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Terrorists on Screen, Actors on Stage

Stereotyping Arabs and the Cinema Industry in Contemporary Arab-American Theatre

Abstract

This essay investigates the relationship between the representation of Arab Americans, Arab-American cinema, and the cinema industry as a topic in contemporary theatre through the perspective of Arab-American stage performers and playwrights. As a response to the resurgence of stereotypes and the binary representation of the Good vs Bad Muslim in cinema and TV after 9/11, Arab-American playwrights have used the stage to counter-react to ignorance and prejudice by narrating the everyday struggles of Arab-American artists—and actors in particular—against the over-simplifications and requests of the blockbuster cinema industry. In particular the focus will be on two plays: Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes *(2014) by Youssef El Guindi, and* Browntown *(2004) by Sam Younis. Both plays question mainstream culture and prejudices through humorous representations of the role of Arab-American artists within the cinema industry and their struggle for visibility beyond the terrorist mask.*

Keywords: *Arab, Arab-American theatre, American cinema, 9/11*

1. Arabs, Muslims and the Orientalist discourse

The relationship between the Arab world and Hollywood has never been an easy one. Despite some glowing exceptions that have entered Western imagination with Arabia depicted as a dreamlike world (peopled by characters like Ali Baba, Sinbad and Aladdin's many cinematic forms, together with some occasional benevolent sheikhs or caliphs), negative stereotypes related to Arabs are deeply ingrained in American cinema industry, whose pervasiveness has always had a profound effect not only on the perception of Arabs, but also of Arab immigrants in the United States.

The lack of sensitivity of the cinema industry to the reality of the Arab countries is the effect of historical and cultural processes deeply embedded in the Western gaze. As Edward Said demonstrated in *Orientalism* (1978), a milestone in the field of literary and cultural studies, the system used to represent the Orient originated a set of stereotypes that circulated firstly

through Western literature and academia, and then also affected and spread throughout popular culture through media like cinema. The creation of a fictional monolithic Orient named 'Arabia,' with no defined geographical borders, no distinctions in terms of religion, social differences, culture, and so on, is in itself significant of the way the West has conceived and represented Arabness for centuries, a world that has long been depicted as backward, always under the yoke of Islam, populated by greedy sheikhs, corrupt and sneaky merchants, vengeful desert bandits (nearly always against a background of decadence and irrationality), and, from the Fifties onwards, terrorists. The Arab world on screen is a brutal and mainly male one, the female presence long confined to the realm of the silent, veiled woman or the seducing odalisque, that testifies how the Western gaze has not been able to conceive gender relations in the Arab world unless in terms of misogyny.

The long-standing negative bias towards the Arab worlds in Western thought and their negative representation has long impeded a knowledge of who the Arabs are, where they are from, what their history/histories is/are, and—last but not least—what the relation is between the Arab and the Muslim worlds; these are all issues largely unknown to the American audience. The vastness and complexity of the Arab world can, to some extent, discourage its understanding: roughly made up of 265 million people residing in twenty-two Arab states, stretching from the Strait of Hormuz to Gibraltar, 'Arabia' is also characterized by an extreme diversity in ethnicity. What these people have in common is their main language, Arabic, but not religion; and although most Arabs are Muslims, most Muslims are not Arabs.[1]

As always with stereotypes, these latter are largely functional to political goals. The oversimplification and negative portrayal of the 'Orient' have been extremely useful throughout Western history. Firstly, in the 13th century, during the Crusades, they were used in order to legitimize soldiers and missionaries rushing to the aid of the Roman Church; it was then employed by British ideology in the 18th and 19th centuries in order to justify colonial control over parts of the region; and more recently it has been utilized by the US during the 20th and 21st centuries, with the country increasingly involved in the politics of the Middle East and equally entangled in economic exchanges with the Arab countries. The US support of the creation and defense of the state of Israel (and the crisis with its neighbors it led to, especially, but not exclusively, with Palestine), the Oil Wars of the Seventies; direct and indirect US military intervention in Middle-Eastern conflicts (especially from the Gulf Wars onward),

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[1] Of the top six countries with largest Muslim populations (Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Turkey, Iran), none of them are Arab, and only one-fifth of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims are Arabs.

reactions and counter-reactions like *intifadas*, *embargoes*, revolutions, hostage crises, and terrorist attacks have all contributed to the increase in tensions between the US and the Arab world and have made Arabs the perfect villains, replacing what Russians represented during the Cold War: the enemy that posed dangers on both economic and political terrain—a danger that culminated in, and became a tangible, domestic reality with the 9/11 attacks (see Khatib 2006).

The influence of the Western gaze on Arabness and the economic and political dynamics between the US and the Arab World have obviously affected the depiction and perception not only of Arabs, but of Arab Americans as well. Arab Americans constitute only 1% of the US population, and their migration to the US has been largely due to the political upheavals and war scenarios of the territories of the Middle-East. Prior to WWI, nearly all Arabs came from the provinces of Syria, Mount Lebanon and Palestine in the wake of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. The second wave took place after World War II, after the displacements and upheavals that followed the creation of the state of Israel; a third significant wave has reached the US shores from the 1970s onward, more varied in terms of origin and of religion—both Christians and Muslims, coming also from the Gulf states and North Africa.

