

Film Review

looking for comedy in the muslim world

Albert Brooks. *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World*. Kintop Pictures (starring Albert Brooks and Sheetal Sheth), 2005.

Reviewed by Tara Kolton

In choosing a title like *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World* for his new film, Albert Brooks creates a fair amount of expectation from viewers. Firstly we expect some sort of active looking, we expect some humour, and we certainly hope for insight of some kind into this 'Muslim world.' While on the surface, Brooks' film is about just what the title suggests, that the film is devoid of any pointed political or religious commentary, or really any comical content (other than determining what is indeed not funny to Muslims in India), is made all the more perplexing by this 'provocative' title.

There is curiously little searching taking place in *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World*. As Brooks' journey progresses, Brooks and company seem to expect the answers to be brought to them. Whether or not the idea that the comedy should come to him is supposed to be an intentional reflection of America's attitude towards the "Muslim world" is unclear. If it is, it's a point rendered too obvious and simplistic throughout the film.

Albert Brooks plays Albert Brooks, who is unexpectedly summoned to complete a 'national project' for the U.S. Government: spend a month in the Muslim world (in this case, India and Pakistan), and return with a 500-page report on what Muslims find funny, in order to "improve relations" between the two worlds. While it's a potentially absorbing premise, any hope for genuinely humorous encounters and revelations are thus rapidly quelled. Of course it's a ridiculous and simplistic assumption that one person could define any entire cultural or religious community's sense of humour, and this absurdity is certainly reflected during the introduction of the film as Brooks meets with a U.S. senator who claims that George W. Bush has a "great sense of humor." But what we absorb from this encounter is enough to take away with us for the rest of the film, as what follows as Brooks journeys to India (and Pakistan for a quantity of 4 hours to meet with a bunch of stoned, would-be Pakistani comedians) fails to focus on the people in more depth than an array of multiplied American clichés of both Indians and Muslims.

Though shot on location in India, the whole film is glossed over with a Hollywood sheen, and actors playing Indian Muslims spew out lines that could have only been written by an American screenwriter. It's never quite clear if the Hollywood aesthetics of this film are an intentional way of reflecting Brooks' (and the Western world's)



imposition upon the East in demanding definitive answers within a month for the U.S.' own benefit, or whether some of the insipid stereotypes are meant to be just that. Furthermore, it's hard to get a read on how we're to accept Brooks' version of himself - mostly he remains the clueless American, and the funniest moments of the film come as a result of his own (lack of a) star-image; he is unknown in Muslim India except for as a fish in *Finding Nemo* (2003). In India his comedy falters and doesn't quite translate; here he becomes that proverbial fish-out-of-water.

As Brooks fails to identify any consistency in humour amongst Muslims, we more troublingly fail to gain any real insight into India or its Muslim community beyond stereotypes with which we are already familiar. Brooks hires the dutiful Maya (Sheetal Sheth), a pretty and impeccably well-dressed young Indian woman. We're supposed to accept and find funny that this accomplished woman with a Master's degree is completely unacquainted with sarcasm - an apparent cultural difference. Another missed punchline comes as we pass the office next door to Brooks', crammed with Indian, English-speaking phone operators who answer the computer help-lines of overseas Americans; I found this no more funny than simply visually filling out that middle-class American complaint that they can never understand the Indian accents of computer-operators when they call for help. However, the point here is obvious - that America continues to exploit those overseas from afar, while their accolades and accumulated degrees would be rendered useless should they venture over to the U.S. in search of work. But as we follow Brooks along his journey we are unsure what to make of these criticisms. He neither grows much as a person (walking past the Taj Mahal without noticing it), nor does he completely obliviously waltz away from India. In the end what we are to assume about Brooks' failed project is a mystery that one barely cares to solve.

As Brooks returns to the U.S. with less than 4-typed report pages, little discovered, and a political crisis left in his wake, we perceive that indeed, the U.S. is an oblivious, world-exploiting nation, its attempts to understand 'the Other' selfish and misguided; but didn't we know that already? Here we have a film with an interesting premise, but Brooks doesn't seem to know where he should go with it, and we are left with an astonishingly conventional film about the Muslim world, which lacks the punch, insight, and humour that its title promises us. ☺