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## Escaping Hollywood's Arab acting ghetto: An Examination of the Career Patterns and Strategies of American Actors of Middle-Eastern Origin\*

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The mid-2000s have been an ambiguous period for American actors of Middle-Eastern origins. Contradictory reports have appeared in the press, from the enthusiastic assertion that "It's a good time to be an actor from the Middle East"<sup>1</sup> due to the growing number of American films dealing with the Middle East, to the description of the continued plight of actors "relegated to playing terrorists, the new Arab acting ghetto."<sup>2</sup> One issue recurring in the few trade paper articles on the topic was indeed the difficulties encountered by these actors in a Hollywood context, where, in the words of Jack Shaheen, "There's no escaping the Arab stereotype."<sup>3</sup> The aim of this paper is to provide a specific case study on the career of these specific minority actors, thus participating to the larger debate on the place of minority personnel in Hollywood. Concurring with Ella Shohat, and Robert Stam's remark that "(that) films are only representations does not prevent them from having real effects in the world,"<sup>4</sup> this paper will not call into question the idea of stereotypes but rather examine the very concrete consequences that these race-based stereotypes, bred both by the Hollywood industrial culture and by Mainstream America's social imagination, have on employment opportunities for actors, and on the strategies available to escape these constraints.

The basis of the article is the quantitative and qualitative analysis of a database mapping out the careers of 22 Arab-American and Iranian-American actors. Determining a representative corpus of talent was the main methodological step since it is in fact difficult to define what an "Arab-American" is and to get reliable data. The Arab American Institute provides the following definition: "Arab Americans constitute an ethnicity made up of several waves of immigrants from the Arabic-speaking countries of southwestern Asia and North Africa that have been settling in the United States since the 1880s."<sup>5</sup> According to the results to the "ancestry question" on the 2010 American Community Survey, people from or with ancestry from the following countries can be considered as Arab-American: Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Palestinian Territories, Morocco, but also Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Kuwait, Libya, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.<sup>6</sup> However, being of Middle-Eastern origin does not mean that

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<sup>1</sup> Ali Jaafar, "Arab, Muslim Actors Shed Stereotypes," *Variety.com*, August 31, 2007 <http://variety.com/2007/film/features/arab-muslim-actors-shed-stereotypes-1117971204/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ashraf Khlailil, "But Can you Play a Terrorist ?" *Los Angeles Times*, October 4, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, 2d ed. (Northampton: Olive Branch Press, 2009), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Ella Shohat, and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the media* (London: Routledge, 1994), 178.

<sup>5</sup> Arab American Institute Foundation, "Quick Facts about Arab Americans," 2012 <http://www.aaiusa.org/pages/demographics/>.

<sup>6</sup> Arab American Institute Foundation, "National Arab American Demographics," 2012 <http://www.aaiusa.org/pages/demographics/>.

one necessarily wishes to assert it. After 9/11, many preferred not to define themselves as ‘Arab Americans,’ and did not fill in the ancestry question of the Census form.<sup>7</sup> While the 2010 census returned an estimation of 1.9 million Arab-Americans in the U.S.A., the Arab American Institute suggests at least 3.5 million.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, few American actors of Arab descent actually display their ethnic origin. The first names in the corpus used here come from a list of “Famous Arab Americans” compiled by Casey Kasem for the Arab American Institute.<sup>9</sup> This list was adjusted in three ways: a small number of actors with distant heritage or non-US nationality were removed; names gathered from the trade papers were added; actors of Iranian origins were included. Indeed, the latter face the same hurdles as Arab-Americans since they are often included in the same social imaginary trope, a trope that tends to amalgamate “Middle Eastern,” “Arab” and “Muslim.”<sup>10</sup> The corpus is thus composed of a list of 13 actors and 9 actresses born between 1914 and 1989. Each actor’s filmography was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively through information found primarily on IMDb, covering a period from 1947 to 2013. Out of the wide diversity of these careers, the article identifies a series of determinants. First the actors’ and actresses’ strategies are determined by industrial practices premised on race-based stereotypes. This impacts not only the type of roles offered, but also the media and genres available as spaces of expression. Career strategies however also have to be put in a historical context as the social view on “Arabs” has evolved in the U.S.A. over the years. The final focus will be current efforts to collectively resist and challenge Hollywood’s – and America’s – social imagination.

Fig. 1: Corpus of American Actors of Middle Eastern Origin or Descent. The table indicates the dates of birth and death, place of birth, as well the specific Middle Eastern origin.

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Danny Thomas (1912-1991, Michigan; Lebanese)   | Krysty McNichol (1962, California; Palestinian)  |
| Michael Ansara (1922-2013, Syria; Syrian)      | Nasser Faris (n/a, Egyptian)                     |
| Vic Tayback (1930-1990, New York City; Syrian) | Khrystyne Haje (1968, California; Lebanese)      |
| Jamie Farr (1934, Ohio; Lebanese)              | Maz Jobrani (1972, Iran; Iranian)                |
| James Stacy (1936, California; Lebanese)       | Shannon Elizabeth (1973, Texas; Syrian/Lebanese) |
| Marlo Thomas (1937, Michigan; Lebanese)        | Omar Metwally (1974, New York; Egyptian)         |
| F. Murray Abraham (1939, Pennsylvania; Syrian) | Waleed Zuaiter (n/a, California; Kuwaiti)        |
| Michael Nouri (1945, Washington D.C.; Iraqi)   | Raya Meddine (1976, New York City; Lebanese)     |
| Wendie Malick (1950, New York; Egyptian)       | Yasmine Hanani (1980, Maryland; Iraqi)           |
| Shohreh Aghdashloo (1952, Iran; Iranian)       | Jonathan Ahdout (1989, California; Iranian)      |
| Tony Shaloub (1953, Wisconsin; Lebanese)       |  |
| Kathy Najimy (1957, California; Lebanese)      |  |

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Arab American Institute Foundation, “Quick Facts about Arab Americans.”

<sup>9</sup> The list, which covers many areas, includes the following actors and actresses: Jamie Farr, Danny Thomas, Marlo Thomas, Michael Nouri, Vince Vaughn, Wendie Malick, Tony Shalhoub, F. Murray Abraham, Shannon Elizabeth, Vic Tayback, Kristy McNichol, Khrystyne Haje, James Stacy, Michael Ansara, Kathy Najimy, Salma Hayek. It can be found at <http://www.aaiausa.org/pages/famous-arab-americans/#Entertainment>.

<sup>10</sup> Shaheen insists on the diversity of religious beliefs in the Arab world, as well as the diverse national origins of Muslims. Jack Shaheen, *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11* (Northampton: Olive Branch Press, 2008), xiii.

## 1. Representational Practices in Hollywood and Acting Strategies

### 1.1 Race-based Stereotypes as an Industrial Practice

*The Nativity Story* (Catherine Hardwicke, 2006) tells the Biblical story of Joseph and Mary on their way to Bethlehem. Although the story takes place in the Middle East, the main characters are played by talent from Maori, Cuban and Northern-Irish origin. To optimistic visions that more Middle Eastern characters in films in the mid-2000s would mean more employment opportunities for actors of Middle Eastern origin, one could object the fact that characters of Middle Eastern origins have been indifferently played by “Latinos, South Asians and Greeks.”<sup>11</sup> In an industry relying on Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief,” the discrepancy between an actor’s national or ethnical background and that of his character is routine. While figure 2 confirms that there is no correlation between being an actor of Middle Eastern origin and playing Middle Eastern characters – 15 out of the 22 actors in the corpus mostly play non-Middle-Eastern characters, it also bring to light two different types of careers. The first group of actors and actresses mostly play Middle-Eastern roles (for example Yasmine Hanani, Waleed Zuaiter, Omar Metwally), while the second group play non-Middle-Eastern, mostly US roles (Shannon Elizabeth, Kristy McNichol or James Stacy). While talent playing non-Middle Eastern roles tend to be fair-skinned with wavy or straight light brown hair, talent playing Middle Eastern roles tend to have olive skin and dark, sometimes curly hair. The clear link between the actors’ physical appearances and the type of roles played over the course of their careers is to be understood in the light of cinema’s reliance on visual stereotypes. These stereotypes work as visual simplifications which are “immediately comprehensible” by the audience, since they refer to the collective social imagination of each viewer.<sup>12</sup> As Pierre Chermatin and Nicolas Dulac note, “the ‘seeing’ implied by the monstrative function of cinema is implicitly linked to a “knowing,” which is predetermined and collectively shared.”<sup>13</sup> Stereotypes are thus narrative shortcuts premised on a specific and culturally-constructed imagery.<sup>14</sup> The talent in the second group indeed corresponds to the stereotypes of the “Arab” as it exists in the American – and Western – social imagination, a visual trope inherited from centuries of orientalist representations as well as decades of Hollywood films<sup>15</sup>:

Males with swarthy complexions, dark hair, and hooknoses, wearing turbans and scarves and carrying swords reminiscent of years long past but ever-present to the unchanging Arab.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 10.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Chermatin and Nicolas Dulac, ‘La femme et le type: le stéréotype comme vecteur narratif dans le cinéma des attractions,’ *Cinéma*, vol. 16, n. 1, Fall 2005, 151.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 149. My translation.

