

## ~Diwan~

**Jack Shaheen**

Zeldes: (10:35:02:00) First and last name and your title please.

Shaheen: (10:35:03:03) Shaheen. Jack. Author.

Zeldes: (10:35:10:27) Tell us a little bit about your background...your family background to start with.

Shaheen: (10:35:18:00) Well, my family...

\*\*\*Cell phone interruption\*\*\*

Shaheen: (10:35:51:10) I was born in Pittsburgh and my family lived right outside of Pittsburgh, a small town called Clairton. The Clairton Bears. C-L-A-I-R-T-O-N. Had the largest Coke works in the world. There was a huge steel mill in Clairton. And my grandparents immigrated from Lebanon before World War One to Brazil. And my mother was born in Rio, but my grandmother had two miscarriages in Brazil and convinced my grandfather to pack his bags and return to Lebanon. Well, as soon as they returned World War One broke out, which were difficult times for anyone in the Middle East in terms of enough food to eat, they were taking young men and putting them into the military to fight with the Turks against the Allies. But somehow they managed to survive that and right after World War One came to the States. Packed his bags again. My mother had spent several years of her life in Lebanon and then immigrated to Clairton. And I grew up in a—it was a beautiful environment, actually. It was a sort of an ethnic tabouli. I never say melting pot, because melting pot to me never describes America. I always say tabouli because tabouli is one of the world's healthiest salads and I think of my country as tabouli. And we had people there from different colors, creeds, cultures and they all interacted in steel mills. And so I was very fortunate, in a sense, that I became exposed to prejudices that I thought never existed among my black friends. It was a segregated town but an integrated school. And the integration in school, of course, was another reality. I mean, the segregation we weren't exposed to, most of us never saw that, it was on the other side of town. I did see it because my grandfather worked in the mills and when he wasn't working in the steel mills, he went peddling and I would drive him, and I would always drive him to different parts of the city. And one section of the city that I was exposed to was the African-American sector. And so there was always an increased sensitivity that was never taught but was part of my upbringing in terms of never vilifying a people because of their color, their creed or their culture. And our home was like a fast food restaurant. And there were always people coming, and this is true I think with most Arab American families at this time. There's always visitors—the insurance salesman, the milkman, the fellow who delivered the milk, next door neighbors coming in and out. And I had interacted with all kinds of people at that particular time. And then, of course, I worked the steel mills, I had all kinds of jobs—you know paper boy—you name it, I did it. You were never asked to go to work, but you knew, sort of inbred, that you should work to help the family. And that's, of course, what we all did. I was raised primarily by my mother, and I have a brother and a sister, and my grandparent, three uncles, three aunts who took care of us. We all lived in one house—twelve people. And on the other side of the house was a little grocery store, that switched from a grocery store to a candy store to an ice cream shop. And that's why when I was very young I was a great football player because I was roly-

poly from all the ice cream and all the candy when I worked in the store, you see. No one ever went through me, they always went around me because I was pretty chunky at the time. And so it was a wonderful opportunity to really get to know people and to understand people. There was never a word spoken in our family to demean someone because of where they worshipped or because of the color of their skin. And it think, of course, when you're young you're not aware of that. But, I think, as I moved into adulthood that that helped me tremendously.

Zeldes: (10:40:32:04) I found an interview of you by John Donvan on Nightline, several years ago. And you mentioned that you started noticing stereotypes when you saw cartoons. Is that when you started looking at stereotypes?

