A is for Arab:
An Interview with Dr. Jack Shaheen

Paul Davey
Growing up in a diverse community in the Pittsburgh area, Dr. Jack Shaheen developed strong principles of tolerance and understanding for people of all backgrounds. An Orthodox Christian with Lebanese parents, Dr. Shaheen eventually began to question how Arab Americans and Muslim Americans were depicted in television and films. During a Fulbright teaching fellowship in Beirut, Dr. Shaheen had his first encounters with Muslims, and he discovered that they were wholly different from the portrayal of Muslims in the American media. This experience inspired him to write his first essay on the topic of media stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims, “The TV Arab,” in 1975. It took three years and dozens of rejections for Dr. Shaheen to find a publisher for “The TV Arab,” a struggle which further propelled him towards a career in which he continues to take on cultural indifference to these harmful stereotypes.
For over three decades, Dr. Shaheen has dedicated his career to addressing portrayals of Arabs and Muslims in the American media. He has written four critically-acclaimed books on the subject: *The TV Arab* (1984), *Arab and Muslim Stereotyping in American Popular Culture* (1997), *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (2001), and *Guilty: Hollywood’s Verdict on Arabs After 9/11* (2008). In 2006, a documentary based on *Reel Bad Arabs* was released by the Media Education Foundation. He has served as a consultant on films dealing with the Middle East, including blockbusters like *Three Kings* and *Syriana*. He has also worked as a consultant for 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. He has appeared on numerous national television and radio programs, and his essays have been featured in many national news publications. Over the years, Dr. Shaheen has given over 1,000 lectures throughout the United States and around the world.

Dr. Shaheen has won numerous awards for his work, including two Fulbright teaching awards, the Janet Lee Stevens Award from the University of Pennsylvania, a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, the Archangel Michael award from the Greek Orthodox Church, and the Pancho Be Award. He has received acclaim for his “outstanding contribution towards a better understanding of our global community,” for “his lifelong commitment to bring a better understanding towards peace for all mankind,” and for “the advancement of humanity.”

Today, Dr. Shaheen serves as a Distinguished Visiting Scholar at New York University’s Asian/Pacific/American Institute and The Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies. In 2011, The Jack G. Shaheen Archive opened at New York University. This collection, gathered by Dr. Shaheen and his wife Bernice over the years, consists of thousands of films, television programs, cartoons, comic books, advertisements, books, magazines, toys, and more that feature Arab or Muslim figures. It spans over a century and forms perhaps the most comprehensive account of the depiction of Arabs and Muslims in American popular culture available. This collection reveals the depth and breadth of Dr. Shaheen’s research, and serves as a testament to the dedication with which he treats his work.

To learn more about the collection, visit: http://neareaststudies.as.nyu.edu/object/kc_media_jackshaheen.

**Interview**

What inspired you to focus on negative portrayals of Arabs and Muslims in your career?

I grew up in a small steel town right outside of Pittsburgh. There was a blend — it was sort of a multicultural haven for people of different creeds and different colors, primarily African Americans — and there was always, at least in my home, respect for other people. And there was never an unkind or derogatory word spoken against anyone because of their faith or because of their color. And that stayed with me. I was always very sensitive growing up to how blacks were being portrayed because we lived in a segregated town with an integrated school. All of my black friends could not live where I lived, and in order to be with them in their homes, I had to go to another part of town. And then, what finally happened, I was almost forty years of age when my children came run-
ning up to me after watching Saturday morning cartoons, complaining about how Arabs were being portrayed on television, and I couldn’t find any. And I said, “This is interesting. I think I’ll write something.” And I wrote an article back in the mid-70s called “The TV Arab,” but no one wanted to publish it. It took three years before it would get published. So it was really a couple of things: one, my background, my family, and their ability not to see prejudice; two, the impact that the stereotypes were having on my children; and finally, the indifference and the refusal to accept this stereotype as a legitimate stereotype. I think that perhaps, had the article been published right away, I may have stayed with other research projects that I was working on at the time, namely images of nuclear war in cinema and the survival of public broadcasting. I was working on both of those at the time. But because of the resistance, and because all of the sudden my heritage became an issue at the university. You know, some of my colleagues behind my back would say, “there goes the Arab professor,” and it was only because I was doing research on Arab images. And that had a profound impact.

On the topic of how stereotypes against Arabs relate to stereotypes against other groups, it seems like a lot of stereotypes have faded away from media portrayals in the past few decades. Why have stereotypical portrayals of Arabs and Muslims persisted and are more or less unchallenged today?

