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THE BIG PICTURE PATRICK GOLDSTEIN

## Funny choices

*Something's wrong when a studio balks at a comedy this inspired.*

September 27, 2005 | PATRICK GOLDSTEIN

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IN the days after the calamitous 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, there was a brief flurry of soul-searching in Hollywood, focusing in part on how much of a role our movies played in stirring Muslim rage against America. As innumerable cultural historians have discovered, many devout Muslims are horrified by the sexual innuendo and crass materialism in Hollywood films and music videos, not to mention Vanity Fair, whose salacious cover spread this month of Paris Hilton pretty much says it all when it comes to celebrating even the tawdriest members of our celebrity culture.

Judging from the films in the multiplexes this summer, the soul-searching in show business lasted about as long as Britney Spears' first marriage. According to a recent survey by the Pew Research Center, an overwhelming majority of respondents in Middle Eastern countries were opposed to the spread of American ideas and customs. I seriously doubt that sitting through a double-bill of "The Dukes of Hazzard" and "Deuce Bigalow: European Gigolo" will improve the polling numbers.

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### FROM THE ARCHIVES

That's why comedy is a tough business

February 26, 2006

A comic walks into India ...

January 20, 2006

But the real problem with Hollywood isn't simply its glorification of sex, money and lame old TV shows. It's that our Ivy League-educated studio elite often don't know the difference between crass and class. How's this for an example: Sony Pictures, the studio that made "European Gigolo," has refused to release "Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World," an inspired new film by Albert Brooks about a comedian -- Brooks, playing himself -- who is recruited by the U.S. government to go to India and Pakistan to find out what makes Muslims laugh.

The movie makes fun of comedians' neurotic neediness and State Department ineffectuality, but seems to steer clear of anything that would insult Muslims. Still, in a June 30 letter to Brooks, Sony chairman Michael Lynton said that he wouldn't release the film unless Brooks changed the title. Lynton wrote: "I

do believe that recent incidents have dramatically changed the landscape that we live in and that this, among other things, warrants changing the title of the film." Sony insiders say Lynton was alarmed by the violent reaction in the Muslim world to Newsweek's May 9 story, since retracted, about a Koran being flushed down the toilet by interrogators at the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay.

Brooks' movie, financed by producer Steve Bing, has now found a new home at Warner Independent Pictures, which plans to release it early next year. Warner Indy chief Mark Gill says he had no problems with the title. "How often do you get a laugh simply from the title of a movie?" Gill told me. "We saw the movie, and it was clear that Albert makes fun of himself and America, not anybody else."

Lynton won't discuss the issue publicly, but perhaps he is worried that merely having "Muslim" in a film title could cause the kind of outrage that led to the murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh, whose film, "Submission," showed naked women with verses of the Koran projected on their bodies. I'd be worried if I'd made "Submission" too. But Brooks' film is a comedy, not a political screed, closer in spirit to Randy Newman than Salman Rushdie. I only wish I could get Lynton to explain why Sony was squeamish about Brooks' film and not "European Gigolo," which makes fun of a female Chernobyl victim who has a penis instead of a nose.

Brooks, in his first interview about the film, confirmed that Lynton expressed concern about Muslim outrage over the alleged Koran incident. "When we spoke, he told me, 'The Newsweek thing has changed the world.' And I said, 'Wasn't it 9/11 that changed the world?' But Michael said he just didn't want to take a chance."

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Best known for such films as "Real Life" and "Lost in America," Brooks says he was inspired to make "Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World" in the wake of 9/11. "For so long afterward, whenever I heard anyone talk about Muslims, it was in association with terrorism," he explained after screening the film for me at his Bel-Air office. "But I thought, what could I do in a teeny way -- and believe me, it's a teeny way -- to defuse this? There had to be some way to separate the 1.5 billion people who don't want to kill us from the 100,000 or so who do. I thought if I could get five Muslims and six Hindus and maybe 3 Jews to laugh for 90 minutes, then I've accomplished something."

