

HANDOUT 17

The Houston Chronicle
November 25, 2001
Reuters News Service

REEL STEREOTYPES: WRITER EXPOSES HOLLYWOOD VILIFICATION OF ARABS

ANDREA SHALAL-ESA

WASHINGTON - Jack Shaheen, born in western Pennsylvania to Christian Lebanese parents, never met a Muslim Arab until he was 40 - when he won a Fulbright award to teach in war-torn Beirut in the 1970s.

He soon realized he knew virtually nothing about the region of his ancestors. What little he had seen about the Arab world on U.S. television and in the movies had nothing to do with what he experienced firsthand in Lebanon, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

Shaheen spent the next two decades trying to find out why. The retired professor recently published *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, a catalogue of the negative stereotypes of Arab men, women and children used by the U.S. movie industry in nearly every film of the past century that has an Arab character.

"Seen through Hollywood's distorted lenses, Arabs look different and threatening," Shaheen concludes. "From 1896 until today, filmmakers have collectively indicted all Arabs as Public Enemy No. 1 - brutal, heartless, uncivilized, religious fanatics and money-mad cultural 'others' bent on terrorizing civilized Westerners, especially Christians and Jews."

Islam also is regularly linked with male supremacy, holy war and acts of terror, he said. "Arab equals Muslim equals terrorist - that is the predominant image of Islam."

In tracking down more than 900 films dating back to the silent films of the early 20th century, Shaheen haunted video stores, surfed television channels and did computer searches using keywords such as "bedouins," "desert" and "sheikh."

He visited research centers across the country to screen films not available on video, scoured movie and video guidebooks and placed ads in film magazines for hard-to-find videos.

He even shopped for obscure films at garage sales.

HANDOUT 17

Of all the movies Shaheen examined since 1980, he includes only 12 on his "best" list of those containing positive portrayals of Arab people, including Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves from 1991 and The 13th Warrior from 1999.

Shaheen worked with the producers on another 1999 film, Three Kings, which made his best list. The film tells the story of four U.S. Army rogues who set out after the 1991 Gulf War to retrieve a fortune in Kuwaiti gold bullion that was stolen by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

He said Warner Bros. hired him as a consultant after several Arab-American groups and Islamic organizations protested the studio's 1996 film Executive Decision, saying it unfairly portrayed Islam as being synonymous with terror.

Reel Bad Arabs was published last summer, appearing just before the Sept. 11 attacks by hijacked airliners that killed more than 4,500 people in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania.

The United States has blamed the attacks on Saudi-born militant Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaida network, launching airstrikes against Afghanistan, where bin Laden lives.

Shaheen said hundreds of hate crimes committed against Arab-Americans and Muslims in the United States after the attacks underscored the importance of combating stereotypes.

"The purpose of the book was to really explain that when you vilify a people, innocent men, women and children suffer. History has taught us and continues to teach us this lesson," he said.

"When we look at the vilification of Arab Muslims, it just makes it that much easier to hate and kill them," he said. "We should not be in the business of vilifying people because of the actions of a minority of a minority."

Shaheen's book is especially frightening because movies and television mold American public opinion, said David Mack of the Middle East Institute, a Washington think tank.

"It is incumbent upon every serious film director and producer to read this book and take some of these lessons to heart," Mack said.

Hundred of movies dating back to 1914 portray Arabs as the "quintessential evil," Shaheen said, citing the 2000 Paramount release, Rules of Engagement, as a film that "reinforces historically damaging stereotypes (and) promotes a dangerously generalized portrayal of Arabs as rabidly anti-American."

HANDOUT 17

The movie's opening scenes show Arab children and women in burqas firing at the U.S. Embassy in Sanaa, Yemen. A U.S. Army officer orders his troops to fire on the civilians.

That film and 13 others that show Americans killing Arabs credit the U.S. Defense Department for providing equipment, personnel and technical assistance, Shaheen writes.

Hollywood has remained mum on the entire topic.

Rich Taylor, a spokesman for the Motion Picture Association of America, said he had not seen Shaheen's book and could not comment on its conclusions.

Part of the problem, says Shaheen, is that the major film studios have faced little criticism of their portrayals of Arabs.

Time magazine film critic Richard Schickel agreed.

"Particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, (Hollywood) did turn to Arabs as villains in movies," he said. "The Arabs did not have, initially, their equivalent of the Anti-Defamation League to step up and protest when those stereotypes were put up."

Nor has Hollywood spared the Arab next door, Shaheen says.

"There have been less than two dozen films made where Americans of Arab heritage appear or are recognizable on movie screens, and most of those images show us as carbon copies of the Arab Muslim stereotype," he said, noting that 75 percent of Americans of Arab heritage are actually Christian.

"You have all these characters that are Jewish, that are Italian, that are Hispanic, that are Asian. They're all American, but they have these wonderful roots," he said. "But where is the character that talks about falafel?" Falafel, made of ground chickpeas, is a typical food in some Arab countries.

Veteran White House correspondent Helen Thomas, who also has Arab ancestry, has described Shaheen as a "one-man anti-defamation league who has exposed Hollywood's denigration of Arabs in most, if not all, of its films."