That’s an excellent question. There are several reasons for it. One is that 9/11, the tragedy of 9/11, sort of took the stereotype to a new level. Prior to 9/11, Arabs and Muslims were not being vilified that much. I mean, they were being demonized, but not to the extent that they are today. And I think the tragedy of

Dr. Jack G. Shaheen. Courtesy of the Asian/Pacific/American Institute at NYU.
9/11 not only escalated the stereotype, but brought to the silver screen images of American Arabs and American Muslims as terrorists. And that was new, that sort of fresh, post-9/11 stereotype. We, as Americans, were being lumped together with clones of al-Qaeda. Then, I think, this endured for so long because of the lack of Arab Americans and Muslim Americans as an integral part of the image-making process in the media. They’re not present. So I think a lack of presence has a great deal to do with it. You see many more African Americans and Hispanics and Asians. And presence, you know, it has a great deal to do with it. I think politics, to some extent, plays a role. The Arab-Israeli conflict, I think – if Arabs and Israelis were at peace, you would see sitcoms with Arab and Israeli characters on commercial television. We should see it now; we shouldn’t wait for peace to happen. I think it would go a long way to help soften the stereotype. Economics; you can vilify an Arab and get away with it. And it makes money, still these films make money, whereas with other groups, I think, are so well-organized that if you demonize them, there’s going to be a backlash, to some extent. And finally, I think that some special interest groups and religious groups really are blind to this stereotype, and honestly believe that all Arabs, and all Muslims, are our enemies. That’s regrettable. That’s very, very sad.

How would you sum up, in general, the stereotype of Arabs and Muslims in the American media?

Well, the villain. Let’s be candid; words and images teach us whom to love, whom to hate, whom to fear. And I think, you know, these things are really embedded in popular culture, so anything that’s linked to Arabs or Muslims automatically means America’s enemy. Whether it’s a terrorist, a wealthy oil sheikh, a submissive or exotic woman, it is always the evil cultural other. Or the godless cultural “other”, because their god is supposedly not the same as our god, they don’t play by the same rules as we do, they don’t play fair, and they hate us. And that’s the image.

One fascinating revelation in *Reel Bad Arabs* is that some of the most racist portrayals of Arabs come in action films made in cooperation with the United States Department of Defense. What is the extent of this collaboration, and what is the wider impact of having anti-Arab portrayals in a film sanctioned by an arm of the U.S. government?

Well, that’s a very good question. I tried to meet with a fellow called Philip Strub – he’s the Pentagon liaison – he’s the guy who approves the scripts and makes the decisions as to whether the Department of Defense should cooperate, and he would not return any of my calls, nor would he agree to meet with me in Washington. I did speak with his associate addressing my concerns. And then what’s interesting, I know another author who works with Strub, and has written a couple books because he’s linked to the military, and he wants to know if I’m sympathetic to Muslims. And when he wrote to me, he said, “You’re not a Muslim or sympathetic to them, are you, Jack?” And so it’s a problem when you have individuals like that in charge who won’t even have a dialogue to go over what they are doing wrong. I don’t know how many people actually paid attention to the collaboration with the Department of Defense. I did primarily because of my academic background and because I felt that my taxpayer monies, as a veteran, are being used to demonize people; that’s morally and ethically wrong.

How has the portrayal of Arabs in films and TV changed due to the increased American focus on the Arab world in the 21st century? Has there been any positive change because we consider that part of the world more closely, or has
it all been negative due to vilification?

Well, I think we still have a tendency to focus on the violence that's taking place in the region. The Arab Spring, I think, temporarily brought change in press coverage in Egypt, but now that things are so unsettled in Egypt and Syria and other parts of the region, the killings of our people in Libya – I think, as a rule, print journalists do a much better job, and have been doing a much better job, to bring about a balance. What frightens and concerns me is that there isn’t what we would call American Arab or American Muslim professionals speaking out, addressing, or commenting on this issue in mainstream media, particularly in television news. There’s an absence of that, and I think that’s a mistake. They go to just about everyone else, every other color, every other ethnic group, to talk about the region, except people like American Arabs and American Muslims, who are very knowledgeable about the region. And I think that’s a major drawback. I think with cinema… if we look at movies, there are independent films that have come out. There are small films that have made a profound difference, like The Visitor, Amreeka; those are nice films. And the stereotype, we don’t see films like True Lies anymore, or The Kingdom, or Rules of Engagement. And even television to some extent, now that 24 has been cancelled, and Sleeper Cell is no longer on the air. The only show that kind of goes out of its way to vilify all things Arab and all things Muslim is this show Homeland, and it’s done in such a way that gives the appearance of being balanced when it’s not.