Shaheen: (10:40:47:06) Well I was always sensitive to stereotypes and the vilification of others early on, particularly African Americans, because of my friends in high school. You know, the dual reality of the school where we were all—we could do things together in the school. We played together, we fought, you know, but we lived at separate parts of the city. And then, of course, when I was in the military, I went to Dockhall, came very very sensitive to what happened to the Jews during World War Two. And all of this, it sort of helps shape you, without, again without realizing it. And I became aware of the Arab stereotype primarily because I kept seeing these images on television of these people wearing funny costumes doing outrageous things. And all of a sudden I began thinking, “Maybe I have Arab roots”, you know. But, of course, I was Christian, I was not Muslim. And television historically has only vilified Arab-Muslims. And when my children started noticing cartoons, like they ran up the steps, “Daddy, daddy, they’ve got bad Arabs on!” I think then as a young married man with a family, with two children, who all of a sudden were aware of their heritage, who went to a Catholic school, and who were sort of harassed a little for the first time because of a scholastic magazine article on Palestinians as terrorists. And they came running home and said, “Are we Palestinian or Lebanese?” Because my wife has Palestinian roots and I have Lebanese roots. And I said, “Well, you’re not—you’re American, first of all. And secondly, you have both roots in both countries. And they said, “But that’s hard to explain, we need a word.” So my son came up with “Lebastinian.” And my daughter said, “No not for her.” She wanted to be “Palanese.” So she was a Palanese American and my son was a Lebastinian American. And those were the terms that they used. But the children helped, I mean, they really helped, because then I realized that it was coming very very close to home. As a young man growing up in Clairton, I never experienced the sting of prejudice, never. My grandfather, as I said, he used to go door-to-door selling linens when he wasn’t working in the steel mills. His best friend was a Jewish merchant in Pittsburgh. He would always take me with him, I always went with him. And it was just not part of that particular time. Now I’m talking from the mid-‘30s until the mid-‘50s...or maybe even the late ‘50s, where I experienced this kind of innocence, in a fact. And I didn’t experience either, not even in the military, when I was in the military, from ’58 to 1960. But the issue of stereotypes, I worked for the government for three years, from 1960 to ’63 in West Germany in West Berlin, at that time that’s what it was called. And I remember shattering stereotypes of American GIs. Presenting to Germans, American soldiers who could sing, who could play classical piano, who could entertain. I created a Berlin International Theater Group that involved Berliners, the French, the British, the Americans. And we did plays for Berliners, which just amazed the people of Berlin. I mean, here we were, the GI civilians, all interacting, performing stage plays in the middle of a divided city—divided city that was really suffering in many ways. And that you couldn’t leave, you were trapped in West Berlin because they had built the wall in 1961—they started the wall in 1961 and they continued to fortify it. So all of these incidents in

one's life, I think, help shape, help form one's approach to an issue, again, without being aware of it. You're never consciously aware.

Zeldes: (10:45:12:00) Now how did—or when did those sensitivities lead to your analysis of the Arab in films and in other media?

