

# Arab/Muslim/MENA Representation Matters:

An intersectional study of the confluence of playwrighting, casting practices, and progressive productions as they relate to diversity and inclusion in theatre.

Created for the students of the McLennan College Theatre Department

Kathleen Laundry, Professor of Costume Design

# Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the friends and colleagues who served as my peer-review committee:

Bader Aljeraisy, student at Kansas State University.

Saddiq Granger, MCC student, violinist, and poet, Waco, TX

Shahrzad Haghjoo, Professor of Costume Design at Del Mar College Corpus Christie TX.

Mona Menking, Associate Director for International Outreach at Kansas State University.

Abdulkareen Omar, English teacher from Saudi Arabia; Khbrat Scholar at Kansas State University.

# Why do we need to know this?

American theatre, film, and television have a long and problematic history with systemic racism, misogyny, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, and ableism:

Although BIPOC make up 70% of the world's population (and 67% of the world's non-Christians), white performers held 76% of the roles during the decade between 2006-2016 on Broadway. Of the 24% of the roles that went to minority actors (which includes all non-whites plus actors with disabilities) only 10.7% of those were non-traditionally cast. In other words, roles that could have been filled by a performer of any ethnic background, nearly always went to a white actor. White actors also earn higher wages than BIPOC actors.

Specifically, 3% of the US population identifies as MENA, but TV shows in 2015-16 season had zero MENA series regular characters on Primetime, and only 1% on TV overall. Only 20 shows feature MENA actors as regular series characters, regardless of the character's ethnicity. However, 90% of shows that do have a MENA character only have one which runs the risk of tokenizing the character within the show's context. Furthermore, when MENA actors portray MENA characters, 78% of those roles are terrorists, secret agents, soldiers, or tyrants. Not only are these roles harmful in exacerbating racism against the MENA community, they are also inaccurate.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century we should know better and do better. We hope through education and deliberate action toward inclusivity in our productions as well as our classes, to increase the representation of these under-represented groups in both our student population and the plays we produce.

<https://howlround.com/how-liberal-arts-theatre-programs-are-failing-their-students-color> <https://variety.com/2016/film/news/movie-tv-diversity-study-hollywood-straight-white-male-1201711586/>

[http://www.aapacnyc.org/uploads/1/1/9/4/11949532/aapac\\_2015-2016\\_10year\\_report.pdf](http://www.aapacnyc.org/uploads/1/1/9/4/11949532/aapac_2015-2016_10year_report.pdf) <https://allarts.org/2019/03/study-finds-decrease-in-broadway-diversity-following-a-record-breaking-year/>

<https://archive.thinkprogress.org/tv-actors-middle-eastern-north-african-representation/>



# Arab/Muslim Tropes

- **Sheik:** The sheik is a sex-obsessed character who lusts after white women, can be played as an exotic and forbidden lover or as an evil slave owner/rapist with a harem of women. *The Sheik*, *Son of the Sheik*, *Kismet*, *Sahara*, *The Thief of Baghdad*, Ben Kingsley in *Harem*, *Secondhand Lions* (flashback scenes), *Prince of Persia*, and *300*.
- **Bellydancer/Slave Girl:** Women are sex objects that dance for men's pleasure, frequently found in harems: *I Dream of Jeannie*, Lalume in *Kismet*, Princess Leia in *The Thief of Baghdad*, Princess Leia in *Return of the Jedi* when she is Jabba's slave, Cassandra in *The Scorpion King*.
- **Oil Baron:** Rich Arab man with big investments in oil. Typically seen in Arab dress with dark aviator style sunglasses with an expensive luxury car. Jamie Farr in *Cannonball Run* movies, *Father of the Bride 2*, *Jewel of the Nile*, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*,
- **Bundles in Black:** Oppressed Muslim women who are forced to wear the burka. *Protocol*, *Sex and the City 2*, *Iron Man 3*, and *Hala*.
- **Terrorists:** The [Iran Hostage Crisis](#) 1979-1981 was the beginning of this trope, which continued throughout the rest of the millennium and was renewed with even more vehemence after 9/11. The terrorist trope has been especially pernicious and damaging to not only Muslims in America but all MENA peoples, regardless of religion. Films like *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Back to the Future*, *Flight 93*, *True Lies*, *24*, *Iron Man 3*, *Homeland*, *13 Hours*, and *12 Strong*.

<https://www.newsweek.com/sex-and-desert-72797>

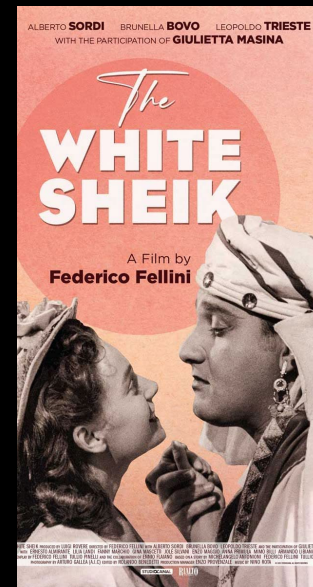
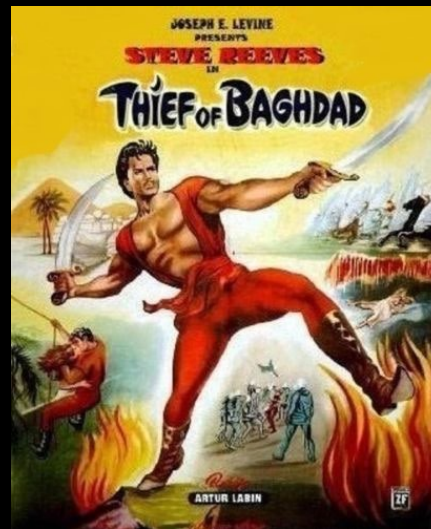
<https://shatteringthehollywoodbias.weebly.com/the-vilification-of-muslim-men.html>

<https://onepathnetwork.com/how-hollywood-has-failed-muslim-women/>

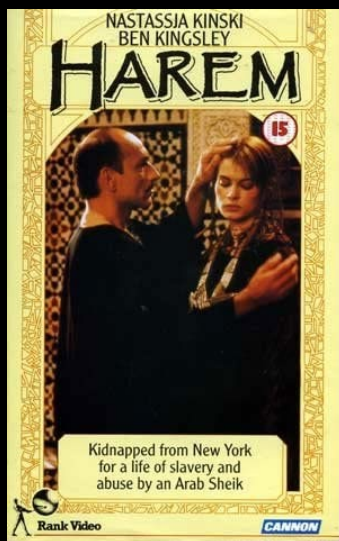
<https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc50.2008/reelBadArabs/2.html>

[https://popcollab.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/HaggAndHollywood\\_Report.pdf](https://popcollab.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/HaggAndHollywood_Report.pdf)