In your view, is change more likely to come when the media stops producing works portraying negative stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims, or when the public refuses to accept these portrayals?

I think the public will continue to accept it as long as the media churns it out. I think what we need, and Katie Couric said it years ago, is an Arab American Bill Cosby Show, or a Muslim American Bill Cosby Show. I mean, if you recall, when the reality show All-American Muslim was on, a couple of sponsors pulled out because special interest groups said that there weren’t any terrorists in the show. Why do these sponsors insist on perpetuating the image of Arab and Muslim Americans as ‘terrorists’? I think these things have to change. There is no reason why we can’t have a show like Seinfeld, where he’s Jewish, but you don’t know that until it comes out occasionally when his parents visit him, etc. There could be a similar show dealing with Arabs, a sitcom, something like that. Many of us unlearn our prejudices through laughter and by looking at families. We never see an Arab American or Muslim American family on television. They’re invisible. And I think a series, just about good old Americans, you know, who just happened to have Arab roots, or just happen to go to mosque, would be refreshing and would go a long way to help. It would pave the path, and it would set a precedent, allowing other producers and directors to do the same, so that Arabs and Muslims would also be a part of our heroic multicultural teams that go out after evil.

At the end of Reel Bad Arabs, you express hope that young filmmakers will promote positive images of Arabs in cinema; in your view, has that hope come true since the documentary was released in 2006?

Yes, it’s coming true. There’s a new film out now called The Citizen about a young Egyptian who comes to the United States on September 10, the day before 9/11. There’s a new film called Detroit Unleaded, all about Arab Americans and Muslim Americans growing up in Detroit. There are several independent films that are trying to be made in the process; I met with...
some filmmakers in Hollywood. Annemarie Jacir [a Palestinian filmmaker and poet], she has two new films out, which are quite good.

How has your work been received in the United States? Have people been receptive to the idea of challenging these stereotypes?

I couldn’t be more pleased, particularly among my colleagues in the academic world and students. Students, I would say, first and foremost. This is fresh material for them. They know about other groups, but this is new, this is something fresh, this is something they can do research on. It’s giving them an ability to see something they didn’t see before. It’s good material for them. So, by and large, I would say, within the academic community, and even in conservative cities like Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. These are places where the vast majority of residents are conservative Republicans. Even when I lectured here, not everyone may have agreed with me, but they were respectful of what I had to say and wanted to hear what I had to say. That’s a refreshing change.

One last question: Are you more or less optimistic today than in the past that damaging stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims will diminish or disappear in the foreseeable future?

I’m much more optimistic, primarily because I see... when I go to Los Angeles, I see more and more Arab Americans and Muslim Americans; talented, bright, and committed to working in film and television to bring about change. That didn’t exist ten years ago. When I started working on this issue back in the mid-70s, even up through the 80s and early 90s, Arab and Muslim Americans were just not becoming a part of the industry. They didn’t care that much. And today, they do care, this younger generation. Because these stereotypes had a really horrific impact on them and their families, and they want to bring about a change. And scholars, now, for the first time, are addressing this stereotype in their classes. I think Reel Bad Arabs has helped a great deal in terms of educating people. And so this has all come about, I would say, within the last ten years. And so I’m more optimistic now, in spite of all the other things that are taking place, than I’ve ever been. And it’s primarily because of the young men and women that I’ve met during my lectures, after my lectures, when I travel. I mean, I just have great faith in our young people, and I’ll continue to do that.
Thank you so much for your time, Dr. Shafeen. It’s been an honor to talk to you, and we very much look forward to having this interview in the next issue.

Well, you had some very good questions, you know, and it was refreshing. Years ago, there was a journalist who wrote that we’re all captives of the pictures in our heads. And what I’ve tried to do is alter that…not make us captives, but to break that; we are no longer captives, we are creating fresh, more realistic images in our heads. We aren’t being held captive by this stereotype as much as we used to be. And eventually, producers and writers will acknowledge the unjust portraits of the past and take the high ground. And the only other thing I wanted to say is that the purpose of my work continues to involve portraying Arabs and Muslims as ordinary, decent world citizens. No better, no worse, than any other group.