Shaheen: (10:45:22:10) Well, looking at the Arab image in popular culture came about as a result of a Fulbright Grant received electorship to go to the American University in Beirut. And I spent a year there with a family, traveled extensively to different parts of the Arab world. Went to my first mosque, and you know, realized that the prayers and the mosque were not like the prayers I saw on television. Now this may sound very naïve, here I am in my mid-30s, experiencing this for the first time, uhh, interacting with Muslims for the first time, coming across Palestinian camps in the south of Lebanon that were under attack by, you know, by the Israelis and seeing some of the devastation and the destruction, going to Canaytra and Syria. All of these things, I think, had an impact on me. And of course, when I came back I rushed to the library looking for material on how Arabs were projected, you know, in comic books, in television, on film, and there was nothing. And you know for an academic, that's that's, it's good news and bad news. Good news in the sense, where's the material that you can quote? I mean, and and, you had the, where can I get the material? And so, again it was fortunate because the material came from reading about the denigration of other groups: Jews, Asians, Blacks, women, gays, all of these things helped and so I immediately embraced that literature and I began looking at how Arabs were portrayed on television. I wrote my first article in '75. Three years later it was published...more than 50 rejection letters. The article that was published was pretty much the same, the article that was published in '78 was almost identical to the one I has written in '75. There was so much prejudice out there, which only made me more determined. Very very difficult, you know, as an academic you know when you've written something that's right...you do know...and I knew this should be published, and I couldn't get anyone to publish it. And then all of a sudden, all of my research projects at the university, you know, I was doing extremely well, I was on the fast-track for promotion, I had the Fulbright, I was doing research in public broadcasting, the undersea world of Jacques Cousteau, I'd gotten a couple of grants to study with Cousteau, I was also looking at nuclear war films: How did Hollywood project nuclear war in the cinema. I was the first to come out with a book on nuclear war films in the 1970s. So no one was going to tell me that I couldn't get anything published on images of Arabs, particularly when we had all of this other literature. But then my colleagues, or some of my colleagues stopped, I was no longer the professor from Pittsburgh...I was no longer the Pittsburgh Steeler advocate on campus...I became the "Arab Professor." Whenever I'd go, I remember when I came here to Michigan once and I spoke in Flint, the stories: "Arab Professor in Town." I was furious because the "Arab" was not meant in a complimentary manner, it was negative. How dare they label me like that. And my topic, incidentally, when I spoke at Flint, was on stereotypes of all groups, not just Arab stereotypes. So I think the rejections, prejudices, the fact that my research proposals at the University were scrapped and I couldn't get funding, or I couldn't get released time, or research time, made me that much more determined, but it was not easy. I mean, whenever anything happened in the Middle East and I spoke out, I was advised not to say anything. My barber, who was like my best friend, you know, one day when I was the only one in the shop, told me not to say anything, that there were people in town that said you should go back where you came from. Okay, I'll go back to Pittsburgh if that's what they want me to do. And all I'm talking about, mind you, I'm not talking about the political process, I mean, I'm talking about the dehumanization of a people. And yet that was enough to really get

people to attach a label and a label that was intended to damage me personally and professionally. And that's how it started.

Zeldes: (10:50:07:20) Who's the title of the article that was published in '78?

Shaheen: (10:50:11:05) I think it was called "The T.V. Arab." Same title that I used for the book that was and it was in the Christian century. And then a few, maybe a month later, I edited that article and miracle of miracles happened: The Wall Street Journal published it. It was in October 1978.

Zeldes: (10:50:34:00) Okay, and then.

Shaheen: (10:50:35:25) The Wall Street Journal would never publish such an article today. (\*Laughing\*) I would probably bet the mortgage on my house they wouldn't do it today. But they did in 1978 to, their credit.

Zeldes: (10:50:47:20) Okay, and now take us to "Real Bad Arab."

Shaheen: (10:50:51:05) I wanted to bring in one other thing.

Zeldes: (10:50:52:15) Okay.

Shaheen (10:50:52:00) And I think this is important for history. And I'd forgotten about it, until now. I was on New York when the Wall Street Journal article came out. And I had a meeting with an NBC executive. And the meeting was concerning the vilification of Arabs on television. And I remember walking into her office. And she had one of her colleagues there who attacked me, basically, and said I was an anti-Semitic. Who just--one verbal abuse after another. Of course now, I was young, I was not prepared for this and I remember watching this executive sit there, almost grinning as this man attacked me—Boom! Boom! Boom!—one verbal barrage after another. And I remember walking out of her office shaking, just literally shaking. And I think I had a tape recorder, because at that time, I wanted to interview her, and of course the interview never took place. But I remember recording my thoughts and my emotions, I have no idea where that tape is, now I should really look for it. Based on that attack, as a means again to perhaps silence me, to not allow me to continue my work, but I—I—I—I couldn't believe it. Because here was a woman at NBC—I know her name, I won't tell you her name, doesn't matter—who had been corresponding with me, who had been very polite, who seemed very cooperative and who basically set me up to be attacked in her office in New York.

Zeldes: (10:52:46:00) Now take us to "Real Bad Arabs."

\*\*\*Photographer/Camera Operator Interruption\*\*\*: (10:52:49:15) Give me a second before you do, okay, if that's okay.

Zeldes: (10:52:50:00) Okay, sure.

Shaheen: (10:52:53:20) That's interesting that I had forgotten about that.