<sup>14</sup> A seminal work on the construction of national identities is Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

<sup>15</sup> Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs*, 20-31. See also Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, [1978] 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Louise A. Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experiences After 9/11* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009), 89.

Such a visual stereotype is clearly racialized, materializing into what Cainkar calls a “phenotype.”<sup>17</sup> Race-based stereotypes have been the topic of numerous academic research, such as Shoat and Stam’s discussion on Eurocentrism,<sup>18</sup> Alessandra Raengo’s concept of “photochemical imagination”<sup>19</sup> or, when it comes to the representation of Arabs in Hollywood films, Jack Shaheen’s seminal writings. Such narrative shortcuts tuned to the social context of film production are also industrial practices built into the Hollywood system. Bielby and Bielby specifically attribute the industrial reliance on stereotypes to a number of factors: “a high level of risk and uncertainty, an emphasis on reputation, demographically-based marketing and a product that embodies cultural idioms about age, gender and race.”<sup>20</sup> They thus contend that “the stereotypes make perfect business sense to Hollywood executives, who self-consciously attempt to mirror and trade on cultural idioms.”<sup>21</sup>

For the actors and actresses, stereotypes are not simply social constructs, but also very concrete career determinants, and the place where social imagination, Hollywood’s culture of imagery and career opportunities intersect is the desk of the casting directors. Very little academic research has been devoted to this profession who acts as gatekeepers for young actors, and whose practices are grounded in Hollywood’s representational regime. Casting choices are primarily motivated by visual considerations. The job of casting directors is to go “through these boxes and boxes of pictures”<sup>22</sup> and to imagine the “faces” that will go with the script. As casting director Ellen Lewis explains: “If someone has an interesting face, the look for the part, they don’t need to have a million things on their resume.”<sup>23</sup> But when choosing an “interesting face,” casting directors are influenced by the mainstream social imagination, feeling – consciously or not – they need to conform to them: “societal stereotypes get enacted in casting decisions because it is assumed that audiences prefer to see characters and behavior consistent with such stereotypes.”<sup>24</sup> Casting is thus the moment when stereotypical and race-based social imaginations become tangible. The primacy of race-based visual considerations in casting practices<sup>25</sup> in Hollywood can be compared to a similar situation in stage theatre:

Far from race being subsumed under ethnic categories, ethnicity is subordinated, indeed is dissolved into what can only be described as race, in its reliance on biologically-based physical

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>18</sup> Shoat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*.

<sup>19</sup> Alessandra Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Denise D, Bielby, William T. Bielby, “Hollywood Dreams, Harsh Realities: Writing for Film and Television,” *Contexts*, Fall/Winter 2002, 21.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>22</sup> Ellen Lewis quoted in Foster Hirsch and Donald R. D’Aries, “The Art of Casting: Interviews with Ellen Lewis, Avy Kaufman and Craig Campobasso,” *Cineaste*, 31, no. 4 (Fall 2006): 56-9.

<sup>23</sup> Ellen Lewis quoted in Foster and D’Aries, “The Art of Casting,” 56-9.

<sup>24</sup> Ezra W. Zuckerman et al. eds., “Robust Identities or Nonentities? Typecasting in the Feature-Film Labor Market,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 108, no. 5 (March 2003): 1040.

<sup>25</sup> That looks are paramount in considering an individual as Middle Eastern is also testified by the fact that the issue of ethnic origins is not raised when these actors work as voice artists. Wendie Malick has worked as a voice artist in a number of TV series, notably *Kung Fu Panda* (2001-2014). Kathy Najimy voices the mother in the very suburban *King of the Hill* (1997-2010). Tony Shaloub has performed both ethnic and non-ethnic voices.

characteristics. Whether an actor is of Chinese, Japanese, or Korean descent, ethnically Mexican, Cuban, or Peruvian, or a member of the Algonquin, Cherokee, or Nez Perce tribe is irrelevant in the vast majority of cases of theatrical casting. It is the appearances that count.<sup>26</sup>

In turn, casting choices strengthen prevalent stereotypes. In a chicken-and-egg conundrum, casting thus appears as a determining cog in the Hollywood myth-making machine, and the race-based social imagination determines the way American actors of Middle Eastern origins are seen and the type of roles offered, as is the case for talent from other racially-identified groups. Given the existence of such representational practices in Hollywood, American actors of Middle Eastern origin have had to position themselves, conceiving their career paths in ethnic and racial terms. An analysis of our corpus shows two different career strategies, with a first group deciding to silence their origin and a second group foregrounding their ethnic appearance.