The first wave of immigrants from the Middle East was largely constituted by Christians but even nowadays only 30 to 40% of Arab Americans are Muslims; the remaining 60% are mostly Christians, ranging from Eastern Orthodox to Roman Catholic to Protestant.[2]

Although Arab-American associations lobbied for official minority classification during the 20th century, Arabness has never been an ethnic category, and the Arab-American world has thus long remained an 'invisible minority,' untracked by the US census and long treated as both white and ethnic, with no fixed legal identity and with a trenchant position in US racial hierarchies. With the tragic events of 9/11 and the need to frame Arabness within the majority/minority binaries that have long shaped American social identities, Arabness became a race in a few hours, with a rigid racial and political status whose discriminative traits were enforced by the PATRIOT Act and the additional xenophobic legislation that followed.

Although this racialization did not originate from domestic interests, but from the political and economic interests of American imperialism and its effects, national culture remains the benchmark from which to analyze these racialization processes, and media like cinema and TV

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[2] The Muslim population in the US is the fastest-growing religious group in the country—six to eight million people, according to a recent survey. The majority of Muslims migrating to the US come from the five countries with the largest Muslim population, none of them an Arab country.

remain the main vehicles for the government agendas when it comes to shaping the national imagery as for the representation of minorities.[3]

2. The representation of Arabs and Arab Americans in the media before and after 9/11

9/11 has not been the trigger of negative stereotyping: "Arab-as-villain images have been around for more than one century," notes Jack Shaheen in his monumental *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (2001), where the author surveys more than one thousand movies prior to 9/11 featuring Arab characters, most of which are demeaning portrayals, and shows that the Arab stereotype has been slowly but systematically constructed over time, relying on both the Orientalist gaze deeply engrained in the contingencies of the past, and by the political and economic contingencies of recent times. Since the very first Hollywood movies, the Muslim Arab was represented "as [an] uncivilised character, the outsider in need of a shower and a shave, starkly contrasting in behavior and appearance with the white Western protagonist" (Shaheen 2008, 25), and very few movies, such as *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924) and the World War II drama *Sahara* (1943), presented Arabs as positive characters. In the first decades of the 20th century, "movie-land's Arabs appeared as sex-crazed, savage, and exotic camel-riding nomads living in desert tents. When not fighting each other and Westerners, they bargained at slave markets, procuring blond women for their harems" (Shaheen 2008). With the foundation of the state of Israel and the Arab-Israeli wars, the image of the Bad Arab began to intensify in the shape of the Terrorist. Since *Sirocco* (1951), the first Hollywood feature film with an Arab as terrorist, Arabs (and especially Palestinians) have been hijacking planes and threatening men, women and children, when not torturing and killing them in brutal ways, even on American soil (as in *Black Sunday*, 1977). While the oil crisis and embargoes fueled the image of the greedy, repulsive and inevitably fat oil sheiks, in the wake of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the following Gulf Wars, and the bombing of New York City's World Trade Center, American cinema has been even more eager to disseminate images of the 'Arab enemy.' The Arab became more and more associated with Islam and Islamic fundamentalism, to the point that, according to Shaheen (2008), only five percent of movies deflated the image of Muslims as barbaric. Blockbuster movies like *Terror Squad* (1988, and its Arab invasion of the US), *True Lies* (1994,

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[3] However, it is worth remembering that whereas the agenda is national, the audience is nowadays largely transnational: overseas box office income constitutes sixty percent of the studios' profits, and Muslim countries are about ten percent of the overseas box office. Moreover, cinema circulation through electronic media is the most important form of access to cinema in the Arab countries, the largest part of which are Hollywood's productions (Shaheen 2008).

with the threat of nuclear bombs planted by a group of Palestinian terrorists in the US), *The Siege* (1998, Islamic fundamentalists staging a terrorist attack on the FBI building)[4] concurred in strengthening and perpetuating the negative depiction of Arabs (and in particular Palestinians) as active agents of menace and violence. There are also numerous movies (including cartoons and kids' movies) from these decades featuring gratuitous 'reel Bad Arabs,' whose ethnic characteristic was not functional to the plot or associated with any logic, save the one of reaffirming the negative stereotype (Shaheen 2008).

On the other hand, Arab Americans were almost invisible on screens prior to 9/11. One reason, according to Shaheen, is that there have not been many Arab Americans involved in the film industry and none of them are famous Hollywood celebrities. However, it can be noted how ignoring Arab-American presence in the US and perpetuating the image of the Arab coming from far away is also a reinforcement of the process of 'Othering.' In negating geographical contiguity, cultural and ethical contiguity is also denied: faraway Arabness can remain an indistinct entity based on the lack of subjectivities ('Arabs look all alike,' like most foes, is a recurring sentence in American movies), and constructed in terms of opposition, often defined by a 'lack' (of power, morals). As Khatib notes, "In this way Orientalism fetishizes the Other, reducing him/her to a set of essentialist variables that are often contradictory" (2006, 5).

The 9/11 terrorist attacks and the sudden visibility of Muslim and Arab Americans had a huge impact on their representation in the media (and, it goes without saying, on their lives in the US).[5] Arabs and terrorists as interchangeable categories justified discriminatory acts towards Arab Americans as both concurrently wrong but essential and necessary.

Immediately after the attacks, the media industry (and cinema in particular) officially took a stand against negative stereotyping of the Muslim world. As James Castonguay reports, "In the wake of 9/11, Jack Valenti (the head of the Motion Picture Association of America) announced that Hollywood would not be making films that portrayed Islamic terrorists so as to prevent a backlash against 'the decent, hard-working, law-abiding Muslim community in this country'" (2004, 103-104).

