

ALADDIN ANIMATED RACISM

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A L A D D I N ANIMATED RACISM

by Jack Shaheen

A *laddin*, the most financially successful Disney film ever and a winner of two Academy Awards, provides a painful reminder that unconscious racism is still alive and well in Hollywood. Yes, this thirty-first animated Disney feature is whimsical, which means some allowance must be made for comedic license. Yes, any film that has a humorous theme is entitled to poke fun at a culture's foibles. But *Aladdin*, a \$35 million film aimed at children, crosses the racist line in no uncertain terms. Consider the film's opening song, "Arabian Nights." It is belted out by a shady-looking *al-rawi* (storyteller) sitting atop a camel crossing the desert. The ditty goes like this:

*Oh I come from a land
From a faraway place
Where the caravan camels roam.
Where they cut off your ear
If they don't like your face.
It's barbaric, but hey, it's home.*

The viewer can't say, "Hey, that's just Hollywood," for this song effectively slanders the heritage of 300,000,000 Arabs. One would have to be very naive to believe that Hollywood would dare to use such a song if it did not see Arabs as belonging to an 'other' or 'alien' culture. Successive themes drive home the view that these creatures are suspicious, lazy, unethical, and violent outsiders. 'They' most definitely are not like 'us.'

This Disney rendering of Aladdin's adventures is set in the mythical desert kingdom of "Agrabah," a stereotypical Arabland. Complete with a foreboding desert castle featuring Arabesque cupolas and surrounded by poverty and intrigue, Arabland is inhabited mainly by thieves, harem girls, and unscrupulous vendors. The merchant image sets the general tone. No merchants are shown to have any charitable instincts and their appearance and behavior are modeled after the Sultan's cruel and dim-witted sentinels.



The Genie, Aladdin and Princess Jasmine are seen as the 'good Arabs'...

Arabland's other disturbing characteristics raise any number of questions. Why are Arabic names mispronounced? Why are storefront signs written in nonsensical scribble-scratch rather than a real language? Why do the palace guards and merchants have large, bulbous noses, sinister eyes, and idiotic accents? Why do the hero and heroine, Aladdin and Princess Jasmine, look and speak so differently than other Arabs? In this 'family entertainment,' what impression of Islam is conveyed when a street vendor insists that the standard penalty for stealing is chopping off one's hand? How will children judge a society in which hideous guards chase a homeless Aladdin because he stole bread, and still other hideous guards threaten to cut off Jasmine's hand for taking an apple to give to a starving child? What concept of justice is conveyed when a cruel guard screams at Aladdin, "I'll have your head for a trophy, you sewer rat!"

Just as Aladdin's genies serve as serfs-to-the-lamp, Hollywood's filmmakers seem to serve as serfs-to-the-Arab demonizers. The celluloid caricatures of *Aladdin* effectively reinforce the media image of Arab terrorists and religious fanatics. And the Disney studio knows better. Disney Chairman Jeffrey Katzenberg has said, "Each of us in Hollywood has the opportunity to assume individual responsibility for creating films that elevate rather than denigrate, that shed light rather than dwell in darkness, that aim for the highest common denominator rather than the lowest."

I would remember those words if I were ever fortunate enough to come across an enchanted lamp with a genie able to grant three wishes. My first wish would be to have the Disney studio make films that fulfill the stated ideals of its executives. My second wish would be that all other Hollywood producers did likewise. My third would be that reviews of this kind would never again be needed. ■



...while the evil Jaffer and his cohorts reinforce the worst anti-Arab prejudices.

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