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So an Imam Walks Into a Mosque . . .

By [DAVE KEHR](#)

Published: January 8, 2006

FRESHLY returned from the Middle East, where his new film, "[Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World](#)" had its world premiere as part of the second annual Dubai International Film Festival, [Albert Brooks](#) sounded exhausted, elated and relieved.

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Lacey Terrell/Shangri-La Entertainment
In "Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World," Mr. Brooks plays a comic on a somewhat dubious government mission.

"This had never happened before," said Mr. Brooks from Los Angeles. "There's been no other American comedy that's made light of anything after 9/11. Nobody knows what will happen. The audience could stand up and walk out, they could boo, who knows? I don't have any road map here. I was told that, 'We think it will be O.K.,' but I was also told that people don't mince words here. If you hit the nail wrongly, it's like your thumb: you know it right away."

In truth, Mr. Brooks's is not the first attempt to wring humor from the post 9/11 political environment. There was the eager if ideologically scrambled "[Team America: World Police](#)" from Trey Parker and Matt Stone, the creators of "South Park," and "The Daily Show" has made "Mess-o-Potamia" a catch phrase. But it may be the first post-9/11 comedy to pass up broad satire for a more humanistic, interpersonal approach - with all the attendant

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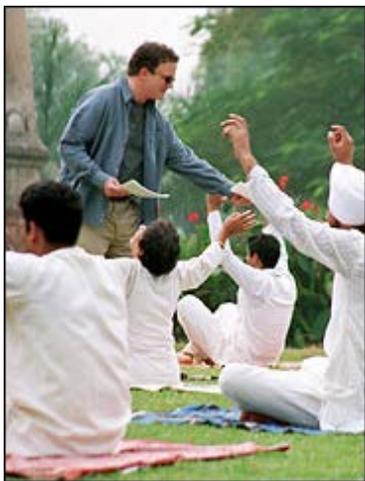
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Lacey Terrell/Shangri-La Entertainment
"I had the head of a studio telling me that this would cause a fatwa," Albert Brooks says.

risks.

"Looking for Comedy" is rooted in a solid, unbendable sense of reality that Mr. Brooks has cultivated since his first feature, "[Real Life](#)," in 1979. A radical stylist among comedy filmmakers, Mr. Brooks shuns punch lines and emphatic editing in favor of long takes

and wide framing, a technique that allows the inherent absurdity of a situation to emerge on its own. And for Mr. Brooks, there is nothing quite as absurd as a narcissistic professional who finds his hermetic view of the world challenged by the world itself.

In "Real Life," Mr. Brooks plays a character named "Albert Brooks," a comedian whose career has entered an ominously quiet phase. Trying to get things back on track, he persuades a middle-class family in a Phoenix suburb to let him film their lives as they unfold (a reference to the 1973 PBS series "An American Family"), but ends up burning their house down in an attempt to pump some entertainment value (he's thinking "[Gone With the Wind](#)") into the dull spectacle of quotidian existence.

His character in "Looking for Comedy" could be a direct extension of that earlier Albert: his career again in the doldrums (the opening scene finds him being rejected by the director [Penny Marshall](#) for a remake of "[Harvey](#)"), he is selected by the retired Tennessee senator Fred Thompson (also playing himself) for a high-level government mission: Albert is to travel to India and Pakistan, where he's to research and write a 500-page report on what, if anything, tickles the Subcontinental funny bone. There's no money in it, Senator Thompson tells Albert, but there is the possibility of a big, shiny medal.

At the Dubai premiere, Mr. Brooks said: "We were told right before the screening that Sheik [Abdullah](#) bin Zaid al-Nahayan, who's the minister of information of the United Arab Emirates, would be flying in from Abu Dhabi to see the film. And people are saying: 'Do you know what this means? He never goes anywhere.' O.K., all right, good - now, I'm even more worried. I thought, oh, my God - if the sheik walks out, that means they all have to walk out together, you know? I asked the theater manager if he had a CD of 'Exodus' just in case - we could play the theme while everyone leaves. He didn't know what I was talking about."

Neither do most of the locals whom the fictional Albert encounters as he conducts his oblivious, self-absorbed investigation, aided by a pair of State Department functionaries ([John Carroll](#) Lynch and Jon Tenney) and a wide-eyed young Indian woman (Sheetal Sheth) whom Albert hires as his translator. Desperate to fill his 500-page

quota, Albert gathers data by staging a stand-up performance (no one laughs), paying a visit to the local Al Jazeera bureau (it asks him to audition for a sitcom called "That Darn Jew") and slipping over the border into Pakistan, where he meets with an underground group of would-be comics (they do laugh, but then, they seem to be smoking something other than fruit-flavored tobacco in their water pipes).

Before the Dubai screening began, Mr. Brooks took the stage for an introduction. "I said I thought the festival was important," he later recalled, "and I do - I don't know where else in the Middle East I'd be invited to show this movie at this particular time. And I said: 'I have to be honest with you, a lot of my friends asked me: 'Why are you doing this? Aren't you scared?'" So I looked them in the eye and I said, 'But I'm not scared!' They liked that."

Mr. Brooks may not have been frightened, but Sony Pictures, the film's original distributor, dropped it after he declined to change its title in the face of widespread Muslim anger over a Newsweek report, since retracted, that American interrogators at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, had flushed a Koran down a toilet. As Patrick Goldstein reported in The Los Angeles Times, Michael Lynton, the chairman and chief executive of Sony Pictures Entertainment, wrote in a letter to Mr. Brooks, "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."