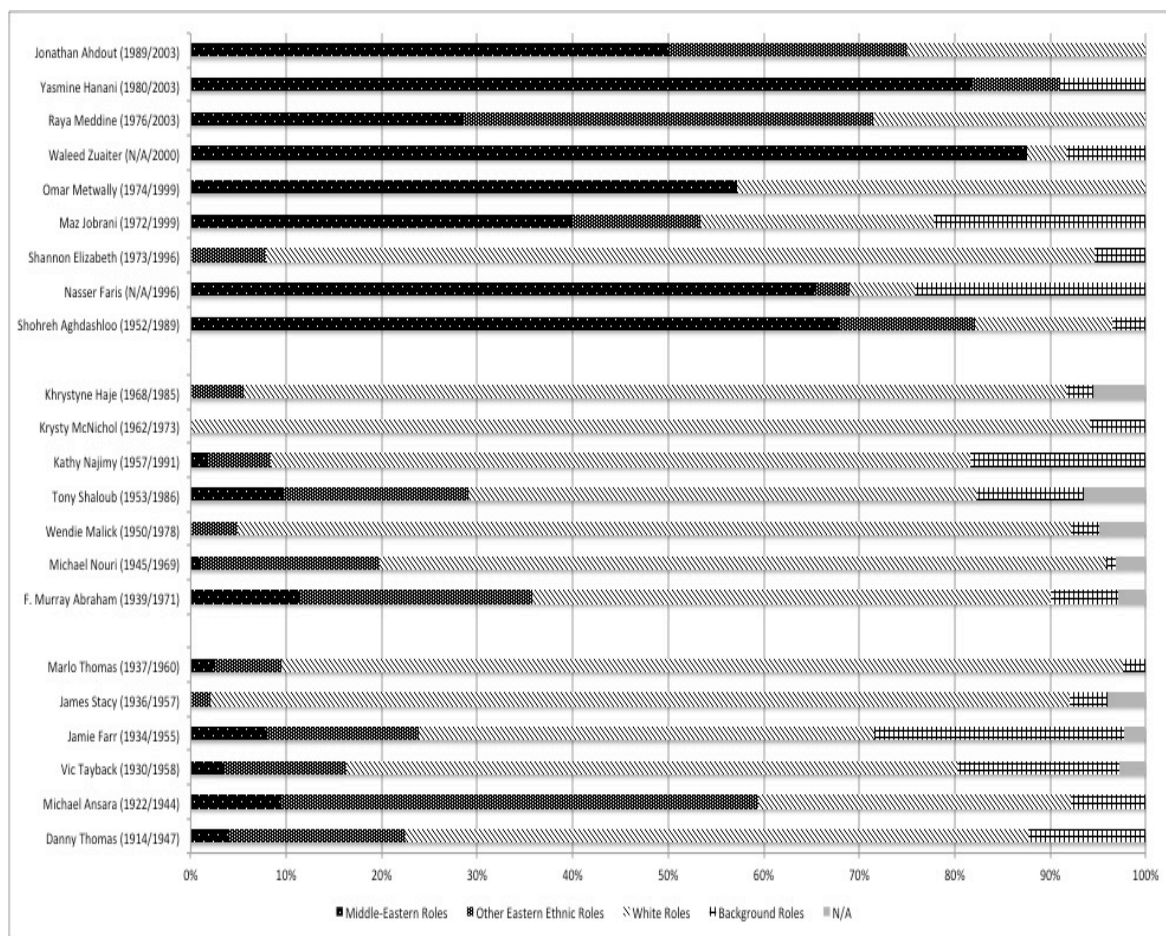


Fig. 2: Classification of the Roles according to their Ethnicity  
 For each person, the dates correspond to the date of birth and the date of the first role.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Angela C. Pao, "Recasting Race: Casting Practices and Racial Formation," *Theatre Survey* 41, no. 2 (November 2000): 11.

<sup>27</sup> Table created by the author from information compiled from IMDb.



## 1.2 The Caucasian Strategy

The first strategy consists in downplaying one's ethnic origin and physical type. This choice is based on a recognition of the racial *status quo* in Hollywood, that is the fact that: "primarily white male decision-makers buy scripts from primarily white men, who tend to write lead characters who are white men."<sup>28</sup> Justifying their choices by the popular belief that spectators would not accept non-white leads,<sup>29</sup> decision-makers tend to set aside the main roles for white talent. An invisible barrier thus exists for non-white actors and talent of Middle Eastern origin are limited by this glass ceiling. In order to access roles created for Whites, actors in the corpus have silenced their ethnicity. F. Murray Abraham, for example, "dropped his first name 'Fahrid' to avoid being typecast 'as a sour Arab out to kill everyone.'"<sup>30</sup> That race-related imagery is at stake here is made clear by a journalist's remark in 1998 about "a handful of Arab-American and Muslim actors whose skin tone and accent allow them to 'pass.'"<sup>31</sup> The use of the word "passing" here is quite striking as it has strong racial connotations. Passing is:

a deception that enables a person to adopt certain roles or identities from which he would be barred by prevailing social standards in the absence of his misleading conduct. The classic racial passer in the United States has been the "white Negro": the individual whose physical appearance allows him to present himself as "white" but whose "black" lineage (typically only a very partial black lineage) makes him a Negro according to dominant racial rules.<sup>32</sup>

This fully applies to acting careers and casting decisions, as an actor of Middle Eastern ancestry must practice a form of "deception," i.e. emphasize his whiteness, to be able to access parts "from which he would be barred by prevailing social standards." The use of the term, however, reveals the ambiguous position of Arab- and Iranian-American actors as compared to other minorities. They should not have to "pass," since, in the U.S.A., they are officially considered as Caucasian, i.e. white.<sup>33</sup> However, social constructs have defined them as non-white. Hence the fact noted by Cainkar that Arab-Americans have had the same experience of exclusion as other minorities.<sup>34</sup> The discrimination faced by Arab-American actors has also been compared to those encountered by sexual minorities, symbolized by the image of actors hiding in the "Arab closet."<sup>35</sup> The "Caucasian strategy" is exemplified by Tony Shaloub's career. After having refused early on to play terrorists, he later managed to play "many non-descript Caucasian Americans".<sup>36</sup> In an industry where, unless specified otherwise, parts are conceived for white people, being "non-

<sup>28</sup> Russel K. Robinson, "Casting and Caste-Ing: Reconciling Artistic Freedom and Antidiscrimination Norms," *California Law Review*, Vol.95, No.1 (Feb. 2007), 7-8.

<sup>29</sup> Jorge Rivas, "Study Finds White People Don't Watch Black Movies. Who's to Blame?" *ColorLines.com*, July 12, 2011, [http://colorlines.com/archives/2011/07/study\\_finds\\_white\\_people\\_dont\\_watch\\_black\\_movies.html](http://colorlines.com/archives/2011/07/study_finds_white_people_dont_watch_black_movies.html).

<sup>30</sup> Laurie Goodstein, "Hollywood Now Plays Cowboys and Arabs," *New York Times*, November 1, 1998.

<sup>31</sup> Goodstein, "Hollywood Now Plays Cowboys and Arabs."

<sup>32</sup> Randall Kennedy, Randall, "Racial Passing," *Ohio State Law Journal* 62 (2001): 1145.

<sup>33</sup> Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity*, 19.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Khlalil, "But Can you Play a Terrorist?"

<sup>36</sup> Goodstein, "Hollywood Now Plays Cowboys and Arabs."

descript” is actually an achievement. In fact, while non-descript Caucasian-looking actors can access white roles, they also benefit from the freedom to embody any ethnicity.

Indeed, Shoat and Stam note in their chapter entitled “The Racial Politics of Casting” that “(w)ithin Hollywood cinema, Euro-Americans have historically enjoyed the unilateral prerogative of acting in ‘blackface,’ ‘redface,’ ‘brownface,’ and ‘yellowface.’”<sup>37</sup> While non-Whites are strongly limited by racial considerations, white actors do not experience racial barriers in casting. A recent example of this “asymmetry in representational power”<sup>38</sup> was the choice to cast Jake Gyllenhaal, a Caucasian actor of Swedish ancestry, in the leading part of Disney’s *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (Mike Newell, 2010).<sup>39</sup> F. Murray Abraham’s career is also representative of this “white” privilege to play various characters. Over four decades, Abraham has played characters who were Italian (*Baby Face Nelson*, Scott P. Levy, 1996), Latin American (*Scarface*, Brian de Palma, 1983), Russian (*The First Circle*, Sheldon Larry, 1992), white American (*Dream West*, TV mini-series, 1986), as well as Arabic (*The Favorite*, Jack Smight, 1989), Jewish American (*Mobsters*, Michael Karbelnikoff, 1991) and ‘Son’a’ in *Star Trek*. About 11% of the characters he played were Middle-Eastern, about 24% were non-Middle Eastern ethnic characters, and about 54% were white characters. Other actors whose careers fall into this category are Krysty McNichol, Kathy Najimy, Wendi Malick, James Stacy and Shannon Elizabeth. By insisting on one’s “Caucasianness,” an attitude socially interpreted as “passing,” these actors have thus developed careers in which they have enjoyed the freedom to circulate in various white and ethnic territories.

### 1.3 The Middle-Eastern Strategy

The second strategy consists in taking the opposite tack and foregrounding one’s ethnic origin, non-white looks and, sometimes, foreign linguistic abilities. This strategy has been used by Yasmine Hanani and Waleed Zuaiter who both started their careers in the early 2000s: more than 80% of their roles have been Middle Eastern characters. Yasmine Hanani notably played an Iraqi welcomer in *Weapon of Mass Destruction* (Nicholas Jacobs, Tony Jacobs, 2004) and a Saudi aunt in *The Kingdom* (Peter Berg, 2007). Waleed Zuaiter was Shahib in *Sex and the City 2* (Michael P. King, 2010) and Mohammed in *Elevator* (Stig Svendsen, 2011). By conforming to prevailing stereotypes, and by accepting to be typecast in such roles, these actors can hope to gain a foothold in Hollywood. In their analysis of typecasting in film, Zuckerman et al. indeed noted that developing a “focused identity” or “robust identity” is an asset for young entrants.<sup>40</sup> This is in line with casting director Ellen Lewis’ remark that look can be more determining than experience. The “Middle

<sup>37</sup> Shoat and Stam, 189.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> The blog Racialicious.com conveys the news with the following comments: “And here are the Arab American actors who will *not* be playing the Prince of Persia :” followed by the pictures of Al Issmail, Philip Shabaz, Jake Yacobi, Haaz Sleiman. The author adds: “Better luck next time, gents! I’m sure the next great role for Arab-Americans is just around the corner! [/sarcasm]” Layota Peterson, “Five Not-Impossible Things Before Breakfast,” *Racialicious.com*, June 2, 2008, <http://www.racialicious.com/2008/06/02/five-not-impossible-things-before-breakfast/>.

