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COLUMN ONE; But can you play a terrorist?; Actors of Arab descent face the dilemma of whether to be typecast. It's often the only work available, but it can leave some feeling guilty. [HOME EDITION]

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"What kind of a name is that?" the voice coach asked at the end of the lesson. The name on the check he'd been handed by his student didn't match the young actor's European-sounding stage name.

The actor hesitated. He was fairly new in town and leery of any missteps. "Umm, my grandfather was Middle Eastern," he said.

The actor said the room temperature seemed to drop. The teacher took him aside and spoke urgently. "Look," the teacher said, "I see big things for you, but if you tell people this, you will not work in this town." Recently, the actor landed a prominent role in a big-studio film. But he still feels compelled to keep his heritage under wraps. Only his closest friends know his ethnicity; he tells others that his parents are Italian, French, anything but the truth.

"I'm really proud of who I am, but I'm constantly having to lie about it," said the actor, who didn't want to reveal his name for fear that he would be relegated to playing terrorists, the new Arab acting ghetto.

Arabs and Arab Americans in Hollywood live in an interesting time. The appetite for Middle Eastern stories and themes boomed after 9/11 and grew again with the ongoing grind of the war in Iraq. But the roles suddenly being created for Arab-heritage actors often are limited to those of terrorists or are otherwise so poorly drawn that actors must swallow their pride to take them. And that's if they even get offered the parts.

Some in the community still see the changes as a sign of progress.

"There is more work out there for the Arab actor than 10 years ago," said Ismail Kanater, a Moroccan actor who has been in Showtime's "Sleeper Cell" and the now-canceled Steven Bochco series "Over There." "Even though we get actors complaining about terrorist roles, there is a natural interest in the region. That will open doors."

At least one actor made that interest pay off. Omar Metwally played a Palestinian militant in "Munich" and has received good buzz about his role in the current film "Rendition," in which he plays an Arab American trapped in a war-on-terrorism nightmare when he becomes suspected of being a terrorist. "Americans are hungry for information," Metwally said. "They want to engage."

But until that engagement becomes a full-fledged conversation, the enduring dilemma for Arab actors is whether to play terrorist roles. It's often the only work available to them, but it can leave them feeling guilty or conflicted.

Tony Shalhoub, the Emmy-winning star of "Monk" who's of Lebanese descent, recalled his first television gig playing a terrorist on a 1986 episode of "The Equalizer." "I did it once, and once was enough," he said.

Writer-director Hesham Issawi, an Egyptian, said the increase in the quantity of Arab roles hadn't been matched by an increase in quality. "The roles are bigger, the scenes are bigger, the money is better. But it's still a terrorist role." He cited two exceptions: the terrorist recruiter character in "Syriana," played by Egyptian Amr Waked, and Metwally's part in "Munich." Both were smart, nuanced militant roles, he said. "There's a little more depth. There's more to the characters, and they're not stupid," Issawi said.

Kanater says he doesn't object to playing the bad guy. "I can play a villain. I played Caligula onstage." What he resents is a steady diet of shallow, poorly written bad-guy roles. "You go for some Arab role and they say, 'Can you do it again with a heavier accent?'" Kanater said.

Yasmine Hanani, a young Iraqi American actress, has played roles in "Over There" and "Sleeper Cell." Her character in "Sleeper Cell" beheaded an FBI agent. "The thing about playing terrorists is they exist too. It's real, even if it's only half the story," she said. "If I don't do it, someone who knows less about my language and culture will."

That terrorist dilemma has even been turned into comedy. The pilot episode of "The Watch List," a Middle Eastern American show vying for a spot on Comedy Central, features a skit in which young Arab actors learn how to play terrorists. The students practice holding an assault rifle, begging "24's" Jack Bauer for their lives and, finally, falling down dead. In the end, the teacher, played by Iranian American comedian Maz Jobrani, earnestly urges his

students to learn how to play these roles "so that Latino actors won't get them."

The undisputed champion of the Arab terrorist role is Sayed Badreya. The burly, bearded Egyptian-born actor has played an array of menacing characters in a 20-year Hollywood career. He'll appear with Robert Downey Jr. in next year's "Iron Man" as an Arab arms dealer who kidnaps the hero. In 2003, he and Issawi made a short film called "T for Terrorist" in which an Arab actor, frustrated with endless terrorist roles, takes over a movie set at gunpoint.

Badreya recalls when he first arrived in Hollywood in 1986. "I couldn't work. I was too handsome," he laughs. "So I put on some weight and grew a beard, and suddenly I was working every day and playing the angry Arab."