However, negative depictions of Arabs increased, especially in TV dramas and series and, as several critics noted, had a huge responsibility in the construction of the fiction of an Arab or

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[4] *The Siege* raised a lot of debate in the US: while it depicts Arab terrorists in the usual stereotypes, it also shows innocent Arab Americans being harassed and tortured in the FBI's search for sleeper cells and sheds some light on the role of US secret service in aiding terrorism. See Shaheen 2008.

[5] Although Muslims make up less than 1 percent of the US population, they were victims of the 13 percent of religious based hate crimes in the first decade of the 21st century.

Muslim 'race' (Alsultany 2012, 9; Castonguay 2004, 103-104). As far as cinema is concerned, many critics have underlined a progressive differentiation in the depiction of Arabs and especially Arab Americans, with the reinforcement of positive portrayals of the latter. As Shaheen noted in *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs After 9/11* (2008—in which the author examines one hundred post 9/11 movies), about a third of the movies depicted Arabs and Arab Americans in positive terms. Besides Islamic fundamentalists, allies or victims of the US exertion of military power abroad, or members of 'sleeper cells,' depictions of Arabs as victims of discrimination at home have made their way on screen, and not without ambiguities and contradictions.

The promotion of more sympathetic portrayals of Arabs and Arab Americans, seemingly offsetting or balancing the stereotype of the Arab/Muslim terrorist, has been carried out in several ways, as Evelyn Alsultany notes: through innocent Arabs or Muslims being persecuted at home and facing suspicion and hostility; by inserting patriotic Arab or Muslim American characters; and, in the case of Arabs, humanizing terrorist characters (see Alsultany, in Shoat 2013, 162). However, as for the 'articulation' of terrorist characters however, Morey underlines how "'secondhand' images of Muslims as threatening, untrustworthy terrorists—even when placed in contexts where such stereotypes are called into question […] repeat the association and, arguably, add fuel to the backward-looking arguments of cultural and national purists" (2011, 3-4).

Contradictory as it may seem, the good/bad Arab/Muslim dichotomy has aided the persistence of institutionalized racism. On the one hand, even stories of multicultural inclusion have shaped very restrictive forms of Arab and Muslim American identity (Alsultany 2012, 16); on the other, the diffusion of positive images of Arabs and Arab Americans has been aimed at projecting the US as a benevolent agency that "creates a post-race illusion that absolves viewers from confronting the persistence of institutionalized racism" (Alsultany 2012, 15). Moreover, after 9/11, 'good' or 'bad' as they may be, Arabs and Arab Americans in mainstream cinema have persistently been placed in war scenarios, testifying to the difficulty of disentangling the whole group from what, albeit in the popular imagination (and in the American imagination in particular), is conceived as a "state of exception."

It cannot be ignored how, by making Arab Americans visible, 9/11 has also drawn attention and given room to native voices, with the result that a number of Arab-American or Muslim-American directors and moviemakers have been able to find their way into the movie industry: for example Ahmad Zahra (*American East*, 2007), Annemarie Jacir (*Salt of the Sea*, 2008), Kackie Salloum (*Slingshot Hip Hop*, 2008), Alan Zaloum (*David and Fatima*, 2008), Rolla

Selbak (*Three Veils*, 2009), Ruba Nadda (*Cairo Time*, 2009), Eyad Zahra (*The Taqwacores*, 2009), Ali F. Mostafa (*City of Life*, 2009), Nabil Abou-Harb (*Arab in America*, 2009), Rola Nashef (*Detroit Unleaded,* 2012) and the most famous of these, Cherien Dabis's *Amreeka* (2009), a comedy about a mother and son migrating to the rural US of Illinois in search of a better life. Their distribution however has been quite limited. "Terrorism, specifically Muslim terrorism against America, pays big money at the box office, and so these themes and images continue to win out in the theatre. Money [...] guides how religion will be portrayed in American film—that is the blockbuster" notes Rubina Ramji (2016, 17), listing the box office earnings of eleven movies released between 2005 and 2010 with positive and negative depictions of Arabs and Arab Americans and showing how the 'reel bad Arab' may be morally debatable, but it remains highly profitable.

3. Performing cinema: Hollywood onstage

"Do you realize the worst film of last year was seen by more people world-wide than the absolute best play ever staged in the past hundred years. Wrong business?" Barry, a film producer, asks Ashraf, an actor of Arab descent unwilling to play the terrorist part in a blockbuster movie in Youssef El Guindi's play *Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes* (2014, 17). Exaggerated as it may be, when talking about circulation and dissemination, cinema and theatre can hardly be compared—even less nowadays, if we think of the new circuits of distribution of the cinema industry such as Netflix, Amazon, etc. that have mainly voiced the dominant discourse and thus left little or no space for alternative or insiders' perspectives.

In the years immediately after 9/11, theatre has been the most accessible medium for Arab-American artists and writers willing to be subjects, rather than objects, of representation, for several reasons: their sudden visibility (and of an audience willing to know more about them); an interest on and for the stage, as in other art forms that, especially at the beginning of the 21st century, has seen theatre focusing more and more on 'the real,' on verisimilitude and truth;[6] a network of theatres and theatre companies already producing and staging Arab-American plays before 9/11; and obviously the lower budgets required by theatre compared to cinema.