In the film, Brooks is recruited for his mission by a government official, played by former Tennessee Sen. Fred Thompson, also portraying himself. The comic heads for India, where he has a variety of misadventures, including a disastrous stand-up comedy concert and a botched meeting with Al Jazeera, which Brooks assumes is interested in his search for comedy when, in fact, the network wants to audition him for a sitcom. "At your age," says the Al Jazeera executive, as coolly pragmatic as any Hollywood agent, "you should think about television."

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As with most Brooks films, the movie, which was filmed in India late last year, makes fun of showbiz self-absorption. But it also toys with other cultural stereotypes, from young Pakistani terrorists who turn out to be comedy connoisseurs to Brooks' hapless State Department minders, who are so disorganized that they can't even rent a decent office in New Delhi.

For Brooks, the film's title was an essential ingredient. "Even if you didn't see the movie, you'd see two words you'd never seen put together before -- comedy and Muslim. Comedy is friendly -- it's the least offensive word in our language."

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After the Newsweek/Koran incident, Lynton told Bing he wanted a title change. "I was so upset I was throwing up at 3 a.m.," Brooks recalls. "It felt wrong -- it defeated the whole idea of why I went to India in the first place." Bing took the film to Warner, where he'd put up half the money for "The Polar Express" and has a long-standing relationship with studio chief Alan Horn. After Horn watched Brooks' film and gave his blessing, Warner Independent picked it up.

So why is one studio willing to embrace the film while another studio runs and hides? In fairness to Sony, it has every right to reject any movie it wants. Lynton may have his own personal reasons for being gun-shy. Disney refused to let Miramax release "Fahrenheit 9/11" last year, largely because Michael Eisner didn't want to deal with the potential political fallout from its attack on the Bush administration. None of the major Hollywood studios would release Mel Gibson's "Passion of the Christ" either, fearing a barrage of criticism.

The truth is that we live in an era when the political agendas of most media conglomerates are shaped by their core businesses, which often have little to do with Hollywood. Rupert Murdoch famously refused to publish a book critical of the Chinese government at a time when he needed Chinese access for his satellite TV network. In the 1990s, Time Warner mortally wounded its music division by selling off Interscope Records and getting out of the rap business, largely because it feared that gangsta-rap controversies would harm its relations with Congress, whose largesse it needed for its more lucrative cable TV business.

When we spoke, Brooks eyed a Sony Trinitron TV set in the corner of his office. "Sony makes televisions -- and everything comes after that," he says. "Time Warner is an entertainment company. They don't make TVs. My impression was that if I got in the way of Sony selling one more TV set somewhere, I was out of there."

Brooks, like me, is alarmed that Sony and other studios seem so unconcerned about the dumb, sexist image of America their comedies project to the the world. "We export films that are full of sleazy [penis] jokes and toilet humor -- that's why we've earned the affectionate nickname of the Great Satan," he says. "What's seemingly benign, by our standards, is doing more damage to us around the world than anything I could ever do." Soon Brooks is on a comic roll, wondering "if we actually find advanced life on another planet whether they'll be as obsessed with their own genitals as we are."

Comedy is not just a laughing matter. For years, great American artists, from Mark Twain to Richard Pryor to Jon Stewart, have used humor to expose our foibles and help us grapple with our differences. Even today, the popular Egyptian comic actor, Adel Imam, is starring in "The Embassy Is in the Building," a movie that uses comedy to pursue a serious premise -- that making peace with Israel is a viable political option. The movie is a hit in Egypt. And the fact that a comedian can raise an issue that's too hot for Egypt's political leadership to touch shows just how much influence laughter can wield. It lets us see the world -- and our fears -- in a fresh light.

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Brooks' movie may not have the box-office potential of an Adam Sandler comedy, but at least it has something to say about our world, which is why Sony's refusal to release it is so dispiriting. If Sony is this timid about a well-intentioned comedy, imagine how timid it will be when something really volatile comes along.

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