# Sheik







*I Dream of Jeannie*



*Kismet*

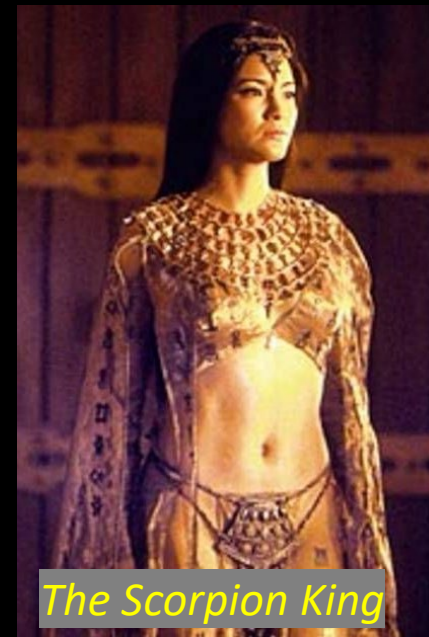


*The Thief of Bagdad*

# Bellydancer



*Return of the Jedi*



*The Scorpion King*





*Cannonball Run*



*Jewel of the Nile*



*Father of the Bride 2*

# Oil Baron



*Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*

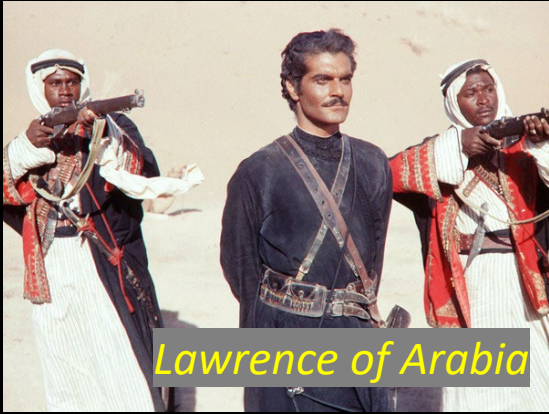


# Bundles in Black

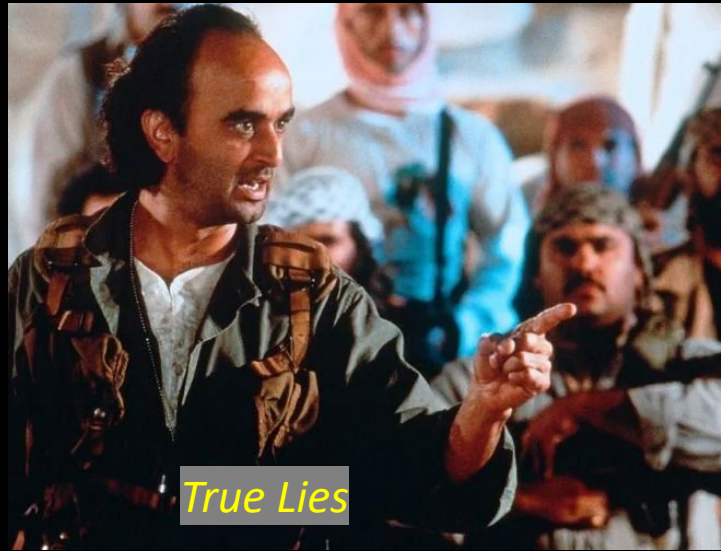




# Terrorists



Lawrence of Arabia



True Lies



Flight 93



Back to the Future



Iron Man



Iron Man 3



24



Homeland



# What now?

Without bringing attention to the mistreatment of Arab/Muslim/MENA characters, it makes it difficult for writers to change how they write these characters. By learning about stereotypes, we grow to appreciate quality storytelling. We always have to ask ourselves certain questions: Are these stereotypes damaging? How should show-runners and writers improve their storytelling when it comes to Arab/Muslim/MENA characters? Can we like certain pieces of media while simultaneously recognizing their mistreatment of Arab/Muslim/MENA characters?

# Frank Lackteen:

## The first Arab American actor

He was born Mohammed Hassan Yachteen in 1897 in Lebanon, but his family immigrated to Massachusetts when he was 11. In 1915 he went to Canada to visit his brother. When he heard about a silent film being made, he showed up to gawk and was plucked out of the crowd to be in it for \$1.50. Over the next few years he would work in a textile factory in Detroit, but go to New York on the weekends and ask for roles. Eventually he parlayed his strikingly gaunt good looks into bad guy roles. Film historian Kalton C. Lahue : “His face was his fortune, for the hollow cheeks, swarthy complexion, and unique structure of his facial bones heightened the villainy which he was able to project so well.” Ironically, he was a great cook, yet he didn’t over-indulge in eating his creations, in order to stay rail thin. He became an American citizen in 1941, listing his occupation as character actor.

He never pursued leading man roles, saying, “Leading men come and go, the character actor stays around and works consistently.” He did over 500 films over 50 years, mostly uncredited. Purposely typecasting himself, he portrayed—most often negatively—Mexicans, Chinese, Pacific Islanders, Arabs, South Asians, Africans, and hundreds of Native Americans. It took Hollywood nearly 50 years after Lackteen’s film debut to create another Arab movie star, Omar Sharif, and it would be 50 more years before Rami Malek rose to blockbuster fame and fortune playing Freddie Mercury.

<https://www.theringer.com/movies/2019/5/22/18634743/aladdin-middle-eastern-muslim-representation-hollywood>

<https://www.arabamericannews.com/2019/07/05/muslims-and-arabs-in-hollywood-a-century-of-vilifying-a-religion-and-culture/>





# *The Thief of Baghdad, 1940*

The masterpiece of Arabic literature, *1001 Nights*, is a 14<sup>th</sup> Century compilation from the Islamic Golden Age, featuring stories from many different Middle Eastern traditions. Professor Muhsin Al Musawi, the world's leading authority on *1,001 Nights*, says that it wasn't particularly treasured in the Arab world, dismissed as being for women and children. All that would change when French archeologist and multi-linguist Antoine Galland found the Syrian manuscript in 1690 in Constantinople and translated it into French in 1704-1717.

In this film there are two lead male characters--Abu and Ahmed. Ahmed is the Prince of Baghdad that Jaffar tricked into disguising himself as a peasant so he can have him thrown into the dungeon and executed to seize his kingdom. The thief Abu is already in the dungeon when he meets Ahmed. Abu helps Ahmed escape from prison, meet genie in a bottle, battle Jaffar, rescue the princess, and save the day. Abu is played by Sabu, the first American Indian actor. This was his second movie after *The Elephant Boy*. Ahmed is played by John Justin, the British born son of an Argentinian rancher.

Disney's *Aladdin* borrows heavily from this film: the evil Jaffar, the thief Abu, the genie, the flying carpet, the childish Sultan who likes toys, and the Princess caught in between the villain and the hero. It was nominated for 4 Oscars and won three.

100% Fresh on Rotten Tomatoes.