While some Arab-American (also collective) projects tried at first to depict who Arab Americans were (as in the docu-project *Sajjil*, 2003), often in the context of migrant/minority discourse, others decided to focus on the hardships Arab-American communities and individuals had to

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[6] In forms like the documentary theatre and docudrama, the verbatim theatre, reality-based theatre, the theatre of witness, tribunal theatre, nonfiction theatre, and theatre of fact. See Martin 2010, 1.

face after 9/11. Though persecution and violence have been the subjects of the most famous plays (from Rania Khalil's performance *Flag Piece*, 2001, to Ismail Khalidi's *Truth Serum Blues*, 2005; or Youssef El Guindi's *Back of the Throat*, 2006, and *Language Rooms*, 2007), some have decided to specifically address the representation and misrepresentation of Arabs and Arab Americans in US culture and in the American movie industry in particular, like Sam Younis in *Browntown* (2004) and Youssef El Guindi in the aforementioned *Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes*, two comedies that investigate the mistreatment of Arabs and Arab Americans by the cinema industry, both by focusing on a key moment of that process, casting. As El Guindi explains,

> Being in the entertainment business, a business that will naturally take its clues from these mainstream narratives, it is doubly strange to have to navigate one's sense of self/identity through these misconceptions. Being a writer from a group that is currently occupying the role of lead villain, I have three options: I can either address these concerns directly, as I have in this play; or indirectly, as I have done in other plays; or I can ignore the whole vexing issue altogether, as I sometimes do, if just to take a break. But what if I was an actor of Middle Eastern descent who was being offered roles that bolster these negative stereotypes? What if the only parts being offered were these kinds of roles? What if I had a family to support and needed the money? Perhaps I could justify it by thinking that if I take on this 'evil-doer' role it might lead to better, less stereotypical roles in the future. Or perhaps I can persuade myself that by taking on this hideously-written 'character,' I can flesh him out, humanize him, and perhaps lessen the emotional damage it might do to that Arab kid who might watch the film. (2014, 6)

Ridiculing and thus discrediting the ways in which Hollywood depicts Arabs and Arab Americans is only part of what these playwrights do. By showing the backstage, with its mechanisms and logics, of the movie industry, Arab-American artists also investigate the short-circuits of an art form with shifty and contradictory cultural and political agendas and urgent economic imperatives. These plays unveil the discrepancies between ethics and profit; the contingencies and imperatives Arab-American actors have to face; the legitimization of stereotypes by the system; the treatment and (mistreatment) of minorities at large; and the strategies of exclusion and inclusion not only of the cinema, but of American society in general; and, last but not least, the widespread ignorance towards Arabness.

Together with the content, the genre is also crucial: whereas the depiction of Arab and Arab-American worlds on screen almost always revolves around dramatic plots, both these playwrights choose comedy, and not by chance. The joke is a defense for the self, wrote Freud; Arab-American artists and playwrights' defense took also the form, among others, of festivals and tours like the *New York Arab-American Comedy Festival,* which started in 2003; and *The*

Axis of Evil Comedy Tour, 2005, which aimed at dismantling the connection between Arabness and tragedy. Whereas in several blockbuster movies the 'Bad Arab' is laughed at for his clumsiness and stupidity, as a form of exorcism, the use of comedy in Arab-American theatre is aimed at dismantling prejudices and stereotypes: as Sam Younis underlines, "I believe that comedy is an effective tool for exposing the roots and everyday expressions of ignorance, in a digestible, nonjudgmental way. If we can laugh at our own ignorance, then we have already identified it. And that's a start" (2009, 226).

In the refractions generated by this multiple mirroring (Arab-American playwrights' staging Arabs and Arab Americans' depiction in American movies) the dialectics between theatre and cinema also come into play. As Judith Butler notes, the blurred line between the real and the representational that affects our vision of reality occurs because "the real is positioned both before and after its representation; and representation becomes a moment of the reproduction and consolidation of the real" (1990, 106). Whereas cinema relies on the immutability of the reproduction, and the reinforcement of it through repetition, theatre's performativity and live acting allow it to reframe and contest what Peggy Phelan, in her study of performativity, called the 'fetishization' of the Other, with the psychological and social corollaries it implies: "The pleasure of resemblance and repetition produces both psychic assurance and political fetishization. Representation reproduces the Other as the Same. Performance, insofar as it can be defined as representation without reproduction, can be seen as a model for another representational economy, one in which the reproduction of the Other as the Same is not assured" (Phelan 1993, 3). And, by making that same reproduction and fetishization the theme of performance, the two acts are not only undermined, but radically subverted.

By contesting a fixed, monolithic depiction of the Other through performativity, Arab-American playwrights like Younis and El Guindi explicitly address in their plays the fictional contours of Arabness, and the very notion of 'authenticity': what is the relation between the fictional and the real worlds? Is 'an authentic representation' of ethnic identities viable, not only as far as cinema is concerned (burdened as it is by its politically and economically-dictated agendas), but at least in theatre? Or is 'authentic Arabness' nothing but another constrictive monolith, rather than the goal that sets the self free?

4. The Shades of Terror: Sam Younis, *Browntown* and the cages of stereotypes

"Who are the hijackers and who are the hostages in the entertainment industry?" is the question that introduced *Browntown* at the *New York Arab American Comedy Festival* in 2004, and the

perfect synopsis of a comedy that, as Ali notes "presents Arab American characters who have become hostages to their own social and cultural stereotypes" (2017, 83).