Zeldes: (10:52:56:05) Hmm...it's peculiar how things come back.

Shaheen: (10:53:00:00) Yeah, it was. How I had thought of the journal article and I remember I was in New York and I was so happy and I was taking the journal article to share with her and that's when it happened, that's when it took place.

\*\*\*Photographer/Camera Operator Interruption\*\*\*: (10:53:13:00) Okay.

Shaheen: (10:53:16:00) And then a few years after that I decided to write the “TV Arab,” which was based on eight years of television research. Uhh, it only took about three years for that to get published. And uhh from the “TV Arab” right after that came out I began working on “Real Bad Arabs,” that was in the mid-‘80s. I thought for sure within a few years I’d have a book on Hollywood’s movie Arabs. But, you know, after 200 films—then 300—then 400—I kept finding more and more films. And going from one research institution in Wisconsin to New York to Los Angeles to the Library of Congress, reading just about every film review that had ever been published on all films, looking for names of characters, doing computer searches until I finally came up with close to a thousand films, which by the way I watched. I watched 99 percent of the films. And I watched them, and I documented this because I didn’t want anyone ever to say that it was not accurate. I had to be absolutely certain. I didn’t have any research assistants with me but my wife—my right arm, I don’t call her my research associate. I mean, she was my wife, and she helped me find the films and worked in conjunction with what I did. So I would look at each film two or three times, take notes, revise the notes, et cetera, et cetera. And the result was, the reason I took early renewal from the university, was to finish the book. I couldn’t finish it because all of the courses that I taught had nothing to do with my research—nothing—they were basic courses in mass communication, everything from broadcast writing, to criticism in the public arts, to history of radio and television, to international broadcasting. So the research had to be done after teaching, after I taught, and after I kept my office hours. So I left the university in the late, well, I was 58—to finish the book.

Zeldes: (10:55:28:20) And can you go over some of your findings in the book.

Shaheen: (10:55:31:20) Well, I found that basically, now there are, I’ve come up with 12-hundred films, I found an additional 200. The book came out in ’91. And all Arabs were villains and they fell into certain categories: Maidens...Palestinians.. Egyptians...Shakes. And then there’s one category I call “Cameo,” or gratuitous slurs and scenes. Where 25—maybe 28 percent of the films that I found would have derogatory remarks or scenes directed at Arabs in movies having nothing to do with the Middle East, nothing to do. All of a sudden you’d be watching a film and they would inject a scene or they would inject some defamatory dialogue. And that’s what I came up with.

Zeldes: (10:56:31:00) In which frame, I guess, I had the highest percentage?

Shaheen: (10:56:35:00) It escalated from the ‘80s on up, 80’s and ‘90s. I forget exactly the number. I’d have to go back and...You have to buy the book. (\*Laughter\*)

Zeldes: (10:56:46:10) I guess you checked it out from the library.

Shaheen: (10:56:48:00) (\*Laughter\*) No, no, no, but no, it was that time period. And it evolved, the images were not static. Uhh...what remained static was the Arab was always the enemy. And the Arab was always—the Arab and his faith were always related. It’s interesting, we went through periods of history, they are the most vilified people in the history of Hollywood, more than a thousand films. It’s endured more than a century. And today, all those old films of yesteryear are receiving—they don’t fade into the editing room. I mean, they’re being televised world-wide, everywhere you go—classic movies, old-Hollywood movies. So all of these ancient stereotypes are being mixed with fresh stereotypes and being sort of a spiral, they’re being seen over and over and over again, uhh, everywhere you go. You can’t escape, it’s there. Each and every week on television you’ll see at least 24 old movies that are being in shown that in one way or another demonize the Arab people...each and every week.

Zeldes: (10:58:07:00) Could you define a stereotype?