<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-thief-of-bagdad-1940>

<https://gulfnews.com/entertainment/books/the-enduring-lure-of-the-arabian-nights-1.1876775>





# “The Lost Tribe of Shabazz”, 1990

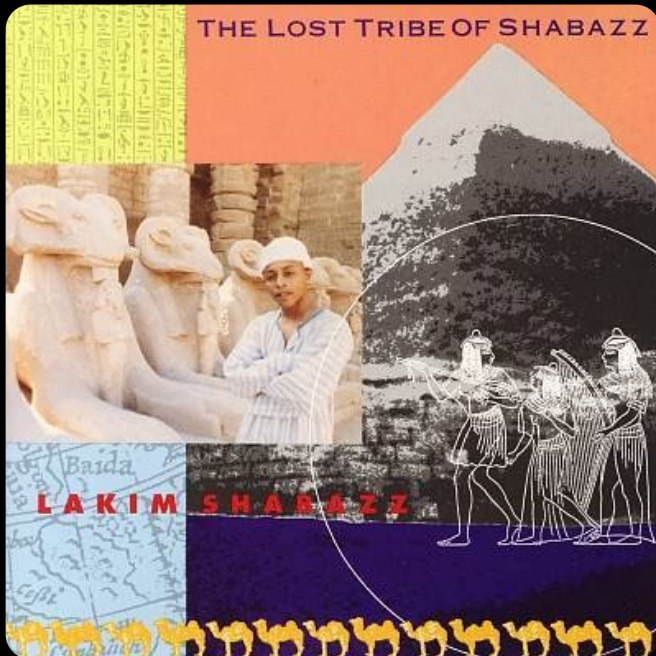
Su’ad Abdul Khabeer, Associate Professor of Anthropology and African American Studies at Purdue University, and author of *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States*, said that hip-hop has historically had a complex relationship to the Arab world. “For example, not only do artists trace their own ancestry back to parts of Africa and the Arab world, but the Five-Percent Nation, an offshoot of the Nation of Islam, played a crucial role in the history of hip-hop.”

In the music video for Lakim Shabazz’s “Lost Tribe of Shabazz,” which is set in Egypt, the images of ruins and pyramids are recontextualized both by Shabazz’s empowered lyrics and also by the juxtaposition of other images. We see groups of men dressed in traditional Muslim clothing side by side with men and children with western clothing, establishing a more profound connection between the two cultures.” “So there’s a way in which the Arab world has been seen as a kind of home, like, ‘I descended from this place.’ Thn there’s also notions of third world solidarity. That becomes a symbol of radical consciousness.”

Yet on top of that, the Arab world also has a problem with anti-black racism, As Amani Al-Khatahbeh pointed out in a n essay over at *Muslim Girl*: “The sad irony is that Arab culture, especially in Gulf countries, is often anti-black itself. The lowly employment and mistreatment of dark-skinned immigrant workers has been regularly documented, and even black Arabs themselves endure common social ostracization in society.”

<https://splinternews.com/the-charged-complicated-racial-dynamics-of-cardi-bs-bo-1798278601>

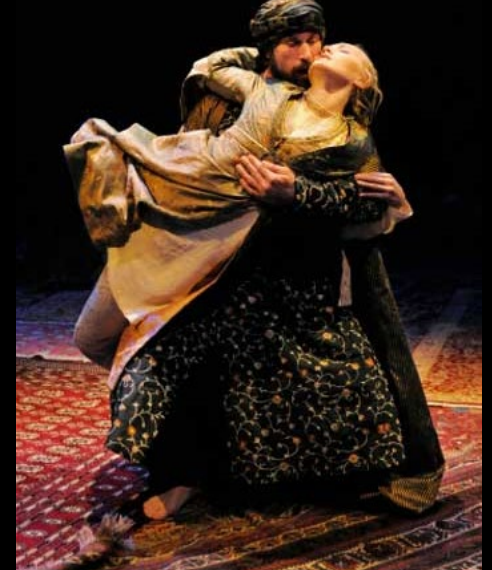
[https://www.allthelyrics.com/lyrics/lakim\\_shabazz/the\\_lost\\_tribe\\_of\\_shabazz-lyrics-1131276.html](https://www.allthelyrics.com/lyrics/lakim_shabazz/the_lost_tribe_of_shabazz-lyrics-1131276.html)





# *Arabian Nights*, 1992 Looking Glass Theatre, Chicago

Playwright Mary Zimmerman wrote the adaption of *1,001 Nights*. It was “an attempt to embody the remarkable richness of one of the great masterpieces of world literature.” The piece was conceived during Operation Desert Storm, in order to draw a sharp contrast between war and literature. Zimmerman stated in the program notes that “it is a preoccupation of war that we view other people as fundamentally different from ourselves; it is a precondition of literature that we view other people as fundamentally the same.” Dennis Polkow critic for the New city Stage wrote “There is much here that is fresh and to be admired, to be sure, especially the sense that captivating stories are as important—as the original collection indicates—as our daily bread. More moving than the stories themselves are the family members of the princess: a sister that stays to hear so as to spend the princess’ last moments with her, and a dutiful father who comes to the palace each morning with his daughter’s burial shroud, only to find that she has been given a reprieve for another night to finish a story.” This piece proves that good story-telling has redemptive and healing powers. It was brought back for three national tours, and then revived during the second Gulf war, in 1997. <https://www.newcitystage.com/2009/06/01/review-arabian-nightslookingglass-theatre/>



# *Aladdin*, 1992

This Disney animated film was the first to feature non-white human protagonists. Although *Aladdin* was a critically acclaimed masterpiece, it was also dripping in Orientalism and harmful racist depictions of Arab culture.



“Its mythos reeks of mystical exoticism, with Agrabah explicitly described as a “city of mystery.” Jasmine is a princess who longs to escape an oppressive and controlling culture; her ultimate aim is to gain enough independence to marry for love rather than political expediency, which made her strikingly evolved for the time but seems hopelessly limiting now. Meanwhile, her father, the sultan, is a babbling, easily manipulated man-child. The citizens of Agrabah are frequently depicted as barbarous sword-wielders and sexualized belly dancers. Worse, the opening song, “Arabian Nights,” originally contained the ridiculously racist line, “They cut off your ear if they don’t like your face / It’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home.”

Lebanese American Jack Shaheen, the author of the 1984 book *TV Arabs*, was so vocal and prolific in his protests of this lyric in particular that he successfully lobbied Disney to remove it when the film was transferred to VHS. Although he considered that a win, he still included the film in his next book, *Arab and Muslim Stereotyping in American Popular Culture*, 1997.

<http://islamophobiainamericanfilms.weebly.com/aladdin.html>

<https://eng2713blog.files.wordpress.com/2017/10/shaheen-aladdin-animated-racism.pdf>



# Malcolm X, 1992

Based on the 1965 book by Alex Haley, directed by Spike Lee and starring Denzel Washington.

The film dramatizes key events in Malcolm X's life: his criminal career, his incarceration, his conversion to Islam, his ministry as a member of the Nation of Islam and his later falling out with the organization, his marriage to Betty X, his pilgrimage to Mecca and reevaluation of his views concerning whites, and his assassination on February 21, 1965. Defining childhood incidents, including his father's death, his mother's mental illness, and his experiences with racism are dramatized in flashbacks.

