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# Arab Filmmakers Battle Hollywood Stereotypes through Media

by Irfan on March 18, 2008

March 17, 2008

Arab Filmmakers Battle Hollywood Stereotypes through Media

By Rima Abdelkader

S.P.A. United Nations

Arab and South Asian filmmakers came together in New York for the third annual New York Arab and South Asian Film Festival this month to challenge misrepresented portrayals of their cultures in Hollywood film and American popular media.

The 2008 New York Arab and South Asian Film Festival - a collaboration of Alwan for the Arts, ThirdI, and the South Asian Women's Creative Collective - ran from March 5-16, 2008, and aimed to give Arab, South Asian and Arab-American artists the chance to strike back against stereotypical roles ranging from the Arab male "terrorist" to the "oppressed" Arab female.

The festival honored Arab and Arab-American directors, filmmakers, and actors, including Malek Akkad, Anissa Daoud, Hala Khalil, Murali Nair, Jilani Saadi, Sayed Badreya and Tony Shalhoub, at a Friday night dinner reception, hosted by Alwan for the Arts and the Arab-American Family Support Center.

Dinner reception tickets were \$250 and proceeds benefitted Alwan for the Arts and the Arab-American Family Support Center (AAFSC), a child protective services agency in New York City that helps "new immigrants adjust to life in the United States," said Yasmeeen Hamza, AAFSC social services program director, in an interview with the Saudi Press Agency on Friday night.

"It is so wonderful to celebrate our art and our heritage – what we're doing, where we are and where we're going," Lena Al Hussein, AAFSC executive director, told S.P.A.

"There is such a disconnect of what people think we are and who we are and this is such a perfect communications vehicle," Al Hussein added.

Among the films that were shown at the festival, AmericanEast highlights the challenges of Arab Americans living and working in the United States following the September 11th attacks and their constant battle with their nationality. While it does not involve "terrorists," it examines the societal tensions that arise when an Arab man and his Jewish friend open up a Middle Eastern restaurant in Los Angeles.

Arab actor Sayed Badreya, AmericanEast co-writer and lead actor alongside Tony Shalhoub (American TV show "Monk"), told the Saudi Press Agency he is often typecast as a "terrorist" in Hollywood films and said Arabs living in America have also felt similarly and hopes films like these humanize them and their situations.

"We always think about back home – Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan – and we don't think about the war the kids have to deal with at school – our kids who are named Mohammad, Ahmad, etc. in the United States," Badreya told S.P.A. on Friday night.

Badreya once described his experience being typecast in "terrorist roles" during CNN interview, which garnered the attention from his politics-debating friend and acting partner George Clooney – the two starred in the movie 'Three Kings' – who Badreya said was sympathetic to his situation.

"He (Clooney) saw a segment on CNN where I was talking about always being cast in terrorist roles in Hollywood. He came to me because I was a 'bad guy' in 'Three Kings,'" Badreya said.

Arab actor Badreya said the more venues that are available to Arabs, the more voices will be available to them.

“That’s the only role that was available for me. Fourteen years I have one line. “In the name of Allah I will kill you all.” That’s it. Every movie I go in and somehow I end up with that line,” Badreya told CNN on 19 November 2007.

Badreya, who also worked with Shalhoub on the 2003 short film “T for Terrorist” with writer and director Hesham Issawi, said his job now is “to focus on our story of immigrants” in American cinema.

Badreya will appear in two upcoming Hollywood films “Iron Man” starring Gwyneth Paltrow and “Don’t Mess with the Zohan” starring American Jewish actor Adam Sandler and French and Moroccan Jewish Canadian-born actress Emmanuelle Chriqui, who, he said, he taught Arabic to on the set.

“We have to continue to tell our story – nobody is going to tell it for us,” Badreya told S.P.A.

“It’s a PR battle we’re losing, not winning,” Los Angeles Arab-American filmmaker Malek Akkad (Hollywood film “Halloween”) told the crowd on Friday night.

Akkad told S.P.A. that there is no time like the present for Arabs to get more involved in media.

Referring to the media first as a “weapon” then as a “tool,” Akkad explained to the crowd “the way to winning this battle is really through the media.”

Akkad, whose father, renowned Muslim Arab-American filmmaker Moustapha Akkad (“Lion of the Desert” “The Message”) was killed in a suicide bomb attack along with his sister, Rima, in Jordan on 9 November 2005, admitted there is a dearth of Arab involvement in American media.

“I think there’s a huge lack of Arab presence in international media, so whether it’s film festivals or TV shows or movies or concerts, everything that can help get our culture across, is an amazing thing and deserves support from everybody,” Akkad told S.P.A.

Akkad said that Arabs were themselves to blame for their lack of involvement in American media.

“As we all know, our Arab image in the media is not what it could be and I think we only have ourselves to blame for that,” Akkad said.

“We have all the resources, all the creativity, but we just haven’t really gone into that field I think as we should. It’s sort of the traditional Arab family thing – ‘be an engineer, be a doctor, be a lawyer’ – and I even got the same thing. But, we need to realize the importance of media,” Akkad said.

“We have people buying buildings left and right, but there should be more investment in artists and the media,” Akkad added.

AmericanEast director Hesham Issawi on Friday night told S.P.A. the festival is an important way to provide a voice for the Arab community.

“It bridges the voice for Arab-Americans and Middle Easterners and we don’t have any other festivals like this in North America. It’s the only festival that has a voice, a way to express who we are,” Issawi said.

“It’s important to have this festival – just to have a voice, we need a voice,” he added.

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