Shaheen: (10:58:09:00) Yes. The Arab is the cultural other, someone who is different. Their God is different than our God. Which is not true, I mean, it's all the mythology—his dark complexion, he speaks with an accent, he's out to seduce our blonde virgin maiden, out to destroy us, despise us, everything that we believe in, it's his hoard versus our hero. You know, it's sort of like the Native American is savage, charging out on the open plains against members of a cavalry. It's the old Arab Bedouin in the desert over the sand dunes charging against the brave legionnaires held up in the fort. It's all of these—it's everything we've come to hate, the cowards—inept in the bedroom as well as in the battlefield. They're different, they're not like us, they're sub-humans. You know, we've had in the past the "Yellow Menace," which is the Japanese or the Asian hoard. You had the "Red Menace," which is the Communist threat, right? And today, with the "Green Menace," the Green Menace is a religion, it's different...and we never think of that. We talk about the yellow, the red, and the green, and when we think the Green Menace we're not thinking of 1.2 billion Muslims, we're thinking only of Arab Muslims, who are a minority, you know, in the Muslim world. And so we've just had this with us and it continues—it continues to persist, it continues to endure. And what's happened, the end result is: We've grown accustomed to its face so that we accept these fictional images. If these are the only images that we're exposed to because the "reel," R-E-E-L bad Arab is the comic book Arab, is the news Arab, is the novelist Arab. I mean, it's the same, the images are the same in all venues of American popular culture it doesn't deviate. We take the same images, as Gerbil defined this in his propaganda technique, you take a few select images and you repeat them over and over again, and that's what we've done with the Arab. His oil money, you know, is a threat to us, just like in the past, the German—in Nazi Germany the Jewish, so called, banking money was a threat to Germany. Today's image of the Arab parallels, exactly, yesteryear's image of the Jew. All you have to do is go back and look at some of the editorial cartoons that were in German and Russian newspapers of the Jew and the manner in which the Jew was portrayed, and look at today's image of the Arab in editorial cartoons. The facial figures are identical, the only things that's different is the costume. The Jewish merchant is squeezing the globe with his banking money...and the Arab is squeezing the globe with his oil money. Otherwise it's the same, we seem to have learned nothing from history.

Zeldes: (11:01:28:05) It's the first time I've ever heard of this term: "Green Menace." What's the "green" associated to?

Shaheen: (11:01:34:10) Islam.

Zeldes: (11:01:35:00) It's green. Green is a dominate color there?

Shaheen: (11:01:38:18) Yeah.

Zeldes: (11:01:39:00) Are there any positive stereotypes?

Shaheen: (11:01:41:15) Well, I think, you know, I'm coming out with a new book on post-9/11 images of Arabs. I look at about films. And, uhh, I look at more international films in this one. And I recommend, or at least there when I say recommend, there are nearly 28 films that I think people can see without being ashamed of their heritage. And that's a sizeable number when you consider the past. And so in film, there's been a change...not on television. On television, Americans of Arab heritage and American Muslims are now being portrayed as terrorists and that happened—that's been going on since 19—19—2002. And with shows like: *24*, *The Unit*...

TV movies like: *The President's Men*, *A Line in the Sand*. This is a very dangerous, new sort of stereotype, vilifying patriotic, decent, ordinary American Arabs and Muslims as clones of Al-Qaeda, as clones of Saddam, as clones of Osama. Not many people were aware of this, I discuss it in detail, I think, in the new book. So it's a mixed blessing, I mean, in one extent we see a gradual sensitivity in cinema, and in the other we see the creation a new, dangerous stereotype in the vilification of American Arabs and American Muslims.

Zeldes: (11:03:19:00) In which movies, um, reflect this—this gradual sensitivity?

Shaheen: (11:03:25:00) Babel, which is a brilliant film not only in terms of how Arabs are portrayed but the Japanese, I mean, and the Mexicans. But it's made by a Mexican, now he's a brilliant director and the performances were absolutely brilliant. *Kingdom of Heaven*, *Syriana* had very balanced images. Everyone in the film is evil except for the young American protagonist and the young Arab shake in his family. And I think those are good examples.