Spike Lee made substantial changes to the script. "I'm directing this movie and I rewrote the script, and I'm an artist and there's just no two ways around it: this film about Malcolm X is going to be my vision of Malcolm X. But it's not like I'm sitting atop a mountain saying, 'Screw everyone, this is the Malcolm I see.' I've done the research, I've talked to the people who were there."

*Malcolm X* is the first non-documentary, and the first American film, to be given permission to film in Mecca (or within the Haram Sharif). A second unit film crew was hired to film in Mecca because non-Muslims, such as Lee, are not allowed inside the city. <https://www.newsweek.com/battle-malcolm-x-203196>



# Arabian Nights, 2000

Filmed on location in Turkey and Morocco with Asian and Middle Eastern actors. The film follows more closely the storylines, geographies and atmospheres created in the literary text. 'Aladdin and the Magic Lamp', for example, is now set in China, as the Nights story has it. This film reflects, for the first time in Hollywood interpretation of *The 1,001 Nights*, the relationship between the tales and the framing device. Includes 5 of the *1,001 Arabian Nights* stories: "Aladdin and the Magic Lamp", "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves", "Sinbad the Sailor", "The Three Brothers", and "The Sultan and the Beggar".

The framing device takes place in Baghdad where Scheherazade tells the paranoid and embittered King stories for 3 years. As she negotiates his violent mood-swings, the film "reflects the understanding of story-telling as an instrument of psychological healing". Scheherazade saves the kingdom by not only ending the gynocide and bearing him three sons over the course of the 3 years, but by teaching the King the meaning and power of love which is informed by the stories she tells him.

[https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/3860/1/metamorphoses\\_of\\_scheherazade\\_in\\_literature.pdf](https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/3860/1/metamorphoses_of_scheherazade_in_literature.pdf)





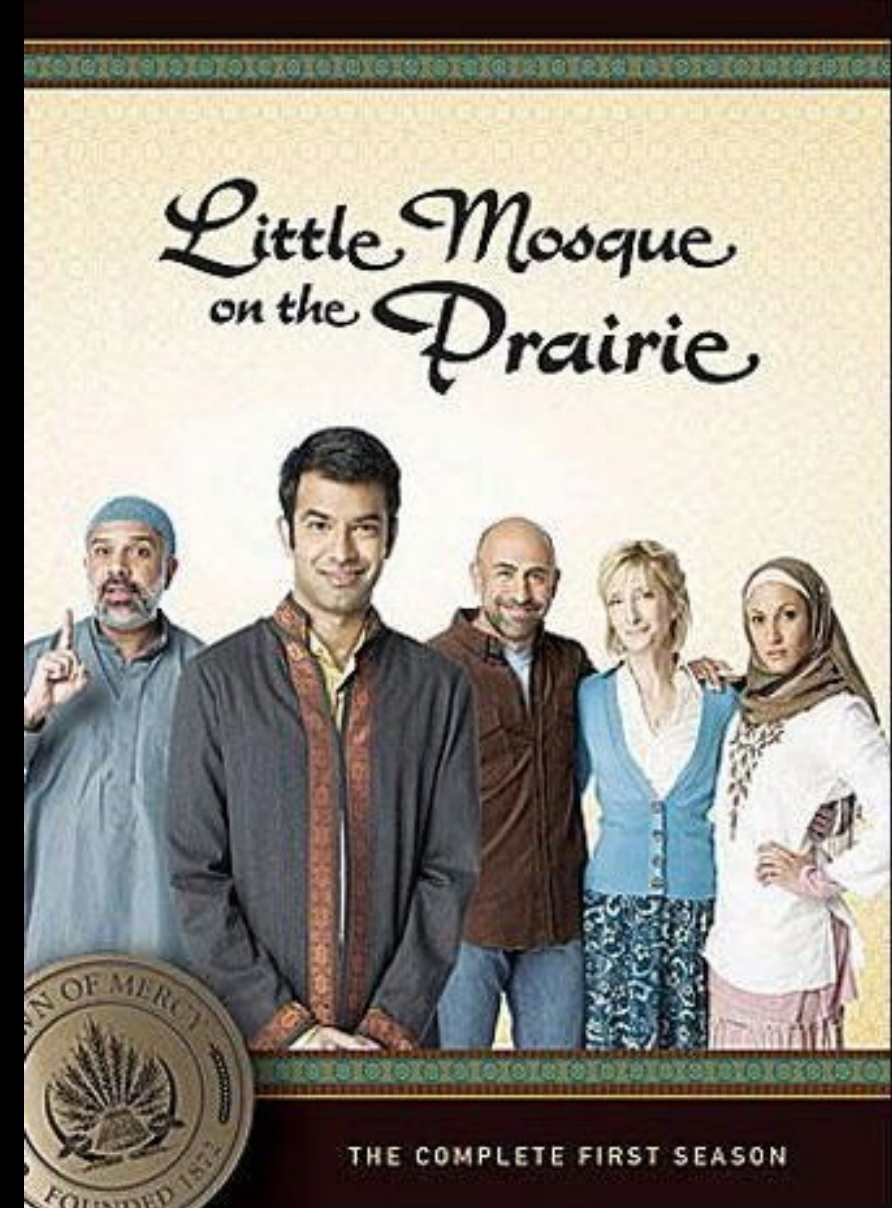
# *Little Mosque on the Prairie, 2007-2012*

Canadian TV series created by Zarqa Nawaz, a Muslim woman of Pakistani origin who was born in England but raised in Canada. Much of the show is based on her personal experiences. Faisal Kutty, a lawyer, academic, and writer, served as the Islamic culture consultant. The show ran 6 seasons, and won Outstanding Achievement in TV series by the Directors Guild of Canada. It debuted in the US in 2013 on Hulu.

The series focus on the Muslim community in the fictional prairie town of Mercy, Saskatchewan (pop. 14,000). The primary institutions are the local mosque run by Imam Amaar Rashid, and Fatima's café, a diner run by Fatima Dinssa. The community patriarch is Yassir Hamoudi, a construction contractor. Yassir's wife Sarah works in the Mayor's office in Public Relations. Their daughter Rayyan is a doctor. The other community patriarch is Baber Siddiqui, an economics professor. The comedy comes from conflict between the parents who are liberal and the adult children who are conservative in their religious views. It addresses such issues as does a Muslim woman have to cover her hair if the only man who can see her is gay? Can Muslims curl? Is it OK to haggle with the carpet salesman over the price of a prayer rug?

The character of Rayyan Hamoudi, in particular, has been singled out in the media as a strong and unique role model for young Muslim women—both for her ability to reconcile a commitment to her Muslim faith with a modern, feminist-inspired Western lifestyle and career, and as a fashion icon who dresses in clothes that are religiously appropriate yet stylish, professional and contemporary. The *Los Angeles Times* said: "The genius of 'Mosque' is that the characters resonate with viewers all over the world."