Some of the younger Arab newcomers to Hollywood look down on Badreya's career as one spent reinforcing stereotypes. Badreya, however, makes no apologies.

"I never played something that didn't happen. We hijack airplanes, I play a hijacker," he said. "I do my work. I'm not going to sit and cry about it."

Still, even Badreya remembers some bad moments. He played a terrorist and also consulted on the script for the 1996 Kurt Russell- Steven Seagal action film "Executive Decision." Badreya used his contacts at his local Los Angeles mosque to connect him with a Puerto Rican mosque to shoot a wedding scene, with Muslims there playing extras.

"We told [the locals] it would be a positive portrayal of Arabs," he said. "The wedding scene was just like the start of 'The Godfather'; it was beautiful."

The film's script also called for a moderate Arab ambassador character who helps the heroes defeat the terrorists. Both that character and the wedding scene were cut from the film. "They didn't want to see good Arabs," Badreya said. "I got a lot of heat at the mosque from that one."

Arab actors seeking to avoid terrorist roles typically hide their heritage, said Omar Naim, the Lebanese-born director of the 2004 film "The Final Cut." "If you see someone named Mohammed, people are going to have unfortunate preconceptions about that. I know a couple of really excellent Arab American actors, some of whom don't speak Arabic, and all they play are Arab roles where they're forced to fumble their way through some Arabic," Naim said.

Metwally, who is half Egyptian and was raised in Orange County and New York, admits he's in some danger of being typecast, but he has also appeared as a patient on "Grey's Anatomy" and as an American soldier on the TV show "The Unit," with neither role revolving around his ethnicity. "I think people are ready to accept an American named Omar Metwally," he said matter-of-factly.

But Naim said the typecasting rut could also be self-inflicted. He warns against Arab actors, writers and directors feeling compelled to make every project some sort of definitive statement on the Arab American experience.

"The overall goal is to do really good work and to make that the thing that people notice us for," Naim said. "I have many Arab things I want to do. But for now the stories that are coming out of me are just not those stories."

Shalhoub memorably portrayed a conflicted Arab American FBI agent in 1998's "The Siege" with Denzel Washington and Bruce Willis but said he evaluated potential roles on their quality, not their ethnicity. "My life isn't about choosing Arab roles and non-Arab roles. There's a potential pitfall in overstating and overusing this Arab American term."

But a young crop of actors, writers and directors wants to create overtly Arab- or Arab American-themed films, sometimes joining forces to do so. One actor calls it HAM: the Hollywood Arab Mafia.

"There's a huge surge in Arab and Muslim filmmakers. Everyone's wanting to express themselves," said Ahmad Zahra, a Syrian producer working in the United States whose upcoming film, "AmericanEast," may be a test case for the potential of this movement.

The movie tells of an ill-fated partnership between two businessmen -- one Muslim and one Jewish -- to open a restaurant. The film, which as yet has no distributor, costars Shalhoub and Badreya, who co-wrote the screenplay with Issawi, who directed it.

The key, Zahra said, is to show that Arab- and Arab American- themed stories can turn a profit. "If everyone goes to see ["AmericanEast"], of course Hollywood is going to come to me and say, 'Please make another one,'" Zahra said.

The desire for an Arab-themed hit is a constant refrain among many in the business. "Somebody just needs to do it on their own like Spike Lee did it," said one young Arab. "We need a breakout hit -- and it doesn't have to be particularly Arab or political. . . . It would be easier to do 'My Big Fat Arab Wedding.' It would be an easier sell."

Says Shalhoub: "It has to be a cumulative thing. It's not going to be just one movie."

One cause for optimism: the surprise success of the 2005 Palestinian film "Paradise Now," a tale of two suicide bombers that was nominated for an Oscar and won a Golden Globe. The film's director, Hany Abu-Assad, has since moved to Hollywood.

"Hany kicked in all the doors," said Nizar Wattad, a young Palestinian American screenwriter and USC film school graduate who is working with Abu-Assad on his follow-up script. "Now he has to prove he can be marketable. If he knocks one out of the park, it could really open the floodgates."

But self-produced and -funded Arab films face one striking obstacle: The Arab community -- both in America and the Middle East -- tends to shy from funding movies.

"There's a lot of rich Arabs in America," Issawi said heatedly. "Movies are considered a hobby. It's not a real investment. . . . The community doesn't believe in the power of the media."

As for the residents of Hollywood's Arab closet, the young actor with the European stage name anticipates a day when he won't feel the need to tell people he's Italian.

"Just let me do three or four awesome American roles and then we'll see," he says. But for now, "everybody's like, 'Where are you from?' and I never want to answer. I'm like, 'Can we just do the audition?'"

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Credit: Times Staff Writer

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