim, and that’s not the case. I think by showing another nationality there it’s like, ‘Who are those people? I didn’t realize they could be Muslim.’ I think it almost opens it up in a different way.”

Said added that the shows might even have the effect of allowing Arab Americans to view others in a different light. “We of all people should be more culturally sensitive, because we know what we endure, right? But we aren’t, and then we expect the other groups to be more welcoming and more sensitive to us. Wait a minute! It starts first at home with you. And you can get that.”

Conversely, Catherine, the only non-Arab at the table, was offended by the portrayal of the non-Muslims in both series. “From the flip side of the coin, to watch shows like these and see the whole non-Muslim community is all of one very specific breed – white, kind of dumb, not real educated – is just simply not true,” she said. “I consider myself a very well educated individual, even being from West Virginia. Said’s father, I love him dearly, but he called me a hillbilly for the first two years of our relationship. So when I watch a show like this and see these kinds of characters it is almost as disturbing to me. Because I still have questions and curiosities about Arabs and Muslims, and you don’t have to be a silly Podunk individual with no brains to have those questions.”

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