<sup>40</sup> Zuckerman et al. “Robust Identities or Nonentities?,” 1039.



Eastern” strategy is also an option for struggling talent. Iranian-American actress Shohreh Aghdashloo, who had rarely acted since the end of the 1970s, relaunched her career by playing a terrorist mother in the TV series *24* in 2005.

The opportunity offered by accepting Hollywood’s prevalent imagination of Middle Eastern characters had also been visible in the creation of a number of specialized talent agencies, such as Middle Eastern Casting, an agency created in 2008.<sup>41</sup> On its website, each talent’s picture is accompanied by a caption mixing nationality, ethnicity and race. Actors and actresses are described as being “Arab/Middle Eastern,” “White Caucasian,” “Hispanic,” “Afghan,” “Iranian/Persian”.<sup>42</sup> In the same way, Arab American Casting publishes casting calls specifically focusing on Middle Eastern roles, casting calls which are all but “non-descript:”

‘Seeking Middle Eastern female between the ages of 20 -32 (or appears this age) for an Arabic language reality TV show pilot to be shot in NYC in mid-April.’<sup>43</sup>

[HOMA RAHAI] Female: 30-40: Middle Eastern, from Iran: Tara's mom. Dark skin with long dark hair.’<sup>44</sup>

The “Middle-Eastern strategy,” however, seems much more restrictive than the “Caucasian strategy.” This remains niche positioning as the number of Middle Eastern characters, although rising, remains marginal. In a 2006 study of characters’ description cards passed on by producers to casting directors (“breakdowns”), Robinson estimated that only 1.7% of roles were specifically Middle Eastern parts.<sup>45</sup> Besides, while typecasting can be an opportunity for a beginner, it can also become a trap for aging actors who are never given an opportunity to play other types of characters.<sup>46</sup> Whereas the Caucasian strategy, when successful, gives actors a certain degree of freedom, the Middle Eastern strategy might be a risky choice after the first few years. By choosing to foreground one’s ethnicity, one is at risk of getting trapped into “the new Arab acting ghetto,” and left to play terrorists.<sup>47</sup>

## 2. Circumscribed Spaces of Expression

Racial representations which permeate society and are both adopted and conveyed by Hollywood is thus a first point of entry to analyze the career patterns of American actors of Middle Eastern origins. These actors’ origins, however, do not simply have an impact on the type of characters they play but also the spaces of expression to which they have access. A study of the corpus shows a strong stability in the type of media and genres open to these actors all over the period studied.

<sup>41</sup> *Middle Eastern Casting*, <http://middleeasterncasting.com/index.php>. NOTE: By insisting on the talent’s origin as added-value and not as a liability, such agencies could provide positive representation for actors who tend to be overlooked by important agencies. Maryann Erigha, “Race, Gender, Hollywood: representation in Cultural production and Digital Media’s Potential for Change,” *Social Compass* 9/1 (2015), 80.

<sup>42</sup> “Browse Talent,” *Middle Eastern Casting*, [http://middleeasterncasting.com/Browse\\_G.php?f=male](http://middleeasterncasting.com/Browse_G.php?f=male).

<sup>43</sup> “NY Casting,” *Arab American Casting*, <http://www.arabamericancasting.com/content/ny-casting>.

<sup>44</sup> “Farsi Speakers Castgin,” *Arab American Casting*, <http://www.arabamericancasting.com/content/farsi-speakers-casting>.

<sup>45</sup> Robinson, “Casting and Caste-Ing,” 11.

<sup>46</sup> Zuckerman et al., “Robust Identities or Nonentities?,” 1031.

<sup>47</sup> Khalil, “But Can you Play a Terrorist ?”

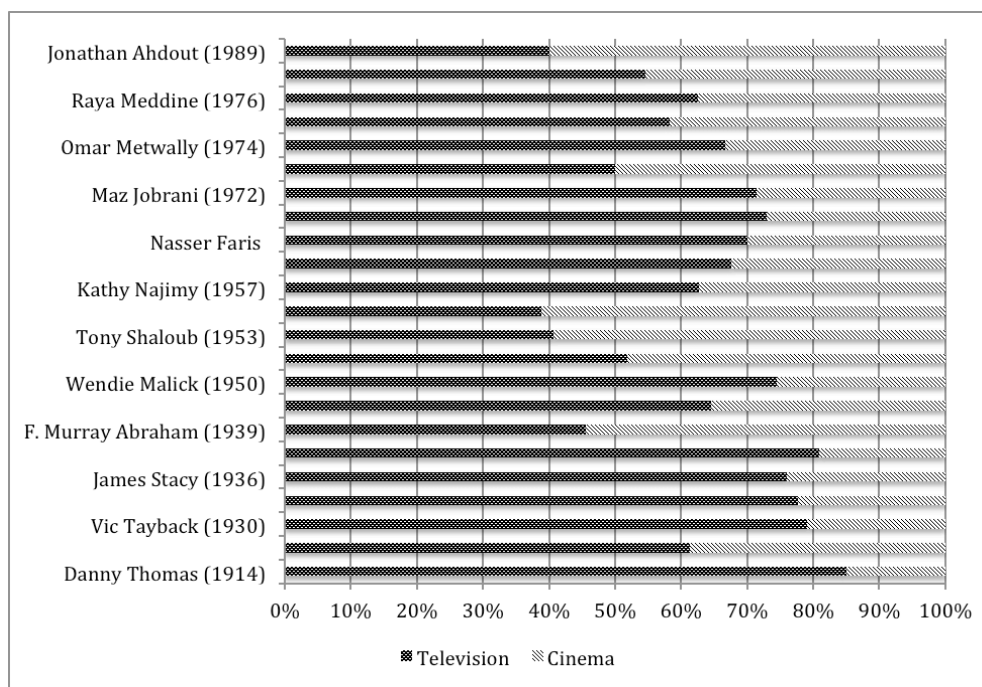


Fig. 3: Roles in television series versus roles in features films<sup>48</sup>

Although this study started out as an analysis of the film careers of a number of actors, the corpus analysis shows that American actors of Middle Eastern origin have consistently acted more in television programs than in films (Fig. 3). The proportion goes from 40% of the roles held by Jonathan Ahdout to 85% for Danny Thomas. A key to understanding this imbalance is to consider the status of the roles filled by American actors of Middle Eastern origin. Although many have acted in films, they usually have not played important parts. Figure 2 shows that many have played extras or background characters, vaguely described in their functionality as “cab driver” or “aunt.” When they embody named characters, these are mostly bit parts, such as Sister Mary Patrick in *Sister Act* (Kathy Najimy; Emile Ardolino, 1992), the alien Jeebs in *Men In Black* (Tony Shaloub; Barry Sonnenfeld, 1997), or Dr. Rao in *X-Men: The Last Stand* (Shohreh Aghdashloo; Brett Ratner, 2006). One could argue that each actor individually lacks the talent to obtain better parts, but the fact that all 22 careers under study follow this pattern seems to point to a more systematic phenomenon. Actors in the corpus who do get leading parts do not appear in mainstream Hollywood movies but in B or exploitation films (James Stacy in *A Swingin’ Summer* [Robert Sparr, 1965], Michael Nouri in *Inner Sanctum II* [Fred Olen Ray, 1994]), direct-to-video products (Khristy Haje in *Demolition University* [Kevin Tenney, 1999] and *Shriek if You Know What I did Last Friday the Thirteenth* [John Blanchard, 2000]), art-house films (F. Murray Abraham in *Amadeus* [Milos Forman, 1984]), or the small-budget films of Middle Eastern directors (Tony Shaloub in *AmericanEast* [Hesham Issawi, 2008], Zuaiteer in *The United* [Amin Matalqa, 2012], shot in Arabic in Jordan, but financed by Touchstone and distributed by Disney). A strong correlation