The show is broadcast in 83 countries, including the United Arab Emirates and Turkey.



# *Community: Abed, 2009-2015*

*Community* ran for 6 seasons. It is about a group of friends who form a Spanish study group at Greendale Community College. Abed is fluent in 3 languages, English, Arabic, and Polish, but needs help in Spanish. It is suggested that Abed is on the Autism spectrum due to his inability to pick up on social cues. His religion is Islam. Abed's father Gobi is a Palestinian from Gaza and his mother is Polish American and Presbyterian. His mother left the family when Abed was 6, causing Abed and Gobi's relationship to be strained. His father sent him to college to take business classes so he could takeover the Falafel restaurant, but instead Abed majors in film. Abed makes a short film about his own childhood that convinces Gobi to allow him to major in film because his dad realizes that film is the medium that he can best communicate his feelings in.

Abed is played by Danny Pudi. IRL his parents immigrated to the US. His mother really is Polish, his dad is Indian. They met in an ESL class in Chicago and are now divorced. Danny went to a Catholic college.

[https://community-sitcom.fandom.com/wiki/Abed\\_Nadir](https://community-sitcom.fandom.com/wiki/Abed_Nadir)





# Aladdin the Musical

## Broadway, 2011

Disney learned a lesson from that experience and remembered it when they decided to turn their animated movie into a staged musical hoping to repeat the success of *Lion King*. Disney did bring in Middle Eastern consultants, specifically Jack Shaheen, to address sensitivity and thus many character aspects and lines of dialogue were changed from the animated movie. Sheehan considered this another win.

However, Disney didn't consider ethnicity in casting the stage adaptation. The American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee received numerous complaints from Arab American actors, who remain under-represented on Broadway. There were 34 actors in the cast and none of them had Middle Eastern heritage. At this time white performers held 79% of the roles during the 2011-12 Season on Broadway. Of the 21% of the roles that went to minority actors (which includes all non-whites plus actors with disabilities) only 10% of those were non-traditionally cast. In other words, roles that could have been filled by a performer of any ethnic background, nearly always went to a white actor. Samer Khalaf president of the AAADC said, "It's like doing West Side Story with no Latinos."

Then there's the Black Genie. Reinforced here is the Magical Negro trope. This term was popularized by Spike Lee in 2011 and refers to "a spiritually attuned black character who is eager to help fulfill the destiny of a white protagonist."

[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/disney-aladdin-broadway-racist\\_n\\_5001833](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/disney-aladdin-broadway-racist_n_5001833)

Adam Jacobs as Aladdin, Courtney Reed as Jasmine, Jonathan Freeman as Jafar, James Monroe Iglehart as Genie



# Ms. Marvel: Kamala Khan, 2014

Fictional superhero developed by Marvel comics. Khan is a teenage Pakistani American from New Jersey with shape-shifting abilities. It won the Hugo award for best graphic story in 2015. Kamala owes her genesis to female Muslim American editor Sana Amanat. The comic is written by G. Willow Wilson, a female Muslim convert and drawn by Adrian Alphona. Wilson stated, "It was really important for me to portray Kamala as someone who is struggling with her faith. Her brother is extremely conservative, her mom is paranoid that she's going to touch a boy and get pregnant, and her father wants her to concentrate on her studies and become a doctor."

Amanat stated that Khan's costume was influenced by the shalwar kameez. They wanted the costume to represent her cultural identity, but did not want her to wear a hijab. Amanat also stated that they wanted the character to look "less like a sex siren" to appeal to a more vocal female readership. "As much as Islam is a part of Kamala's identity, this book isn't preaching about religion or the Islamic faith in particular. It's about what happens when you struggle with the labels imposed on you, and how that forms your sense of self. It's a struggle we've all faced in one form or another, and isn't just particular to Kamala because she's Muslim. Her religion is just one aspect of the many ways she defines herself."



<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bengaluru/American-Muslims-were-proud-of-Kamala-Khan/articleshow/42473218.cms>

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/altmuslim/2013/11/interview-g-willow-wilson-on-the-creation-of-the-newest-muslim-american-comic-superhero/>

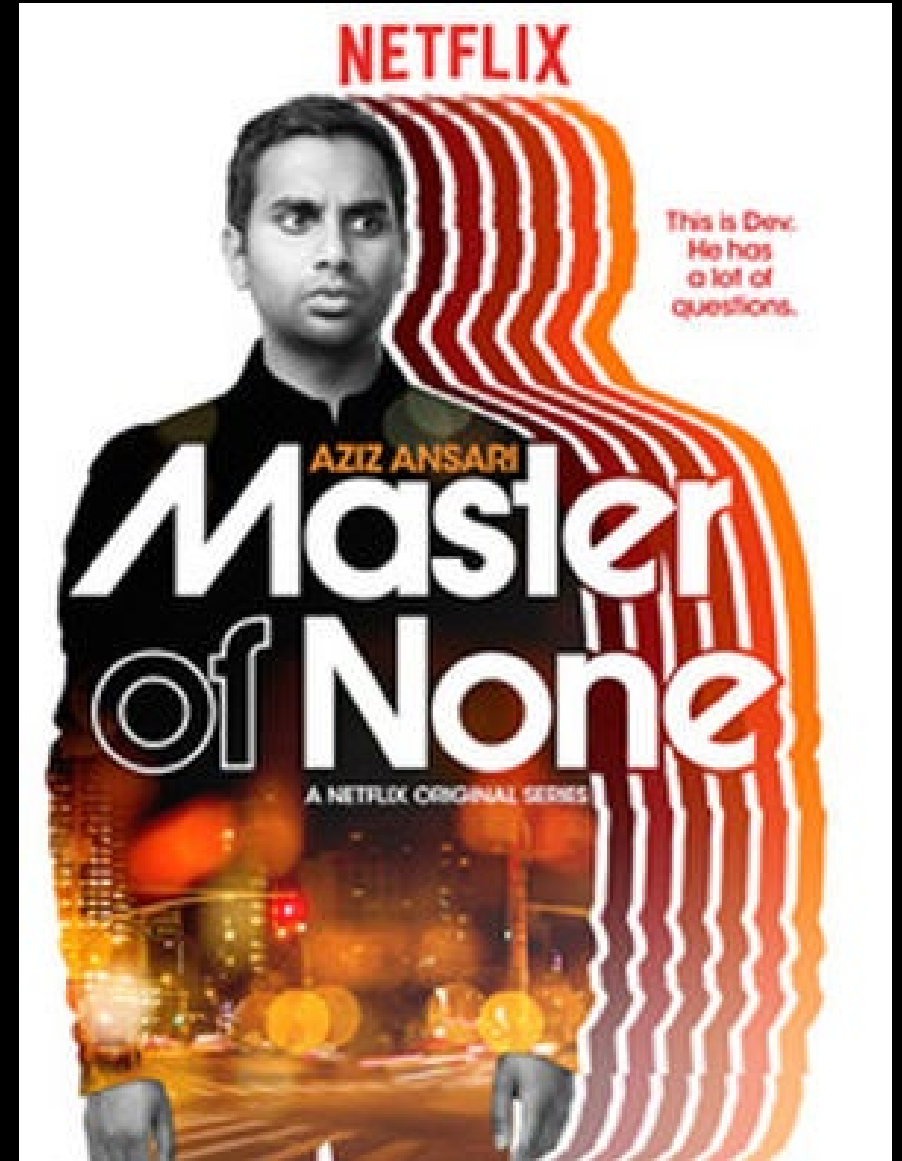


# *Master of None, 2015-2017*

Aziz Ansari's show, co-created with Alan Yang. 2 seasons based on his personal life experiences living and dating in New York. It won Critics' Choice Award for Best Comedy series and was nominated for 4 Emmy awards. Ansari plays Dev Shah a commercial actor, son of Muslim Indian immigrants who are both doctors. His best friend is Brian Chang, the son of Taiwanese immigrants. Denise is their lesbian friend.

