

MOVIES

Albert Brooks, comedy envoy

By SUSAN KING
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HOLLYWOOD — In his latest film, "Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World," Albert Brooks stars as himself — albeit a somewhat fictional version of himself. At the outset of the film, Brooks is having a hard time getting an acting job. Penny Marshall even turns him down for the remake of "Harvey" because she is looking for a Jimmy Stewart type.

But his luck changes when he's summoned to Washington, D.C., by former senator, now "Law & Order" star Fred Dalton Thompson, who wants Brooks to spend a month in India and Pakistan to find out what makes 300 Muslims laugh. And they want him to write a 500-page report for the U.S. government.

With dreams of earning a Medal of Freedom and better acting assignments, Brooks agrees to help the United States in the new diplomatic effort. He nearly causes a war between India and Pakistan in the process.

This isn't the first time that Brooks has played a fictionalized version of himself. He first took his own moniker in his feature film directorial debut, 1979's "Real Life." And the reel-life Brooks was an

obnoxious, self-important filmmaker who dreams not just of winning an Oscar but a Nobel Peace Prize. To achieve his goal, he persuades a Phoenix family to let him film its everyday life.

Coincidentally, Brooks' dad, Harry Parke (born Harold Einstein), also appeared as "himself" in several films in the 1930s and 1940s, under his stage name, "Parkyarkarkus." A comedian and radio performer, he is probably best remembered for his performances on Eddie Cantor's radio show. He made his film debut as Parkyarkarkus in 1936's "Strike Me Pink."

Like his son, Parkyarkarkus also looked for humor to the Muslim world, in the long-forgotten 1942 film "A Yank in Libya." In this World War II action-adventure, he plays the film's comic relief role, an American stand-up comic lost in the country who helps an intrepid American reporter. At the film's finale, it's revealed that Parkyarkarkus is actually a U.S. military intelligence agent.

Parkyarkarkus died a true performer's death in 1958. Directly after he performed at a Lucille Ball-Desi Arnaz Friars Club Roast, he sat down at the dais next to Milton Berle and suffered a fatal heart attack.

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Comedy

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remake of "The In-Laws."

When he bombs on stage in front of an English-speaking audience in New Delhi, though, he gleans no insight. Conversely, when he causes a handful of Pakistanis to fall over laughing at the same material, all he can do is blindly exalt, "I killed!" Never mind that they'd been smoking a hookah around a campfire all night.

Brooks has said he was inspired to make this movie after seeing how the world had changed post-Sept. 11 and wondering what role humor still played in it. The few political or religious elements he adds to the film feel cursory and tossed-in, though.

In one instance, he meets with representatives of the Al-Jazeera Arab television network for what he believes will be an interview about his research project. Instead, they want him to star in a sitcom they're developing, which translates into English as "That Darn Jew." It's a bit of sketch humor — it comes and goes without

really registering.

Later, and more glaring, is the abrupt suggestion that Brooks' presence has inspired troop build-up in preparation for possible battle along the Indian-Pakistani border. This isn't just a half-baked idea that Brooks abandons as quickly as he introduces it; even worse in a comedy, it just plain isn't funny.

'On the Outs': Opportunity's vulnerability

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ways harked back to the streets where they grew up. Skolnik and Silverbush felt it was important to film on some of those streets. But while they secured their film permits, they said Jersey City police tried to warn them away from the areas filled with gangs and criminals. Many of the people the two filmmakers hired as crew and supporting actors were straight off those streets. Some were drug dealers or gangbangers. But all welcomed the filmmakers into their world.

"The very people we were warned about turned out to be our greatest assets," Silverbush said.

For instance, some people coached the actress Marte how to walk and talk like a dealer; others scouted locations for the filmmakers, arranging shoots in cramped apartments and trash-strewn warehouses. In another instance, one woman smoked crack in front of Mendoza so that the actress would know how to perform a similar sequence in the movie.

Skolnik and Silverbush said



Polychrome Pictures

Judy Marte stars in "On the Outs" as Oz, a 17-year-old drug dealer trying to cope with her drug-addicted mother and mentally challenged brother.

they saw the paradox of this film. Both filmmakers are white and grew up in upper-middle-class homes in Westchester County, N.Y. And yet they came to Jersey City to tell the story of a poor and mostly minority community.

The locals hired by the filmmakers helped shape the authenticity of "On the Outs." It may make Skolnik and Silverbush seem like more credible filmmakers, but what reward is there for the locals?

ON THE OUTS

Screening at the Village East Cinemas, 181 Second Ave. in New York. (212) 529-6998; and the Frank Family Theater South Cove Stadium 12, 191 Lefante Way in Bayonne. (201) 437-6600.

For more info about the film, visit www.ontheouts.com.

"That's when you get into the gray area of exploitation," Skolnik said.

But that, they said, sheds light on the way that opportunities are structured in society. What is available to some is not always available to others.

"We're here because so many variables are going right," Silverbush said, speaking of herself and Skolnik. "It's really quite shameful."

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