According to Mr. Brooks, Steve Bing, one of the film's producers, was able to find the film a home at Warner Independent Pictures. The movie is set to open in New York on Jan. 20.

"The film is actually a skewering of our own lack of cultural understanding, and it comes at a time that is extremely sensitive and therefore it is all the more timely," said Mark Gill, Warner Independent's president, in an e-mail message.

Mr. Brooks said: "So I had the head of a studio telling me that this would cause a fatwa. But then, you've got to start somewhere. I didn't know what to expect. If I had gotten three or four polite laughs and no one walked out, I was willing to consider the film a success."

[Aljazeera.net](http://www.aljazeera.net), the Web site of the satellite news channel, ran a Reuters story reporting that "Looking for Comedy" "received mixed reviews from audiences in Dubai," but quoted only one filmgoer: "Zeinab, 18, from the United Arab Emirates, said: 'It was different from the usual movies we see from America. It's good to show others cultures of the world.' "

Mr. Brooks, though, perceived a more enthusiastic reaction: "There's that scene where they call me to Washington, and they explain that Pakistan is all Muslim and I say, 'But I thought India was primarily Hindu.' Somebody at the table says, 'There's almost 150 million Muslims in India alone' and Fred Thompson says, 'Is that enough for you?' They went crazy! I thought, I passed the test, it's O.K.! The sheik is laughing; he's talking to the guy next to him in Arabic and pointing at the screen. And no one walked out!"

Some of the Arab press, Mr. Brooks said, questioned his decision to set the film in India and Pakistan rather than an Arab country. "I said, 'Well, if you can get me permission to shoot in Saudi Arabia, let me know,' " he said. "Because it was not happening when I was

making calls. That was shut down within five minutes, with 'What, are you insane?' They're not going to let a Jewish man, much less a filmmaker, in there. That's just not going to happen. But I wanted the conflict between the two countries. I knew in writing this that I wanted to take two existing powers that are always suspicious of each other, and that was the one place you could do that. The idea was always that I go to do a peace mission, and I almost start World War III."

Azhar Usman - a Muslim stand-up comedian who organized "Allah Made Me Funny," a touring show of Muslim comics that began in Toronto in May and continues in Montreal, Ottawa and Santa Clara, Calif., this month - says Mr. Brooks "has a point." Comedy in the Muslim world (Arab or otherwise) can indeed be hard to find. "Today, stand-up comedians just don't really exist," Mr. Usman said. "But they did once. I have albums from the 70's. The big, towering guy from Pakistan is called Moin Akhtar, and another guy, who was his contemporary, was Umar Sharif. And there was a guy in India who was really famous, who used the name Johnny Lever. They basically did one-man shows, with a lot of improv and sketch comedy, but with a small portion of what we would call stand-up."

Their style of comedy, Mr. Usman said, would not be unfamiliar to viewers of "Seinfeld": "There's a lot of family humor, things about the difference between men and women, jabs at politicians - daily life, situational stuff. The notion that a Muslim audience wouldn't have the vaguest notion of what stand-up comedy or improvisation was is utterly false."

Once Mr. Brooks chose India as his setting, he visited the minister of information. "He told me that [Steven Spielberg](#) had wanted to shoot 'Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom' there, and they wouldn't allow it, because they didn't like the scene where they ate monkey brains," Mr. Brooks said. "I said, 'I don't do that,' and I think they were really appreciative that I didn't have the whole scene where the cow stops traffic. They've seen that so much, and they hate it."

Most of the Indian actors in the film were cast locally, the main exception being Ms. Sheth, a first-generation Indian-American who starred in the independent films "[ABCD](#)" and "[American Chai](#)." "I've been going to India since I was a kid, for long periods of time," she said. "I certainly can't speak for someone who was born and raised there, but I certainly feel that I am very connected to the culture."

"I get nervous when I hear people are doing something about India, because usually it's done with so little intelligence," Ms. Sheth said. "But when I met Albert, I knew right away how great he was going to be in terms of slipping the stereotypes around. He really took care to be true and authentic, to show things right."

To a large extent, the reach for authenticity occurs at Mr. Brooks's, and his countrymen's, expense: much of the ignorance of his character may be feigned, but the film is also an honest attempt to approach our current national "other" - "Your mother thinks Muslim is a fabric," says Albert to his wife (Amy Ryan) - and find the human being beneath.

"Especially with this last year, with tragedy after tragedy after

tragedy, people are tired," said Ms. Sheth. "It's nice to deal with the same issues in a different way, add a little humor to it, realize how silly we can all be, realize how ignorant we all are in this, and not be weighed down. I think they would love this film in India. Seeing people like themselves on screen, shown with some heart and intelligence and dignity - that would be welcomed."

For all of the serious intent behind "Looking for Comedy," Mr. Brooks is not clearing space on his mantle for a Nobel: "Would I ever be capable of making a movie where, at the end, it brings Israel and the Palestinians to the peace table?" he said. "I don't know. My best idea came in a short film I did for 'Saturday Night Live,' where I suggested that Israel move to Georgia. What's more important is that you're elevating this into the green zone, where you can make fun. And now it takes its place alongside everything else you can make fun of - politics or Jews or bad food or anything. If that happens, then that's really a healthy sign. That actually is something."

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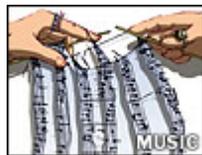
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