Browntown is the response to Younis's experience as an Arab-American actor who was constantly offered terrorist roles. As the playwright of Lebanese origin explains (Younis 2009, 225), this stereotyping worsened after the 9/11 attacks, especially in the television production divisions and networks, whose casting Younis parodies. The play is set in the Wide Net Talent Casting office in New York, in November 2003—that is, after the invasion of Iraq, when the US government needed to gain consensus and reinforcing the idea of the Arab as the Villain was one of its strategies. Omar and the younger Malek, two actors of Arab origin who can hardly make ends meet, are waiting to audition for *The Color of Terror*, a made-for-TV movie in which brown-skinned actors are needed. It is the last of a series of auditions for 'brown' parts (that is, Middle Eastern roles) that are being held for movies full of stereotypical representations of Arabs and other minorities. Whereas Malek naively tries to defend some of the screenwriter's choices regarding the protagonist's characteristics, Omar, who is older and more disillusioned, sees them as they are: discriminatory and limiting, humanly and artistically, to the extent that his main wish is that of interpreting a "normal guy," even a "normal bad guy" (Younis 2009, 236), but ethnically nondescript. While they are waiting, the two are joined by Vijay, an actor of Indian origin who often gets Arab-American parts, because neither the cinema nor the theatre industry seem to know the difference between Arabs, Muslims and Indians (a fact confirmed by the audition itself).

What is debated in the waiting room and what is acted within the office are the logics of ethnic stereotyping and their contradictions: where Omar perceives the mistreatment of Arabs as being unparalleled in the cinema industry, Vijiay sees ethnic stereotyping as the general rule, with all minorities caged in specific roles and characters—blacks as gangsters, Latinos as drug dealers, Indians as bodega owners, etc. According to Vijay, each new group has been the "most likely to be vilified" (Younis 2009, 243). Many minorities are unable to free themselves from stereotypes, but they are also functional to the system when they address a specific audience (and thus market): not by chance, in the adjoining studio, blacks and Latinos are auditioned for a "Long John Silver's spot," a seafood commercial in Ebonics. Omar's repressed frustration at the absurd characterization of the terrorist turns into a tremendous anger during the audition and energy in acting that impresses Ann, the casting director, so much so that she requests another audition in the afternoon. Despite the initial perplexities, Omar is glad for the second audition, especially after he finds out that Barry Juckheime, a famous producer, is on board. During the second reading, full of illogical and involuntarily ridiculous lines ("Mark my words!

If the United States does not become an Islamic state within the next forty-eight hours, you will all face the wrath of Allah!"—Younis 2009, 231), Omar and Vijay play the two Arab-American roles. When Vijay is dismissed and Omar is given more lines to study, the latter is sure the role will be his. Unknown to Omar, Ann will receive a call from her boss in Los Angeles: Colin Farrell, the Irish-born American actor, is willing to play the role offered to Omar in order to "stretch his acting career" and "pass for Arab" (Younis 2009, 258). The only one who seems to have a chance of getting a part at the end of the play is Malek, who has auditioned for the Long John Silver's spot next door and passed as a black rapper.

The play is clearly about the complicity of the cinema industry in perpetuating negative ethnic stereotypes, especially (but not only) of Arabs and Arab Americans, but it is also an investigation of the responsibilities of the final products—with the inevitable negotiations, compromises, and (to some extent) complicity of actors themselves.

Stereotyping race is self-evident in the title of the play and of the movie the actors are casting, both centered on the color of the skin: 'Browntown' refers to the group of actors (and people) with similar skin tones and associated with the terrorist roles. "Brown(town)" is also the answer to the implicit question posed by the title of the fictional TV drama—"what is the color of terror?"—that, like the (fictional) others mentioned in the play (*Geronimo Jihad, Hijacked at Home, Baby Bombers*), reveals the discriminatory attitude towards Arab and Muslim groups.

Besides color, stereotypes are also evident in the persistence in the cinema industry of a fixed and monolithic Arab identity, represented by names themselves—that is, only one: "Why do all terrorists got to be named Mohammed in these movies?" (Younis 2009, 235), Omar asks his fellow actor and the audience. Moreover, the name encourages the association between the terrorist type and Islamic religion (reduced to its fundamentalist incarnation), and equates the latter with violence, as Ann makes explicit by equating the character's violence with his being "a super devout Muslim" (Younis 2009, 239). The terrorist of this TV drama encapsulates all the clichés related to Arabness: he has several wives, he "hates all Jews, he drives a Mercedes that he bought with his family's oil money and he's conspiring with a guerrilla group called 'Allies for Allah'" (Younis 2009, 235-236)—the same stereotypes that can be found in real Hollywood movies, Omar points out, like *True Lies* and *Not Without My Daughter* (Younis 2009, 236).