Ansari retreated from public life for a time after an [article was published on Babe.net](#) by Katie Way, where a woman "Grace" accused him of sexual misconduct on a date in 2018. Ansari thought that what happened between them was completely consensual whereas Grace felt forced into having sex on their first date. It sparked a debate in the wake of the #MeToo movement so that The Atlantic correspondent James Hamblin wrote that these stories of gray areas are exactly what need to be told and discussed. Even Ansari, the semi-ironic expert who authored a book on interpersonal communication was seeing something totally different for his date, Grace, who felt coerced." Ansari never did make a public apology.

On his show there was an episode in the second season where a macho TV food guy called Chef Jeff gives Dev a huge career opportunity before being accused of sexually inappropriate behavior by a bunch of women.



# *The Big Sick*, 2017

Based on Kumail Nanjiani's real life romance with his Anglo wife who was put into a medically induced coma right at the beginning of their relationship. Nanjiani was expected to have an arranged marriage, so his relationship with a white girl put a strain on his relationship with his family. "My family in this picture is definitely the underdog," he says. "They're the people from another culture. We have different names. We look different. It's very easy to have them be the funny foreigners." Instead, *The Big Sick* portrays the family with dimension, including parents who were at first deeply disapproving of Nanjiani's romantic choice. Nominated for an Oscar for Best Original screenplay. It was one of the highest grossing independent films of the year.

The film received criticism from the Muslim community that his Pakistani family's "accents were laid on super, super thick". Qais Munhazim, director of the Gender and Sexuality Center at the University of Minnesota took issue with the scene where Nanjiani burns the photos of the eligible Pakistani women, feeling it was inappropriate because so many women have been burned for not accepting marriage proposals or for marrying against their family's wishes. More than 1,000 young women were burned in 2015.

<https://www.mprnews.org/story/2018/03/09/friday-round-table-muslim-americans-react-to-the-big-sick>

<https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/pakistan-why-are-women-burned-to-death/27790893.html>

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/how-the-big-sick-makes-arranged-marriages-muslim-families-and-a-coma-perfect-rom-com-material/2017/06/21/3ba6d756-4d3c-11e7-bc1b-fddbd8359dee\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/how-the-big-sick-makes-arranged-marriages-muslim-families-and-a-coma-perfect-rom-com-material/2017/06/21/3ba6d756-4d3c-11e7-bc1b-fddbd8359dee_story.html)





# Superstore: Sayid, 2015-2020

*Superstore* is a sit com set in a big box store in the Midwest. Sayid, played by Amir Korangy, appeared in Season 4. Viewers didn't find out Sayid was Muslim until Amy is denied maternity leave and forced to pump breast milk in a small utility closet and she discovers him in there praying. Sayid is also a Syrian refugee, a legal status that is contrasted with the undocumented Mateo. Even though the episode is full of goofy jokes and misunderstandings, much of the dialogue highlights the misconceptions that people have about refugees, such as how many conflate them with fugitives. *Superstore* spoke with Amnesty International and Define American for both episodes. "When I was talking to them I was like, 'Look, my dad works in these kinds of superstores,'" Ahmed said. "It's so funny to me because I could totally relate. I feel like when my dad prays at various places of employment, it's usually in the back room like that. So I thought that was really funny take on it and it was highlighting what it means to be Muslim while not making it so talk-y"

"We've been talking to people about portrayals, both of refugees and Muslims, about the number of times someone might pray, where are you forced to pray when you're in a store like that," said Spitzer. "And in terms of some of the specifics, the actor Amir himself helped with it. He helped us with the difference between a Sunni prayer and a Shia prayer, and I think he already knew how he would be praying. We're going for comedy, but we wanted to give it as much honesty as possible. "We don't want him to just be the Muslim character who's there to pray and be a refugee. We also wanted him to have other defining characteristics. We worked with the actor since then to see what he brings to it. He's also a little dorky. He wears adorable grandfather sweaters. He's eager to be friends with people. He is a fleshed-out character with flaws, just like anyone else. It was important for us to avoid the model immigrant kind of story."

<https://www.indiewire.com/2019/01/muslim-tv-characters-netflix-nbc-freeform-starz-1202031900/>



# Mahershala Ali: The First Muslim Actor to Win an Oscar, 2016

Ali was born Mahershalahashbaz Gilmore to a Broadway actor father and an ordained Baptist minister mother. He was raised Baptist. He grew up playing basketball and attended St. Mary's College on a basketball scholarship; his father died when he was 20.

He earned his MFA from NYU Tisch School of the Arts in 2000. Upon graduation he converted to Islam. After the attacks on Sept. 11, he was put on a watch list.

In 2010 he shortened his name so that it would fit on the poster for *The Place Beyond the Pines*, saying that, "I think if you have any desire to be a leading man or to really carry some of these stories, there's this relationship that has to be cultivated with an audience. People have to be able to say your name. I didn't want a couple of syllables to get in the way of me having the fullest experience as an actor."

He was the first Muslim to win an Oscar for acting-- Best Supporting Actor for *Moonlight*, 2016 and again for *Green Book*, 2018. In his acceptance speech, he thanked his teachers. "One thing that they consistently told me... 'It's not about you. It's about these characters. You are a servant. You're in service to these stories and these characters'."

His other film credits include *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay*, *Hidden Figures*, and *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* as the voice of Uncle Aaron. On TV he is known for playing Remy on *House of Cards*, Cottonmouth on *Luke Cage*, and Sheikh Ali Malik on *Ramy*. He's won three SAG awards, a BAFTA, and a Golden Globe. He has 48 credits over a 20 year career.