<sup>48</sup> Graph created by the author based on data compiled from IMDb.

can thus be inferred between being an American actor of Middle Eastern origin and facing a lack of job opportunities in mainstream Hollywood films.<sup>49</sup>

Lack of opportunity in film is a valid explanation to the fact that these actors turn to television, a media which, although less prestigious, offers more job opportunities. Those adopting the “Middle Eastern Strategy,” have benefited from the development of post-9/11 Middle Eastern-themed episodes<sup>50</sup> or series, such as *24* (Fox, 2001-2010), *House of Saddam* (HBO, 2008) and *Sleeper Cell* (Showtime, 2005-), although these specific roles do not seem more numerous or qualitative than in film.<sup>51</sup> A more encouraging observation for actors is that obtaining a leading part seems less of an impossibility on television. Some of the actors in the corpus have reached public notoriety and professional recognition through television, such as Wendie Malick, with *Just Shoot Me!* (CBS, 1997-2003) and Tony Shaloub with *Monk* (USA Network, 2002-2009). Figure 4 lists the 14 actors, in a corpus of 22, who have gained recognition through a television series.

|                   |  |                   |                                     |
|-------------------|--|-------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Danny Thomas      | <i>Make Room for Daddy</i>                                 | ABC               | 1953-1963                           |
| Michel Ansara     | <i>Broken Arrow</i>  | ABC               | 1956-1960                           |
| Vic Tayback       | <i>Alice</i>   | CBS               | 1976-1985                           |
| Jamie Farr        | <i>M*A*S*H*</i>  | CBS               | 1972-1983                           |
| James Stacy       | <i>Lancer</i>  | CBS               | 1968-1970                           |
| Marlo Thomas      | <i>That Girl</i>   | ABC               | 1966-1971                           |
| Wendie Malick     | <i>Dream On</i><br><i>Just Shoot Me!</i><br><i>Frasier</i> | HBO<br>CBS<br>NBC | 1990-1996<br>1997-2003<br>2003-2004 |
| Tony Shaloub      | <i>Monk</i>  | USA Network       | 2002-2009                           |
| Kathy Najimy      | <i>Veronica's Closet</i><br><i>King of the Hill</i>        | NBC<br>Fox        | 1997-2000<br>1997-2010              |
| Krysty McNichol   | <i>Apple's Way</i><br><i>Family</i>                        | CBS<br>ABC        | 1974-1975<br>1976-1980              |
| Khristyne Haje    | <i>Head of the Class</i>                                   | ABC               | 1986-1990                           |
| Shoreh Aghdashloo | <i>24</i><br><i>House of Saddam</i>                        | Fox<br>HBO        | 2005<br>2008                        |
| Raya Meddine      | <i>The Young and the Restless</i>                          | CBS               | 2008-2010                           |
| Jonathan Ahdout   | <i>24</i>  | Fox               | 2005                                |

Fig. 4: Television series in which actors of the corpus feature prominently<sup>52</sup>

Figure 4 also brings to the fore the genre of the programs in which American actors of Middle Eastern origin regularly appear: almost half of the actors and actresses in the corpus achieved fame through comedy programs, some being both actors and comedians. Again, the presence of these actors in comedy programs is a stable phenomenon over the different

<sup>49</sup> Paradoxically, this glass ceiling actually also applies to actors who do not fit the Middle Eastern phenotype, indicating that, beyond looks, other determinants are at play, such as names, known ethnic background or lack of network.

<sup>50</sup> Evelyn Alsultany analyzes in detail the episodes “Bad to Worse” (*The Practice*, 2002), “Inter Arma Silent Leges” (*The Practice*, 2001), “Baby Love” (*NYPD*, 2004), “Patriot” (*Law and Order*, 2002), in Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media*. Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media*, 10.

<sup>51</sup> Yasmine Hanani, for example, features as a ‘masked female extremist’ and ‘surveillance technician #2’ in two episodes of the series *Sleeper Cell* (2006).

<sup>52</sup> Graph created by the author based on data compiled from IMDb.

generations identified in the corpus. Danny Thomas epitomizes the first generation. Originally a nightclub comedian, he appeared in many of the comedy programs that were flourishing in the 1950s and 1960s, such as *The Lucy Desi Comedy Hour* (CBS, 1957), *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (CBS, 1961-1966) or *The Bob Hope Show* (NBC, 1952). In 1967-1968, he hosted his own show, *The Danny Thomas Hour* (NBC, 1967-1968). His itinerary as an entertainment entrepreneur can be compared to the journey of comedians Lucille Ball and Cuban-American Desi Arnaz (*I Love Lucy*). Thomas also initiated and acted in two sitcoms based on his life: *Make Room for Daddy* (1953-1964) and *Make Room for Grand-Daddy* (1970-1971). In the second generation, Wendy Malick and Kathy Najimy are both comedians. Before starring in sitcom *Veronica's Closet* (NBC, 1997-2000), Najimy acted in a comic duet with Mo Gaffney.<sup>53</sup> A recent example of an Iranian-American appearing in comedies is Maz Jobrani, who started as a stand-up comedian in 1998<sup>54</sup> and later co-founded the Axis of Evil Comedy Tour, which featured stand-up comedians of Middle Eastern origin and toured the U.S.A. and the Middle East between 2005 and 2011.<sup>55</sup> Although not all of the actors in the corpus have comic personas or appear in sitcoms, the strong predominance of roles on television and in comedies still remains strikingly significant. This phenomenon can be traced back to both structural and cultural reasons and bring to light the similarity of experience between American actors of Middle Eastern origin and American actors from other minorities.

Structurally, one can notice that the glass-ceiling phenomenon operates on several levels. In terms of racial representation, we have seen that it prevented actors from minorities being considered for non-descript – i.e. white – roles. In terms of medium, it also pushes American actors of Middle Eastern origin into marginal spaces of expression: B movies and television. In terms of genre, the glass ceiling seems to prevent these actors from accessing “serious” dramatic roles. Comedy is indeed often considered, both by the audience and by professionals, as a less prestigious genre characterized by smaller wages and lack of artistic prestige. Comedy is also strongly conducive to typecasting.<sup>56</sup>

This structural issue also has cultural roots, since the glass ceiling is delineating the existence of two acting spaces: one reserved to white talent and one open to minorities, i.e. to the other type of talent. A process of Othering is here at work, which is actually at the very centre of humour.<sup>57</sup> The itinerary of American actors of Middle Eastern origins can actually be understood as part of a larger pattern in which minorities are not simply relegated to the margins, but also seize these margins as spaces of expression. Because “comedy arises out of social tensions,”<sup>58</sup> it has been a mode of expression often chosen by minorities in the U.S.A. Boskin and Dorison note

<sup>53</sup> Their two off-Broadway shows were televised on HBO in the early 1990s: *The Kathy & Mo Show: Parallel Lives*, 1991 and *The Kathy & Mo Show: The Dark Side*, 1995.

<sup>54</sup> Gordon Downs, “Interview with Comedian Maz Jobrani,” *San Diego.com*, February 14, 2011.

<sup>55</sup> Other stand-up comedians have occasionally made a foray into films. Ahmed Ahmed thus appears in *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008). He also appears alongside Maysoon Zayid, the first American Muslim female comedian, in *You Don't Mess with the Zohan* (Dennis Dugan, 2008).

<sup>56</sup> Zuckerman et al. “Robust Identities or Nonentities?,” 1066.

<sup>57</sup> Joseph Boskin and Joseph, Dorinson, “Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival,” *American Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (Spring, 1985): 81.