Piling up clichés related to Arabness obviously has a comic effect in the play. Laughter originates not only from the absurdity of stereotypes themselves, but also from the ignorance about Arabness shown by non-ethnic characters: for example by Ann, who equates Islam with rage, craziness, violence and a backward moral code, in order to act 'Muslim' you have to be angry (Younis 2009, 242). The cast director is reassured by the fact that Vijay's parents come

from India, "because the director really wants to go with Arab talent" (Younis 2009, 251), and she is impressed by how 'Arab' Omar's fake Indian accent sounds. Sherry, Ann's assistant, on the other hand, suggests that she should tan if she is chosen to impersonate an Arab woman, forgetting that in the script the latter is covered from head to toe. As Ali underlines,

> By introducing the subject of stereotyping through the medium of comedy, Younis whisks away the rigidity and uncompromising nature of the Arab stereotype. This enables him to challenge the authority of stereotypes as a point of reference when the audience first meets the Arab/Arab American characters. Younis familiarizes the audience with the Arab in the non-threatening territory of comedy, and cements the disparity between what he identifies as Arab and those culturally-constructed stereotypes recognized and defined as Arab. (2017, 85)

Beside its characteristics, Younis also parodies the consequences of ignorance, with the three actors recounting how they have all auditioned for (and sometimes obtained) their roles, reminding the audience how, in 'real' Hollywood, most of the actors who have played Arab/Muslim terrorists have been Latinos, South Asians, Greeks and even Israeli-Jewish (Alsultany 2012, 9). With cultural, linguistic and ethnic specificities merged in a blurred, undistinguishable entity, Arabness is reduced by the system to a visual framing based on skin color, which is in itself very dangerous for the perpetuation of stereotypes, as Evelyn Alsultany notes:

> The point here is not that only Arabs should portray Arab characters but rather that casting lends itself to the visual construction of an Arab/Muslim race that supports the conflation of Arab and Muslim identities. This construction of a conflated Arab/Muslim 'look' in turn supports policies like racial profiling; even if unintentional, it does the ideological work of making racial profiling seem like an effective tool when it is in fact an unrealistic endeavor. (2012, 10)

However, Omar involuntarily adheres to the rules of the system too by advocating the correspondence between the actors' identity and the roles they play[7]—only Arab actors should get Arab parts, according to him, since other groups are ignorant of what Arab culture is and would misinterpret it. Beside the incongruities between speech and act (it is Omar himself who played an Indian part in a Tom Stoppard play), Omar's wish for an adherence between real and fictional ethnic identities in that given system involuntarily strengthens the link between

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[7] Something highly debated nowadays in the performative arts and in the cinema industry in particular, and related to the 'politically correctness' of having actors impersonating roles of groups they do not belong to—especially as far as disabilities.

Arabness and specific roles—as it happened when Omar (allegedly) impersonated the Bad Arab in *True Lies* (Younis 2004, 236).[8]

Since most of the ignorance about Arabness in the play is related, as Ann exemplifies, to the ethnic and geographical borders of the Arab and the Islamic worlds, what is also undermined is the search for 'authenticity' mentioned by the casting director and one of the mantras of the cinema industry. The difficulty in achieving 'authenticity' is not only due to the ignorance and the economic imperatives of the cinema industry (the final choice of Colin Farrell, of Irish descent, being their climax) and the possibility that non-Arab-American actors interpreting Arab-Americans may lead to a misrepresentation of Arab culture. Even belonging to the right ethnic group, what is 'authentic' and what is not is hard to be discerned. Not even Omar is able to distinguish an Arab and an Indian actor (Younis 2009, 241) because he does not consider that Indians can be Muslims too: "Not all Indians are Hindus. Indians can be Muslims, too. I'm Indian and atheist, my family is Catholic, and I'll have you to know I eat beef shawarma all the fucking time!", Vijay burst out (Younis 2009, 241). And, as far as one's own cultural heritage, if you are Indian American, how can you know the Indian accent if your parents were raised in Queens, like Vijay's? (Younis 2009, 248). The play suggests that Omar's grasping for 'authenticity' negates the individual and fluid process of identity formation, and it does not undermine, but corroborates, those rigid categories at the basis of stereotypes.

What Omar does not take into account in his call for 'authenticity' is the fictional performativity of the acting process *Browntown* investigates: how do authenticity and the role of the actor interact, since the latter's job is precisely to impersonate somebody he is not, as Malek and Vijay point out? Are 'authenticity' and 'acting' oxymoronic? Like ethnicity, authenticity is also misread throughout the play—that ends, not by chance, questioning authenticity on a mimetic, rather than diegetic, level: are the couple of words in Arab to say good-bye to each other before the curtains fall enough to prove Malek and Omar's 'authentic' Arab identity?

The only authentic act that can be found in the play (and that temporarily wins Omar the part) is the anger he reacts with to Ann's dismissive and unsatisfying answers to his doubts about the character he has to play. The casting director interprets Omar's anger at her as 'playing Muslim.' As Mohammed explains, "Omar's anger is merely an outburst to the pressures ongoing inside him against the prejudiced manifestations of a Muslim. But it seems that it was the pavement to his cultural identity switching" (Mohammed 2020, 98). Here 'authenticity' turns

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[8] In *True Lies* the terrorists are played by a Pakistani-English actor, Art Malik; an Iranian-American, Marshall Manesh; an Israeli-American, Ofer Samra, and a Lebanese-American, Gino Salvano.

out to be a very ephemeral concept: to those who ignore what Arabness is, 'authentic' becomes whatever matches the preconceived idea that ignorance has produced. What undermines the rules of the system is conceiving 'authenticity' in artistic terms, the play suggests: Malek's casting for (and finally obtaining) the part in the advertisement in Ebonics testifies he has accepted and interiorized the rules of that world and has been able to exploit it, taking advantage of its ignorance, thanks to his ability to act. The whole ambiguity of *Browntown* runs on this thin line, where authenticity in cinema is how closely you impersonate the stereotyped image required, whereas to theatre it is what is outside that fictional world, and the two converging in a misunderstanding that both negates and confirms each subject's own perspective.