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/mahershala-ali-becomes-first-muslim-actor-to-win-oscar/>  
<https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2016/10/mahershala-ali-moonlight-luke-cage>





# *Counterpart*: Naya Temple 2017-2019

*Counterpart* on Starz introduces Naya Temple (Betty Gabriel), a character in its second season who is an excellent FBI agent who is a practicing Muslim. Gabriel reached out to the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) for her own research. The MPAC Hollywood bureau director Sue Obeidi said “The largest populations of Muslims in America is the African American Muslim, but in reality, what you see are the Arabs and the South Asians, and we’re not as many as the African Americans Muslims. So the character of Naya Temple is such a welcome to our space, to Hollywood, to the industry.” Obeidi is also pleased to have such a positive and take-charge portrayal of a Muslim woman. “A lot of people don’t understand that women actually have more rights and are protected in Islam than men,” she said. “Typically the cultural norms are what we see on TV. We see very submissive portrayals of women, whereas in reality, in Islam, Muslim women are given more authority and rights than men. And it’s really not portrayed that way.”



Obeidi also points out that Naya Temple’s appearance provides diversity in Muslim women seen on screen since she doesn’t conform to the usual media portrayals seen over and over. Naya Temple is a woman who is a Muslim who does not cover. I don’t cover and I’m a practicing Muslim,” said Obeidi. “Muslim women like us are not really represented on TV because the hijab is an identifier on TV and commercials. Having Temple not be a hijabi and be a practicing Muslim and be an African-American Muslim woman is amazing. That’s what we need to see more of: to see the different of flavors and colors of what Muslims looks like. Gabriel said, “I had to really do a lot of research of the Islam world, the Islam religion. I wanted that to be very real. I had to learn Arabic. That was intense. I had to learn a lot of the Salah prayers.”

<https://www.indiewire.com/2019/01/muslim-tv-characters-netflix-nbc-freeform-starz-1202031900/>

# *The Bold Type: Adena El-Amin 2017-2020*

Canadian actress Nikohl Boosheri plays fashion magazine editor, Adena El-Amin. “I’m Iranian, but my family left after the revolution. Iran is one of the countries where the hijab is mandatory and there are consequences for not wearing it, consequences we still see carried out today,” said Boosheri. “My mother was very resentful of having to wear the hijab, and I had my own misconceptions about that, which comes from the idea that a woman did not have a choice in the matter. But my understanding of the Quran is that it *isn’t* mandatory to wear the hijab, and you are a Muslim whether you wear it or not.” Knowing that Adena is not required to wear a hijab in America, Boosheri had puzzled over why such a globetrotting freethinker would decide to cover her head anyway. The actress drew inspiration from outspoken Muslim female writers like Blair Imani and Fariha Roisin and from her own travels.



“It didn’t quite make sense to me,” she said. “But I remembered I shot a film in Beirut, and there’s actually quite a vibrant LGBTQ scene underground there (her character Adena is a lesbian). I met with women who had tattoos and wore hijabs sometimes but not all the time. In Beirut, it’s also not mandatory to wear the hijab. And so I thought, ‘Okay, then with this character, it has to be more about her freedom to choose, her freedom to express herself. Then it became a matter of ensuring that Adena’s choice of head covering properly reflects her daring and creative sensibilities. The usual hijab did not fit her personality or aesthetic, and therefore Boosheri researched online. “I found these more modern, less traditional ways of wearing the hijab, whether it’d be like the turban or really beautiful intricate braids. Also, stunning fabrics that these young Muslim influencers were using nowadays,” she said. “I like to think that everything she owns are bought from all her different travels. For Adena there are a lot of natural silks in beautiful, warm colors, lots of oranges, lots of fiery colors. And I feel it connects to the part that she’s very unapologetic of the space she takes up.”

<https://www.indiewire.com/2019/01/muslim-tv-characters-netflix-nbc-freeform-starz-1202031900/>





## *The Band's Visit, 2017*

In *The Band's Visit*, a group of musicians travel from Egypt to Israel to give a concert, but arrives at the wrong town. Over the course of a single night, the visitors and the locals make unexpected connections that transcend divisive politics or culture; the bond between them is their common humanity and music.

Nominated for 11 Tony awards and won 10, including Best Musical, Best Book Itamar Moses, Best Score David Yazbek, Best Actor Tony Shalhoub , Best Actress, Katrina Lenk, Best Featured Actor Ari'el Stachel , Best Direction David Cromer, Best Orchestrations Jamshied Sharifi, Best Lighting Tyler Micoleau, Best Sound Kai Harada, as well as a Grammy for Best Musical Theatre album.

The show has had a positive impact on Middle-Eastern actors and audiences, as many feel represented by the authentic characters that are not negative stereotypes. Ari'el Stachel who plays Haled, said "For so many years of my life I pretended I was not a Middle Eastern person. I am part of a cast of actors who never believed that they'd be able to portray their own races and we are doing that. And not only that but we're getting messages from kids all over the Middle East thanking us and telling us how transformative our representation is for them." <https://broadwaydirect.com/bands-visit-music-crosses-borders/>

# American Gods, 2017

Based on Neil Gaiman's 2001 novel. The premise of the story is what happens to gods when their worshippers emigrated to the United States. 2 Emmy nominations and 3 Critic's Choice Nominations. 92% Fresh on Rotten Tomatoes.

- Mr. Ibis: Thoth the Egyptian god of writing, knowledge, wisdom; the Scribe of the stories of the gods, played by Canadian actor, Demore Barnes. He narrates many of the Coming to America stories.
- Mr. Jacquel: Anubis, the Egyptian god of the Dead, who works as an undertaker, played by English actor Chris Obi. In his human form he cares for the bodies of the dead, in his god form he escorts humans to their afterlife. [https://americangods.fandom.com/wiki/Old\\_Gods](https://americangods.fandom.com/wiki/Old_Gods)





# American Gods, 2017

Bilquis: Queen of Sheba and the Goddess of rebirth and creation; in ancient times she was worshipped in orgiastic rituals, but now is reduced to life as a prostitute, played by Nigerian born Yetide Badaki.



# *American Gods, 2017*

- The Jinn: Ifrit, a mythic being of fire, disguised as a cab driver. The Jinn doesn't grant wishes or he wouldn't be stuck in this terrible job as a taxi driver. He has a sexual encounter with Salim, but disappears in the morning wearing Salim's clothes, having left behind his clothes, his taxi, and his hack license that now has Salim's photo on it. The Jinn is played by Mousa Kraish, a Palestinian American actor.
- Salim: an Arab Muslim man is a recent immigrant and works as a trinket salesman but has yet to make a sale. He meets the Jinn when he hails a cab. They have a sexual encounter and in the morning, he puts on the Jinn's clothes, assumes the Jinn's human identity as the cab driver and drives off in the cab. Salim is played by Omid Abtahi, an Iranian American actor.