<sup>58</sup> Jonna Mackin, “Subject to Laughter: Comedy and Ethnicity in Contemporary American Fiction,” (Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2001).

that the “victims of stereotyping” have appropriated these stereotypes “in mocking self-description,” ultimately using them “as a means of revenge against their more powerful detractors.”<sup>59</sup> Lowe calls humour “creative subversion.”<sup>60</sup> Humour has thus been a weapons seized by minorities, whether ethnic or sexual.<sup>61</sup> Stand-up, which has been a particularly strong expression of ethnic humour, was notably developed a “free zone speech” by Jewish-American Lenny Bruce,<sup>62</sup> as well as by African-Americans David Gregory, Bill Cosby and Richard Pryor in the context of the Civil Rights Movement. Stand-up comedy was thus developed in Jewish and black communities, at the same time that Danny Thomas and Jamie Farr were making their names as comedians. American comedians of Middle Eastern origin have appropriated this means of expression. Maz Jobrani’s involvement in the Axis of Evil Comedy Tour is an example of such combative ethnic humour, since its name comes from the expression “Axis of Evil” created in 2002 by the Bush administration to designate three enemies of the U.S. nation: North Korea, Iran and Iraq. Today, African-American and Middle Eastern-American stand-up comedy is also closely related, as can be seen through the presence of Maz Jobrani in the African-American comedy *Friday after Next* (Marcus Raboy, 2002) or in the Cedric the Entertainer show, or that of Kathy Najimy in Tyler Perry’s *A Madea Christmas* (Tyler Perry, 2013).

The strong presence of American actors of Middle Eastern origin in television sitcoms also strengthens the parallel with African-American trajectories. Current sitcoms such as *Whoopi! Aliens in America* or *Community* can be compared to 1970s and 1980s sitcoms such as *The Cosby Show*. Just as stand-up offered a means of expression, sitcoms enable minorities to take centre-stage. According to Mastro et al., “greater equality of characterizations” and “equal status with Whites” was made possible through the sitcoms centred on African-American families.<sup>63</sup> In the same way, while Alsultany denounces the representation of Arab-Americans in television investigation and action series, she notes that Arab-Americans are positively represented in sitcoms.<sup>64</sup> One can argue that smaller budget, targeted audience and provocative humour are characteristics that predispose sitcoms to become places of expressivity for minorities. The television medium and the comic genre thus hold an ambiguous position when it comes to the acting career of American actors of Middle Eastern descent, since they are both marginalized spaces in which these actors are pushed perforce but also places of opportunities in terms of employment and expression.

<sup>59</sup> Boskin and Dorinson, “Ethnic Humor,” 81.s

<sup>60</sup> Lowe, John, “Theories of Ethnic Humor: How to Enter, Laughing,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No.3 (1986), 442-3.

<sup>61</sup> 2005 presentation by psychologist Leon Rappaport at the International Society for Humor Studies, summarized in Allee Pace Nielsen and Don L.F. Nilswen., “Just How Ethnic is Ethnic Humour?,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies Journal* 38, no.1 (2006): 131. Boskin and Dorinson, “Ethnic Humor;” Lowe, “Theories of Ethnic Humor.”

<sup>62</sup> Matthew Daube, *Laughter in Revolt: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in the Construction of Stand-up Comedy* (PhD, Stanford University, 2010), iv.

<sup>63</sup> Dana E. Mastro and Bradley Greenberg, “The Portrayal of Racial Minorities in Prime Time Television,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* (Fall 2000): 691-2. Reality TV could also play a part in conveying fewer caricatures. Nolwenn Mingant, “‘Not A Terrorist’: The Representational Alternative of Reality TV in *All-American Muslim*,” *CineJ Cinema Journal* 3, no. 1 (2013), <http://cinej.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/cinej/issue/current>.

<sup>64</sup> Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media*, 172.

### 3. Sociohistorical Context and Career Strategies

The strategies adopted by the actors in the corpus thus revolve around the creation of specific personae as well as the seizing of opportunities in less prestigious media and genres open to them. Up until now, the paper has adopted a synchronic perspective, analyzing phenomena and strategies that apply to all the period study, and which relate the experience of American actors of Middle Eastern ancestry to that of other minorities. Figure 2, which presents the ethnicity of the roles played by American actors of Middle Eastern origin, however, also invites to look at the issue from a historical and generational perspective. Three generations can be differentiated. Group 1 is made of individuals starting their careers between 1947 (Danny Thomas) and 1960 (his daughter, Marlo Thomas). Group 2 started their career in the late 1960s, from 1969 (Michael Nouri) to 1985 (Khrystyne Haje). Group 3 started their acting career in the late 1990s. A process of reversal seems at play here: while earlier generations tended to play mostly U.S. roles, the younger generation tend to play Middle-Eastern characters. Since the Caucasian strategy and the Middle Eastern strategy are responses to the U.S. social imagination of what constitute whiteness and "Middle Easternness," they now need to be correlated to the social status of Americans of Middle Eastern origins in the US at different historical periods.

#### 3.1 Assimilation and Americanness

According to Cainkar, before the 1960s, the Arab-American community was rather well assimilated into the US society. Considered as Caucasians, its members benefited from many advantages reserved to Whites, such as "better housing, full legal and voting rights, upward mobility, and access to political office."<sup>65</sup> Although they had a lesser status than the WASPs, their successful assimilation can be compared to the other white minority groups: Italians, Poles, Slavs, Greeks or the Jewish community. Cainkar notes that "(T)hey achieved a degree of economic success, experienced upward social mobility, and led social lives that were intertwined with members of white ethnic groups, often resulting in intermarriage."<sup>66</sup> Such is the social context in which the first group of actors started their careers. Danny Thomas and Marlo Thomas, Michael Ansara, Vic Tayback, Jamie Farr and James Stacy all began acting between the mid-1940s and the late 1950s. Figure 2 shows that these actors and actresses played few or no Middle Eastern characters. Apart from the exception of Michael Ansara,<sup>67</sup> they played a limited number of ethnic roles. When they did, they embodied other white minorities: mostly Italians, but also a few Russians, Greeks and Hispanics. Most of their characters were American. Their ethnic origin did not seem to have trapped this generation into the ghetto of ethnic roles. Some actually became prominent figures of U.S. culture, such as Vic Tayback and his diner boss character in the television series *Alice* (CBS, 1976-1985). When they played characters from a specific ethnic background, they still personified the American myth, such as James Stacy as the Mexican-American cowboy in the television series

<sup>65</sup> Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity*, 73.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>67</sup> Michael Ansara enjoyed a rich career by playing almost exclusively non-Middle Eastern ethnic characters, mainly Native Americans, thus making a career out of typecasting.



*Lancer* (CBS, 1968-1970) or Lebanese-American Danny Thomas and his family, a typical representation of the 1950s consumer society in *Make Room for Daddy* (ABC, 1953-1965). The integration of these actors into the white American society was also symbolized by the fact that they Americanized their names: Danny Thomas (Amos Muzyad Yakhoob Kairouz), Jamie Farr (Jameel Joseph Farah), James Stacy (Maurice William Elias). A further indication of their assimilation is their appearance in TV commercials. Danny Thomas advertised Sanka coffee, Post cereals and Dodge cars in the 1950s,<sup>68</sup> while Jamie Farr advertised Mars bars in the 1980s. For mainstream audiences, these actors had become assimilated to the point not only of becoming representative of the United States, but of taking on the role of prescribers. Thus, these actors' Middle-Easternness does not seem to have barred them from being offered a diversity of roles.