5. Youssef El Guindi's *Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes*: the terrorist as hostage

Theatre as the tool to unveil the misrepresentation of the screen is also the point of departure for *Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes* by Youssef El Guindi, a one-act play that debuted in San Francisco in 2008. This too investigates Arab and Arab-American characters and the dilemmas actors interpreting them have to face within the Hollywood industry. Like Younis's play, El Guindi's also stages the casting for a terrorist role, this time in a blockbuster movie. As El Guindi explains in the "Author's Notes," Arab Americans have been villains on screen for decades, not only after 9/11—a presence that has had a huge impact on the younger Arab-American generations: "The genesis for this play arose from years of being that Arab kid watching actors of Arab descent taking on these kinds of bad-guy roles. As I would sit there either cringing or enraged at these portrayals, I would think: what on earth persuaded these actors to take these parts?" (El Guindi 2014, 6).

El Guindi's search for an answer to his childhood question is not as simple (and monetary) as it may seem: it reveals limits, aspirations, ethical and moral choices to make; and multifaceted forms of discrimination as well. In investigating the demands of the cinema industry, it also explores its contingencies, and how political and economic agendas dictate artistic choices.

Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes is set in the office of Barry, an agent who is trying to persuade one of his actors, Ashraf, of Arab-American descent, to accept the role of a terrorist (another Mohammed) in a blockbuster movie. Ashraf, known for his unwillingness to compromise (he had already refused to play the terrorist in a previous movie entitled *Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes*), is hardly making ends meet, playing Hamlet for two hundred dollars a week. The terrorist he should impersonate is supposed to break into an American

house during the Thanksgiving dinner and take the family hostage, and to perpetrate cruel and gratuitous acts of violence (seducing the eldest daughter, killing the grandmother, psychologically and physically torturing the others). Ashraf is disgusted and offended by Mohammed's characterization: it is the epitome of all the most hideous Arab-American stereotypes and attitudes associated with them: a sadist, rapist, moved by the desire for revenge (for his people and what Americans allegedly did to them), who in the end is killed by the father, a splatter death turned into a pornographic spectacle watched by all the members of the family, even the youngest ones. In order to persuade Ashraf, Barry suggests that the play has satiric undertones and aims, the first being the criticism of the American Family. "Stereotypes are passé," Barry assures Ashraf; the bad Arabs are only "provocateurs" (El Guindi 2014, 23). Visibility is an advantage of the movie industry that theatre allegedly does not possess: "What is the point of having principles if you are not around to show people you have any?", Barry asks (El Guindi 2014). The play also poses the question as to whether "a hundred and twenty pages of toilet paper" (El Guindi 2014, 17) can turn into something acceptable, beyond the fact they are paid 800,000 dollars for three weeks' work. Ashraf, ready to leave the office, decides to wait when he hears that Cassandra Shapely, a Hollywood star, and Julius Steele, a director famous for his civic commitment, are already on board and they are joining them for the first meeting in a few minutes. Steele however erases all doubts about the aim of the movie: no irony or satire is intended. The movie is about "the threat to a family and its values"; it is even described by Julius as a "psychological drama" (El Guindi 2014, 43). Despite the rehearsal of a couple of scenes with Cassandra going well, Ashraf erupts and accuses Julius of ignoring the dangers and consequences of the misrepresentation of Arabs, but to no avail. Stereotypes are explained by Julius as rites of inclusion every minority has to undergo before being 'accepted' in the American imaginary (El Guindi 2014, 51), and they must be functional to people's need to "project shadows" (El Guindi 2014, 52) as Carl Jung named cultural forms of exorcism. The play ends with Ashraf alone with Barry in the office; his choice whether to accept the role or not still to be made.

As the synopsis shows, there are many structural devices and themes in common between this comedy and *Browntown*, to the extent that El Guindi seems to rework Younis' play: the choice to look behind the scene, the audition, the stereotypical characters requested by the cinema industry, even the same name given to the terrorist, Mohammed.

Like (and even more so than) *Browntown*, the play can also be read as a concise but exhaustive encyclopedia of distortions, misrepresentations and stereotyping Arab Americans have been subject to in American movies: the Arab is a hater of America and its institutions, including the

American family; the Arab as violent and cruel, especially with women and children (El Guindi 2014, 11), a rapist and sexually perverse, as the thought of raping the son shows (El Guindi 2014, 12), with no respect for the past and traditions, tearing the stuffed turkey open and forcing the family members to eat from the floor or gathering the family photos and pissing on them (El Guindi 2014, 12). Mohammed is "a string of clichés hung together with punctuation marks" (El Guindi 2014, 44), as Ashraf puts it, to the extent that misrepresentation becomes the main source of laughter for the theatre audience. A bitter one, as it stems from fears and ignorance.

All these similarities between the plays confirm the monolithic patterns of (mis)representation of Arabs in the world of the media, but they also speak volumes about the effects that stereotypes disseminated by the cinema industry have on society. And although El Guindi partly attributes this attitude to "Carl Jung's idea of 'projecting our shadows' onto others" (El Guindi 2014, 5), he also interrogates the use of Jung and psychology by society in specific contingencies.

Apart from modes and the effects, El Guindi's play stages the strategies of this discriminative cultural dissemination—that is, how the mistreatment of Arabs and Arab Americans in mainstream cinema has been justified—in order to emphasize the relation between what is onscreen, what is behind the screen and what surrounds the very screen. The first strategy used by the cinema industry is to negate the stereotype altogether, or better yet, deny that a certain characterization is linked to a specific character: "the word 'terrorist' is never mentioned" (El Guindi 2014, 12), Barry assures Ashraf, as if his ethnic identity and deeds were not enough to identify the villain.

