

# Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World (2005)

Rated PG-13. Our ratings: V-2 ; L- 1; S/N-2 . Running time: 1 hour 38 min.

*Now Sarah said, 'God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.' And she said, 'Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.'*

*Genesis 21:6-7*

Those looking for the raucous humor of *The Producers* might be disappointed by the film *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World* from the other Brooks, Albert. However, they would do themselves a disservice by avoiding it just because a number of critics have been less than enthusiastic about the film. Albert Brooks' comedy is far gentler than that of Mel Brooks, and his poking fun at the assumptions and politics of our culture is far subtler. For those given to thinking about their film fare, *Looking For Comedy* can provide an opportunity for considering the question of why do we laugh.

In the opening scene Brooks makes himself the butt of humor, with the absurd idea that he might be cast in the lead of a remake of the classic Jimmy Stewart movie *Harvey*. Penny Marshall, playing herself, goes through a pro forma casting

interview with Brooks, also playing himself, but quickly points him to the door. Returning home very disappointed to his (fictional) wife and daughter, Brooks is puzzled to see a registered letter from the U.S. State Department. It turns out to be an invitation from a task force set up to oversee a project designed to help our government better understand the Muslim world. Meeting with them in Washington, Brooks is entrusted with the mission of discovering what it is that makes Muslims laugh, the theory being that the answer to the question will help our country better communicate with the Muslim world.

Brooks arrives in the first of the two countries he is to visit, India, and then Pakistan, where two American operatives meet him, Stuart (John Carroll Lynch) and Mark (Jon Tenney). Being government agents, of course, their own sense of humor is very under-developed. In the dingy offices they have leased for him, Brooks interviews a succession of candidates for secretary/office manager, few of whom can type or take shorthand. They brush aside any lack of skills, saying that they wanted to come to work for a famous American—by the way, who is he?

Finally Brooks hires the lovely young Maya (Sheetal Sheth), who is very eager, but unable at first to appreciate her employer's humor because of a lack of understanding American culture. Soon, however, she is learning what irony and sarcasm are, and gradually tumbles to the humor of Brooks' remarks. Going out into the crowds, Brooks discovers that the only part of his fame recognizable by anyone is his voicing of the fish in Finding Nemo. Many refuse to answer his question, "What makes you laugh?" or their answers are convoluted and hard for Maya, acting as scribe, to take down. Her notes are important, because Brooks is required to submit a 500-page report on his findings. (Anything shorter, he is told, would not be taken seriously by the State department.)

Brooks stages a stand-up comedy concert in a school auditorium

on the theory that what the audience laughs at, or fails to laugh at, will yield more insights than his random questioning of people in the streets. His meeting with the janitor and stage technician is a marvel of cultural miscommunication, and the reaction of the 400 people in the audience is a delight—or should we say, their lack of reaction. And yet later, when Brooks is led blindfolded across the Pakistani border late at night for a clandestine meeting, the same material provokes loud laughter from a group of bearded comedians in training. This very illegal excursion also leads to the intelligence services on both sides of the border wondering what nefarious activity the stranger from America is up to, their conclusions being ludicrously off the mark. This film cries out to be seen and discussed by an adult or mature youth group. For those who have purchased my “Gospel and Comedy Retreat Kit,” the film will be a welcome addition to the other suggested films.

## **For Reflection/Discussion**

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1) Ask yourself (or go around the group) the question Albert Brooks poses: “What is it that makes you laugh?” This is a question that many thinkers (but seldom comedians themselves) have asked, with various answers offered. One is that laughter results from the gap between expectation and reality, or the sudden unexpected reversal of the expected. Charlie Chaplin is a tramp, an outsider, but he aspires to be successful and accepted, so he dresses in bowler hat, tattered formal clothing, and carries a cane. Or, in our passage from Genesis (read the story of the visit of the three angels in Genesis 18:1-15 that sets up the actual birth story in Genesis 21), what is the age of Sarah and Abraham when Isaac (Laughter) is born? What is the gap between the normal birth age of parents and the actual one of the couple? In the movie itself, where is the humor in Brooks meeting with the staff of Al Jazeera? That is, what is the gap in his expectations and theirs?

2) How do Brooks and Maya discover that cultural context is vital to “getting” the humor? In Brooks’ Improvisation skit how is the very process of changing all the suggestions from the audience a part of the humor? Why was the audience so puzzled? Do you think they understood his bringing in everything at the climax?

3) Much is made of the length of the report that Brooks is supposed to submit at the end of his mission. What is the point that no one would take seriously a shorter report? Of the remark of a taskforce member, “Don’t worry. They don’t read them, they just weigh them”? What does this say about the endless numbers of reports issued by our government? Does this happen in business or church also? For instance, how many of the lengthy reports that committees and task forces of your national church issue after every denominational gathering have you read? (Or want to read.)

4) The aspiring Muslim comedians laugh at all the places where the Indian audience did not: why do you think this is so? Or is this part of Brooks’ humor?

5) What do the characters miss seeing when they are so engrossed in conversation? What variations of this have you seen? (Remember in E.T. when Mom was totally unaware of the presence of E.T. in the kitchen?) Why is this kind of thing so funny? What does this suggest about us and our awareness?

6) What do you think Brooks is getting at in the scenes involving the intelligence services of the Indians and the Pakistanis? How is this counter to the way that the CIA has been pictured so often in Hollywood spy thrillers? Which might be closer to “reality,” Brooks’ lampoons, or the sober depiction in thrillers? How did 9/11 show that the intelligence community, with all of its gadgetry, is not so all knowing, or even competent, as it puts out that it is.

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