The late 1960s marked a turning point for the mainstream perception of Arab-Americans in the U.S.A. According to Cainkar, the racialization of Arabs in the U.S.A. dates back to the media coverage of the June 1967 Six Day War. Pre-existing orientalist stereotypes were reactivated by media trying to denigrate Arabs to better highlight U.S. might. Now considered as enemies, Arabs started to become essentialized as weak, incompetent and backward.<sup>69</sup> The development of negative clichés in popular culture programs, prominently studied by Jack Shaheen, accompanied a change in Arab-Americans' everyday life, now touched by "prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping, political and social exclusion," as well as hate crimes.<sup>70</sup> Arab-Americans thus gained negative visibility, with Hollywood films developing terrorist characters and perverse Sheiks in numerous films. Despite this changing context, assimilation appears to have remained the order of the day for actors of Middle Eastern origin starting their career immediately after 1967 and until the mid-1980s. They obtained a few Middle Eastern roles, a few ethnic roles (playing Mediterranean and Russian characters), but mostly unmarked U.S. roles. Tony Shaloub and F. Murray Abrahams, the two actors characterized as passers, belong to that generation. This group is constituted of fully assimilated second and third generation immigrants. Obtaining US roles made sense for people who were born and raised in the U.S. and immersed in the American culture. Although this generation has sometimes played ethnic roles, they have not been confined to them. Middle Eastern roles have actually been quite rare. The negative Middle Eastern roles proposed to Shaloub and Abraham at the beginning of their careers seem to have pushed them to accentuate, as we have seen, their Caucasianness and Americanness. Playing the Sultan in a harem (Abraham, *Intimate Power*, 1989) or a terrorist (Shaloub's first role in the 'Breakpoint' episode of *Equalizer*, Universal Television, 1986) are experiences that the actors seem to have been eager to put behind them. As for Nouri, Malick, Najimy, McNichol and Haje, their origin is not a well-known fact. One could surmise that the combined influence of assimilation and negative representations has pushed further American actors of Middle Eastern origin towards the path of ethnic invisibility.

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<sup>68</sup> "1962 cereal commercial Danny Thomas," YouTube video, posted by "captainbijou.com," September 19, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T5C6Mih2a0>. "Make Room for Daddy Original Sponsor Closing Credits," YouTube video, posted by "jed 6271," January 14, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NeKAD9ZquRU>.

<sup>69</sup> Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity*, 85.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 85, 90.

### 3.2. Social Exposure and Middle Easternness

The third generation started their acting career in the late 1990s and early 2000s, at a time of highly negative visibility for Middle Easterners, now fully perceived as threats to the U.S.A. and relegated to the figure of the enemy. During and after the 1991 Gulf War, citizens corresponding to the media-created “Arab phenotype” were the victims of anonymous phone calls, harassment and hate crimes.<sup>71</sup> The 9/11 attacks greatly increased the climate of fear and hatred, as the community’s high visibility led to its exclusion.<sup>72</sup> The careers of actors entering the job market after the late 1990s follow a strongly reversed pattern when compared to earlier generations, with a majority of Middle Eastern roles, in line with the “Middle Eastern Strategy” mentioned above. Several factors can explain this reversal. First, there has indeed been an increase in the amount of Middle Eastern characters portrayed in Hollywood films. In an extremely competitive job market, typecasting has been a means of entry for young actors, who foreground their ethnicity to upstage other young actors, notably from other minorities, but also from North Africa and the Middle East.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, Hollywood directors have increasingly placed a premium on casting authentically, going beyond the simple “look” of actors by truly matching the actor’s ethnic origin to his character’s. This move towards authentic casting has been profitable for American actors of Middle Eastern origin.<sup>74</sup> Besides Hanani and Zuaiteer, Omar Metwally’s career also exemplifies the use of typecasting as a means of entry in the post 9/11 context, as Metwally played a Palestinian fighter in *Munich* (Steven Spielberg, 2005) and an Egyptian vampire in *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn Part 2* (Bill Condon, 2012.)<sup>75</sup>

Choosing to play a Middle Eastern role can also derive from ideological preoccupations. By accepting to play these roles, actors can hope to inflect the way the characters are represented. Waleed Zuaiteer’s career can be seen in this light. More than 85% of the film roles played by the actor, who had previously been a successful stage actor, are Middle Eastern and seem to be the result of a careful choice. Zuaiteer appears in small-budget topical films such as *Jihad!* (Muhammed Rum, 2004) and *The Visitor* (Tom McCarthy, 2007), in the quality television series *House of Saddam* (HBO, 2008) and the off-the-wall comedy *The Men who Stared at Goats* (Grant Heslov, 2009). This trend toward topically-motivated role choices may also explain why a number of actors from the previous generation are starting to accept Middle Eastern roles, provided they are more positive or better fleshed-out. In *The Siege* (Edward Zwick, 1998), Tony Shaloub’s Lebanese American character is given equal importance to the characters played by Denzel Washington and Bruce Willis. He is the symbol of a successful balance between integration

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 90-91.

<sup>72</sup> For more on this, see Louise A. Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity*.

<sup>73</sup> In one episode of the comedy series *The Watch List*, Maz Jobrani encourages young Arab-American actors to take on Middle-Eastern roles, “so that Latino actors won’t get them.” Quoted in Khlalil, “But Can you Play a Terrorist?”

<sup>74</sup> Actors in group 3 being still in the early stages of their careers, it is not yet possible to predict whether this ethnic strategy will be profitable in the long run or whether these actors will be trapped in an Arab ghetto.

<sup>75</sup> Metwally, however, seems to try and avoid typecasting by also playing unmarked U.S. roles in *Fringe* (2010), *The Unit* (a soldier called Wirth, 2006) as well as *Grey’s Anatomy* (a patient called Jesse Fannon, 2006).

into the U.S. society through his job as an FBI agent, and faithfulness to one's cultural roots. His victimization at the hand of the US army serves the film's indictment of American foreign and domestic policy choices. Recent TV series have also offered challenging roles to older Arab-American actors. In *Homeland* (Showtime, 2012-2014), F. Murray Abraham plays a complex and shady CIA agent. His character appears recurrently, exerting hidden influence and playing a key role in the unwinding of the last episode of Season 4. At a time when the post-9/11 context pushed some Arab-Americans to explore and lay claim to their origins,<sup>76</sup> these actors' choices can be perceived as attempts to change the system from within.

More authentic casting and the development of more complex Middle Eastern characters are however not without ambiguities. The efforts for more authenticity have remained quite superficial. Directors choose actors of Middle Eastern origin to play Middle Eastern characters, but ignore national, ethnic or cultural differences existing within this region of the world. This can lead to striking choices such as Iranian-American Shohreh Aghdashloo and Kuwaiti-American Waleed Zuaiter playing Iraqis (*House of Saddam*, HBO, 2008; *The Men who Stare at Goats*, Grant Heslov, 2009). The notion that an all-encompassing "Middle Eastern" identity exists is a problem in itself. Similarly, the extent of the changes in representation can be questioned. Alsultany denounces a "simplified complex representations," "strategies used by television producers, writers, and directors to give the impression that the representations they are producing are complex."<sup>77</sup> The third generation identified has thus had to deal with a heightened visibility and strongly negative representation. Although some seem to have chosen the typecasting road as a career-starter, one can surmise that actors who have started their careers since the late 1990s have had to hide their origin to an extent not experienced by previous generations.

#### 4. Collective Responses

The career choices open to American actors of Middle-Eastern origin are thus determined by the codes and practice of a Hollywood system setting clear ethnic, media and genre boundaries. The strategies described above are all individual and they consist mostly in adapting to the existing *status quo*. However, just as these actors' experiences can be, in many areas, compared to those of actors from other minorities, actions taken by those minorities could inspire American actors of Middle-Eastern origin to consider collective responses.

The first target could be to change current casting practices in order to increase job opportunities. Inspiration can be taken from stage theatre with "non-traditional casting," a concept developed in 1986. It opposes "traditional casting," i.e. a white actor, to what is termed "non-traditional" casting, i.e. actresses, minority actors and actresses, or disabled talent. The practice of "color-blind casting," the fact that "actors are cast without regard to their race or ethnicity; the best actor is cast in the role,"<sup>78</sup> would be beneficial to minority actors, among which Arab- and Iranian-American talent. This practice was adopted in *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC, 2005-),

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<sup>76</sup> Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity*, 188.

<sup>77</sup> Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media*, 21.