Zeldes: (11:03:59:15) We're looking at journalists and their relationships with the Arab American community, here in Detroit. Now you had mentioned that the stereotypes you had found permeate throughout popular culture, would that include television news?

Shaheen: (11:04:16:18) Absolutely.

Zeldes: (11:04:17:00) And newspapers?

Shaheen: (11:04:17:20) There was a finding the other day—there was a documentary called “Obsession,” which was funded by very pro-Israeli groups and was telecast a couple of times on CNN and Fox and they never—they never revealed this, but there's a political overtone, I mean, it's tied into the politics of the moment. This obsession supposedly vilified all things Islam and they just discovered it now. It's in news, I mean, you have, the news image is the Hollywood Arab image, in other words, they're seeing selected scenes of violence. We never see Arabs more, we never see them suffer, we never see them with family, I mean, that's excluded, it's the violence, it's the selected frames of violence. You know, look at what's happening in Palestine, and what's happening—or what happened recently in Lebanon—those frames of suffering, those frames of commonality show that we're all common, that we have more things in common than things that are different we almost never see. I mean, Carter's, um, President Carter's Brezhnev? Yeah, not Brezhnev, Brazinski! I'm sorry, excuse me. Brazinski just came out a couple of weeks ago with a statement talking about how dangerous the vilification is of Arabs in American culture, as well as on news. Brazinski, you know, so it's there. The main objection of an Arab American family is to protect their children from images that—that—that bombard them. Whether they be on television, whether they're in the cinema, no matter where, that is the role of an Arab American or a Muslim American parent: How can I protect my children from this vilification process that goes on 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year? I mean, it's sort of like in the old days, you know, when African Americans were saying: “Walk in my shoes.” You know, when they were being denied civil rights and considered animals instead of “like us.” You know, or stupid, it's the same situation now. There's fear, and not in every family but—but the children know more than the parents, I can assure you. They're much more sensitive because they're at school where this happens, and they bring it home.

Zeldes: (11:06:48:00) What advice do you give TV and newspaper, print and internet journalists who are covering the Arab American community or covering the Middle East. How can they, I guess, gain sensitivity to what they writing and what they're covering?

Shaheen: (11:07:05:25) Well, I think, by and large print journalists are better than most. I will say that my limited experience in terms of researching what print journalists have done—there's more in-depth, most of the time in print. I'm excluding the columnists that have an agenda, okay, I'm talking about hard news, particularly in newspapers like *The Christian Science Monitor*, which I use as a stellar example, I think their coverage is excellent. I would say: "Just...portray us as you would portray others. Don't bring...our ethnicity—don't bring out color, creed or culture into the story if it doesn't belong in to the story." I'll give you the best example I can give you is Timothy McVeigh. And look at what Timothy McVeigh did in Oklahoma City. Was his religion part of the story? Catholic. Was his ethnic background: Irish...part of the story? Should it have been? No. Now what if the man's name had been Abdoullah Houteef Hounayti, an Arab American...who lived in the area? Would Abdoullah Houteef's ethnicity been a part of the story? Would his religion be part of the story? Would all Arab Muslims in that area fear something might happen to them because of the actions of this one terrorist? Of course. So why wasn't McVeigh? Why wasn't the fact that he was Irish Catholic part of the story? That was responsible journalism not to make it part of the story—there's a double standard...there's a double standard. And you know, you have to say that journalists too are products of their environment. They try to be fair, they want to be fair, but they grew up with this "Kill 'em all," Arab hate movies and TV shows. And it's very difficult to unlearn these prejudices once you've been taught and the media curriculum is a very powerful teaching tool today. You know, I mean look at the amount of time our young people spend watching television, video games, going to the movies. You know—one time we had three learning centers in our country: the home, where we worshipped and the school. Now we have the media curriculum which is challenging and in many cases overtaking all three of those learning centers. So my advice to them would be: "Look in the mirror and try to be honest and try to be fair—the basic codes of journalism—abide by those codes."