Another way to justify the use of stereotype is relativizing it through interpretation: as Barry explains, in a 'post-stereotype' era the stereotype can be used to contest the system that produced it, pretending it is a self-conscious creative act (El Guindi 2014, 12)—something that is almost immediately contradicted by the director. This cultural justification is nevertheless crucial not only in the cinema world, but also in society at large, and it clarifies the function of what El Guindi calls the "manufactured narratives. Those stories that the mainstream culture keeps in play for whatever reason" (2014, 5). As Julius' dismissive attitude towards ethics makes clear, in times of crisis, the systems of values change, and the need to identify a 'common enemy' to strengthen political power and social control undermine what had been considered, until that moment, a culturally and socially-shared vision of a post-ethnic world. It is a reactionary step-back that involves not only the audience, but also the (apparently) bravest and committed directors. When faced with these contradictions, the director (and the system's) answer is the motto "art for art's sake." The only responsibility, as Julius makes clear, is to tell a good story: "I don't handle causes. I handle a camera. I make movies" (El Guindi 2014, 49). And to Ashraf's

insistence of a moral responsibility in bringing the fictional world to life and the consequence it has in the real one, the suggestion is to "become a preacher, or write a book" (El Guindi 2014, 51), implying that there's no room for ethical issues in cinema.

If art is the only thing that matters, then what should be important is the actor's capability to play all roles. Ashraf's accepting or refusing the part should not be, according to Barry, an ethical question, but an artistic one, because his refusal casts doubt on his talent, on his ability to transform the stereotypical character into "something magical" (El Guindi 2014, 13). The blackmail perpetrated by the system through Barry is both economic and psychological: by refusing that role, the actor is not only giving up a lot of money, but he is also admitting he is not able to do his job properly. Something that, despite his scorn, Ashraf is suggested as having considered, since he keeps in his bag a small handgun and a keffiyeh (El Guindi 2014, 37)—a sign of ambiguity that can either be read as an automatism to casting villains or his willingness to compromise from the very beginning.

While cinema has no place for morals, as Julius affirms, it does not seem to have any space for art as well. In El Guindi's unveiling of the hypocrisy of the film industry, one of the curtains coming down in the play is the very idea that the cinema industry produces art. As Barry suggests, "you have to give it to movies. The dumber they get, the richer people become" (El Guindi 2014, 17). Whether they are related to ethnicity or other categories (like gender), stereotypes are functional to profits, because they satisfy the audience's basic society-fueled expectations. In the most memorable monologue of the play, given not to Ashraf, but to an insider's voice from the blockbuster industry, by Cassandra, Hollywood is nothing but entertainment struggling to get the audience's attention:

> What the hell kind of business do you think this is? An academy for the study of human behavior? This is the land of gummybears [*sic*] and popcorn, and making out in the back row and leaving a mess for the ushers to clean up. It ain't deep, it's not real, and if you're lucky you get paid a whole lot [...] if you're lucky you find one or two great nuggets in your career and that's what you live off while you forage through more trash. Stereotypes, please. You don't know anything about stereotypes until you've walked in my hooker boots for six weeks on a movie set. (El Guindi 2014, 47)

Cassandra's speech makes it clear how stereotypes affect several categories, not only ethnic ones, and encourage and enforce a distorted vision of the subjects in the real world. Whereas Barry and Julius pretend that what is on and off screen are worlds apart, Cassandra's acceptance of the few choices available to women in Hollywood does not exclude her awareness of its consequences in real life, as Ashraf knows well. The movies' potential for giving a shape to one's own fears, but also for shaping our vision of reality is self-evident when Ashraf, trying

to persuade Julius of the dangers of racist depictions of Arabs, produces a fake handgun he used for the rehearsal, and by the panic it causes. "You see: I pick up a gun and it's threatening. Other people might pick up a gun and you'd understand they were trying to make a point" (El Guindi 2014, 45). Although Barry says (not without reason) that "Any actor who's hysterical and has a gun is threatening regardless of his ethnic persuasion" (El Guindi 2014, 46), his words demonstrate how he immediately and unconsciously equates Ashraf and the Terrorist: "Are you holding us hostages? Jesus God, we're hostages" (El Guindi 2014, 46), cries Barry, forgetting how, ironically, the only one who held a hostage was himself, by locking the door of his office in order to prevent Ashraf from leaving the room at the beginning of their meeting.

"Who are the hijackers and who are the hostages in the entertainment industry?" is the question *Browntown* asks and has echoes here as well, with even more sardonic undertones: Ashraf is prisoner of the terrorist's role, of his agent, of an entertainment industry that is deceived by its own shadows and lies.

Choices are to be made, urges El Guindi—not so much by the actors, as Younis suggested, but by the cinema industry because, as Shaheen reminds us, "filmmaking is political. Movies continuously transmit selected representations of reality to world citizens from Baghdad to Boston. [...] Policies enforce stereotypes; stereotypes impact policies. It's a continuous spiral, no matter which comes first" (Shaheen 2008). Theatre may not have a comparable audience, but it can be the backstage where processes and representations are questioned and reframed, stereotypes contested, and Reel Bad Arabs shown for what they are: actors with precarious lives and hostages of the cinema industry; and above all screens mirroring other people's fears in a 'not-so post-ethnic' Hollywood (and real) world.

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