<sup>78</sup> Pao, "Recasting Race," 2.

under the influence of its African-American screenwriter, Shonda Rhimes, who chose not to assign any ethnicity to her characters, for example, by not naming them. This enabled Korean-American actress Sandra Oh to obtain one of the leading parts as Cristina Yang.<sup>79</sup> Bit parts have also systematically been filled in by actors from multicultural backgrounds. Contrary to usual practice, however, their ethnic origin is not remarked on and not central to the episode's plot, thus making the multicultural the new "non-descript."<sup>80</sup> Omar Metwally, for example, played in the "Superstition" episode of *Grey's Anatomy* (Season 2, Episode 21, 2006). Legal expert Russell Robinson proposes a more radical method: denouncing the illegality of race- and gender-specific breakdowns in the name of the anti-discrimination principles announced in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.<sup>81</sup> In the long term, this would eliminate "reflexive discrimination, that is, discrimination not preceded by a period of critical reflection," and would "clear the path for each individual to be able to compete for the most central and lucrative roles in film free from the confines of stereotypical assumptions."<sup>82</sup> While Robinson admits that finding a plaintiff willing to go publically against industry practices is the major obstacle to this theory, one could also wonder about the strength of the argument as film is protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution guaranteeing freedom of speech.

An obstacle that could be remedied is the lack of collective representation for actors of Middle Eastern origin.<sup>83</sup> Contrary to African-American and Latino actors, respectively represented by the NAACP and La Raza,<sup>84</sup> no organization defends the Arab- and Iranian-American actors' interest.<sup>85</sup> Such an association could voice their specific concerns and try and influence decision-makers. To remedy this, the Muslim Public Affairs Council, an organization created in 1986, opened a Hollywood Bureau in 2007, that planned "to conduct proactive outreach to film and TV studios, to serve as resource in developing multi-dimensional portrayals of Islam and Muslims, and create inroads for aspiring Muslim artists."<sup>86</sup> The Bureau has notably tried to foster dialogue by organizing roundtables, such as a discussion with Howard Gordon, executive producer of *24*, in 2008, or "Broadening Film & TV Roles for Arab & Muslim Actors" in 2009. It also maintains a visibility by attending CBS' annual Diversity Showcase. However, contrary to African-Americans, lines of identifications are less clear between Arab and non-Arab, Muslim and non-Muslim, sharing only their Middle-Eastern ancestry. The intervention of the Muslim Public Affairs Council could thus unintentionally further the amalgamation between Arab and Muslim identities. Breaking down traditional casting practices and getting to voice specific concerns are strategies aimed both

<sup>79</sup> Matthew Fogel, "'Grey's Anatomy' Goes Colorblind," *New York Times.com*, May 8, 2005.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Robinson, "Casting and Caste-Ing: 52.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 52, 15.

<sup>83</sup> Goodstein, "Hollywood Now Plays Cowboys and Arabs."

<sup>84</sup> Interestingly, academic literature on the representation of minorities on television exclusively focuses on African-American, Latinos, Asians and Native Americans. For an example, see Bradley S.Greenberg, Dana Mastro and Jeffrey E. Brand, "Minorities and the Mass Media: Television into the 21st Century," in Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillman eds. *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, 2d ed. (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002), 333-354.

<sup>85</sup> Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs*, 39

<sup>86</sup> "History," *Muslim Public Affairs Council*, <http://www.mpac.org/about/history.php>.

at the Hollywood decision-makers and at the audience. It aims to deprogram their minds, to overthrow cultural barriers and open up job opportunities within the industry.

Another path is to take up a position of power by becoming a producer. This strategy has been recurrently used by other minorities. As Erigha notes, through “participation in the film industry, members of underrepresented groups can impact media images and cultural products by contesting and counteracting stereotypes, while dismantling the White male hegemony of American civic myth and culture.”<sup>87</sup> Among Arab-American actors, Danny Thomas is an early example of this strategy, as he produced 30 television shows: family series (*The Andy Griffith Show*), westerns (*The Guns of Will Sonnett*), and crime series (*The Mod Squad*).<sup>88</sup> A current example is Tony Shaloub, the executive producer of two films in which he stars, *Feed the Fish* (Michael Matzdorff, 2009, \$240,000 budget) and *AmericanEast* (\$2.5m budget). *AmericanEast* is a film about two Americans of Egyptian and Jewish origin, who try to open a restaurant together. It was directed by Hesham Issawi, an Egyptian who immigrated to the U.S.A. in the early 1990s, and features many Arab- and Iranian-American actors such as Nasser Faris. Production but also network creation seem at the centre of Shaloub’s initiative. Shaloub, Issawi, Faris, as well as Sayed Badreya, who emigrated to the U.S.A. from Egypt in the 1980s, form one network that tries to favour the creation of content dealing with Middle Eastern-American issues and provide opportunities for young talent of Middle Eastern origin. In 2005, Shaloub was executive producer to Badreya’s *Mush*, a short in which Yasmine Hanani appeared. Another strong network that comes to mind is *The Watch List* stand-up comedians. Network creation is also a means to promote access to fulfilling roles for actors of Middle Eastern origin and to give them the opportunity to foreground their talent.

The difficulty encountered by such production efforts, however, is the lack of access to distribution. According to IMDb, *AmericanEast* was only released at the Thessaloniki International Film Festival, and shorts do not reach a wide audience. To bypass Hollywood’s traditional gatekeepers, the young generation is now turning to the Internet. After moving to Hollywood to become an actor, young Jordanian-American Yousef Abu-Taleb reached fame thanks to the webseries *lonelygirl15* (2006-2008). This pushed him to turn to production and to use the Internet as sole distribution channel,<sup>89</sup> making his film *Look at Me* (Alesia Glidewell, 2012) available on VOD and on iTunes and posting his webseries *Poor Paul* (2008-2011) on YouTube and Twitter. The Internet could thus offer opportunities to aspiring actors of Middle Eastern origin, as it does for other minorities. Furthermore, Erigha notes that as the American population becomes more diverse and as millennials use the Internet frequently and casually, “Hollywood decision-makers might be compelled to incorporate a more diverse group of cultural creators in order to maintain dominance in the face of greater competition for audience attention.”<sup>90</sup> Digital strategies are thus new opportunities to be seriously considered by American actors of Middle-Eastern origin: on its

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<sup>87</sup> Erigha, “Race, Gender, Hollywood,” 86

<sup>88</sup> *The Mod Squad* (1968-1973) notably features a lead African-American character.

<sup>89</sup> ‘Interview with Yousef Abu-Taleb, producer of “Poor Paul,” You Tube video, posted by Gordon Lake, July 11, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DA0ucv5fqkk>.

<sup>90</sup> Erigha, “Race, Gender, Hollywood,” 88

webpage entitled 'How to Break into Hollywood', MPAC ends a list of advice with "Be bold! Pick up a camera, shoot your idea and put it on the Internet."<sup>91</sup>

### Conclusion

This study has brought to light the experience of a specific minority among Hollywood actors, which, although it faces the same discriminatory barriers as other minority talent, had not hitherto caught academic attention. It shows the extent to which they face the same challenges, in terms of type of roles, media and genres accessible, but also the specificity of their itineraries linked to the evolution of the social imagination of "Caucasianness," "Arabness" and "Middle-Easternness." At the heart of the challenges faced by Arab actors of Middle-Eastern origin is the intrinsic link between a constructed and culturally-determined social imagination and the economic structure of the American film and television industry. Contrary to optimistic visions that more visibility in the media would entail a fairer representation, the opposite appears to true: the increased visibility of the Arab and Iranian-American community has paradoxically limited the actors career options, while the qualitative content of roles is still to be proven. The recent debate over the Oscar nomination, in 2015 and 2016, with the creation of the #OscarSoWhite protest movement, has underlined the perpetuation of discrimination practices in Hollywood despite individual and collective efforts. For minority actors, the battle will be long and uphill since the challenge is larger than the Hollywood film industry itself. With the social imagination of the U.S. nation as a major determinant in the day-to-day path of these actors, breaking down the walls of the Arab acting ghetto first entails to change radically how the U.S.A. views itself and its different minorities. So when will Hollywood – and the U.S.A. – be ready for an Arab Will Smith?

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<sup>91</sup> MPAC, "How to Break into Hollywood," September 3, 2010, <http://www.mpac.org/programs/hollywood-bureau/how-to-break-into-hollywood.php#.Uh3yNJYmVJk>.