<https://americangods.fandom.com/wiki/Jinn>

<https://www.bustle.com/p/what-is-ifrit-this-american-gods-deity-comes-from-a-muslim-tradition-57591>





# Aladdin, 2019

<https://www.vox.com/2019/5/24/18635896/disney-live-action-aladdin-controversy-history>  
<https://medium.com/@mastqalander/the-problems-with-aladdin-orientalism-casting-and-ramadan-5a5bde727680>  
[https://www.cair.com/press\\_releases/cair-calls-on-movie-reviewers-to-address-racial-religious-stereotypes-perpetuated-by-aladdin/](https://www.cair.com/press_releases/cair-calls-on-movie-reviewers-to-address-racial-religious-stereotypes-perpetuated-by-aladdin/)



Jack Shaheen had just published *Reel Bad Arabs*, his book analyzing how Hollywood portrayed and still portrays Arabs in a negative light, when he was again asked to consult on the film version, but died before he could contribute. To correct their casting mistake on the stage version, Disney said that “great care was taken to put together one of the largest most diverse casts ever seen on screen”. However, critics cited four major problems:

1. The appointment of white action film director Guy Ritchie to head the project. Mast Qalander, writing for *Medium* said, “Despite all of the issues regarding the origin of the Aladdin story, I still believed the narrative could have been reclaimed in a really empowering way, but that could not happen with someone like Guy Ritchie. It’s textbook Orientalism to have a white man control the narrative.”
2. Neither of the two leads were Arab or Middle Eastern actors--Mena Massoud was Egyptian-Canadian and Naomi Scott was British-Indian--which made it seem like Disney thought all brown actors were interchangeable.
3. It traded explicit racism for cliched exoticism in the production design in which Gemma Jackson cherry picked from different MENA cultures and used them as she pleased.
4. Once filming began, reports that some background performers had been “browned up” drew outrage. Disney responded that the “diversity of our cast and background performers was a requirement and only in a handful of instances when it was a matter of specialty skills, safety and control (special effects rigs, stunt performers and handling of animals) were crew made up to blend in.”



The Council on American-Islamic Relations issued a press release warning that releasing the film “during the Trump era of rapidly rising anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant and racist animus only serves to normalize stereotyping and to marginalize minority communities.” Less well known was that Disney released the film during Ramadan, a religious month of fasting and prayer for Muslim communities. “Even Islamophobic Bollywood doesn’t release blockbuster movies during Ramadan.” according to Mast Qalander.

# Ramy, 2019

Stand-up comedian Ramy Youssef sought to change how Muslims were seen in America. The Hulu TV series *Ramy* follows a first-generation American Muslim who is on a spiritual journey in his politically divided New Jersey neighborhood. It explores the challenges of what it is like to be caught between an Egyptian community that thinks life is a moral test and a millennial generation that thinks life has no consequences. Ramy Youssef stars as the title character. The show is based on his stand-up routine where he talks about his personal experiences growing up as a Muslim American post 9/11. Much of the show is devoted to Ramy's love life, dating a variety of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women, and his struggle to be a good Muslim versus his desire to have sex, which is forbidden before marriage.

The show also deals with disability issues (Ramy's best friend Steve has MD) and homosexuality (Ramy's uncle struggles with coming out of the closet). The first season was rated 97% fresh on Rotten Tomatoes. It's second season premiered in 2020 before the pandemic.



<https://www.businessinsider.com/ap-study-middle-eastern-actors-ignored-stereotyped-by-tv-2018-9>

<https://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/articles/shows/houston-matters/2019/05/03/331844/ramy-youssef-flips-the-narrative-on-children-of-immigrants/>



# Silk Road Rising Chicago, Illinois



Founded in 2002 by husbands Malik Gillani and Jamil Khoury, Silk Road Rising (originally Silk Road Theatre Project) began as an intentional and creative response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. “We recognized that the consequences of that catastrophic day would reverberate for years to come, posing unique and urgent challenges for artists of all backgrounds. It would, moreover, underscore our commitment to educating, to promoting dialogue, and to healing rifts via the transformative power of storytelling.

Harnessing that power, we set out to challenge the ideology and hatred that fueled the 9/11 attacks and the anti-Arab and anti-Muslim backlash that immediately followed. Our vision was to counter negative images and stereotypes of Middle Eastern and Muslim peoples with representation grounded in authentic, multi-faceted, and patently *human* experiences. We’d center politics that were anti-racist, anti-colonial, and pro-feminist, and tell stories that were by us, about us, and for all.

Our focus quickly expanded beyond the Middle East to encompass the vast territory known historically as the Silk Road, a network of trade routes stretching from China to Syria. The legacy of the Silk Road provided us the narrative from which our core values would appear: **Discovery, Pluralism, and Empathy.**

Over the years, Silk Road Rising has emerged into an award winning, nationally recognized art-making and art service organization that shapes conversations about Asian and Middle Eastern Americans. Understanding that cultures are inherently linked, we seek out the intersections of cultures without undermining the specificities of cultures. And we strive to create a world that values art over ideology and inquiry over dogma.” <https://www.silkroadrising.org/> <https://howlround.com/towards-arab-american-theater-movement>



# MENA Theatre Makers Alliance

Founded in 2020 MENATMA's mission states: "MENA Theater Makers Alliance amplifies the voices of Middle Eastern and North African theater makers and expands how stories from and about MENA communities are told on U.S. stages. We will take space, make opportunities, champion artists, and build relationships with other marginalized communities and allies to create a more vibrant American theater.

"The MENATMA Steering Committee includes Andrea Assaf, Catherine Coray, Deborah Eliezer, Denmo Ibrahim, Evren Odcikin, Jamil Khoury, Kate Moore Heaney, Kathryn Haddad, Leila Buck, Michael Malek Najjar, Nora el Samahy, Pia Haddad, Shores Alaudini, Torange Yeghiazarian, and Tracy Cameron Francis. These individuals represent the ethnic diversity of MENA communities, hail from all corners of the United States, and include founders of MENA-focused organizations, as well as younger newcomers.

"We've gone from genies in a bottle and dancing harem girls to maniacal terrorists and raving misogynists. Not exactly a great track record on representation. Why? Because 'representation' was created without us and never for us, and oftentimes against us," said Jamil Khoury, Co-Founder and Co-Executive Artistic Director of Chicago's Silk Road Rising. "MENATMA is about claiming the mantle of representation. It's about MENA theater artists telling our own stories and defining our own art-making."

# Arab/MENA Actors and Actresses

- F. Murray Abraham: *Amadeus*
- Mahershala Ali: *Moonlight, Green Book*
- Aziz Ansari: *Master of None*
- Dave Chappelle: *The Dave Chappelle Show*
- Ennis Esmer: *Blind Spot*
- Maz Jobrani: *Axis of Evil*
- Rami Malek: *Bohemian Rhapsody*
- Wentworth Miller: *The Legends of Tomorrow*
- Mena Massoud: *Aladdin*
- Hasan Minhaj: *The Patriot Act*
- Kumail Nanijani: *The Big Sick*
- Tony Shalhoub: *Monk*
- Omar Sharif: *Lawrence of Arabia*
- Ramy Youssef: *Ramy*
- Shohreh Adhdashloo: *House of Sand and Fog, 24, Star Trek Beyond*
- Sofia Boutella: *The Mummy*
- Shannon Elizabeth: *American Pie*
- Tania Gunadi: *DC Superhero Girls*
- Salma Hayek: *Frida*
- Nekar Zadegan: *NCIS, Picard*