

Meet the Palestinian Seinfeld

By *Jonathan Curiel*
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

"I'm totally secular, but I'm scared like hell of God." Sayed Kashua says this with the kind of neurotic, biting humor that has led many people – critics, fans and others – to compare him to Woody Allen. A Palestinian Woody Allen?

Kashua says it's Jerry Seinfeld (not Allen) whose humor he relishes – a connection that's more apt anyway since, like Seinfeld, Kashua has a wildly popular TV series on his hands. "Arab Labor," which Kashua created and wrote, takes a humorous look at a Kashua-like journalist and his Palestinian family as they navigate modern life in Israel. The groundbreaking series, which screened earlier this year at the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival and is the first in Israeli prime time to feature Arabic-speaking characters, premieres Saturday in the United States on the Link TV satellite channel, which is streaming the first episode for free on its Web site. It's not available on broadcast or cable TV.

Now American audiences can see what Israelis have been talking about for the past year – a series where Amjad (the Kashua figure) and his family are comfortably middle class, interact with Israeli Jews (Amjad's closest colleague is Jewish), and have to confront stereotypes (from both Israelis and Palestinians) that plunge Amjad from one identity crisis to another. In an opening scene, for example, the family is stopped at an Israeli checkpoint, where Amjad wonders if his underarm deodorant helped prompt the pull-over. "Do we smell of fear?" he asks his wife and



LinkTV

Bushra [Clara Khoury] and Amjad [Norma Issa] are a Palestinian couple dealing with everyday issues in Israel in the groundbreaking TV series "Arab Labor"

young daughter as he sniffs his shirt. "Do we look different? All the money I spend on fashionable clothes!"

It's not Amjad's clothing or body odor that's a red flag but his car, a Subaru that security in "Arab Labor" presume is driven by a suspicious Arab. When Amjad buys an expensive Rover, the stage is set for a series of "Seinfeld"-like twists that poke as much fun at him as anyone else. This kind of self-deprecating humor has become a trademark of "Arab Labor." For the first time as a nation, Israelis are laughing at, and identifying with, Arab prime-time figures – a development that's comparable to the United States' embrace of "The Cosby Show" or "All in the Family," which used humor to explore race and society.

He tries to fit in

In one episode, Amjad tries to fit in at a Passover seder, putting on a yarmulke as the other guests watch him

with interest. In another episode, Amjad sends his precocious young daughter, Maya, to an Islamic school – then cringes when, after the first day's instruction, she tells him he's bound for hell because he's an unfaithful Muslim. Though Amjad doesn't realize it, Maya is just trying to scare him into withdrawing her from the school. "I wanted the Israeli mainstream audience to meet different kinds of Arabs – not just terrorists or politicians – and to listen to their language and their stories," Kashua says in a phone interview from his Jerusalem home. "I'm not dealing with (Palestinian) lives under direct occupation, like in the West Bank – it's about the Palestinian minority inside Israel."

Israel's "inside Arabs" make up about 20 percent of the country, but – before "Arab Labor," which was green-lighted by Jewish Israeli TV executives – they were virtually invisible on nightly dramas and comedies. Norman Issa, the veteran Palestinian stage

actor who portrays Amjad, says “Arab Labor” has already had a demonstrable impact in Israel – on both Jews and Arabs. “Many (Israeli Arabs) stop me on the street and say, ‘You speak about me’ and ‘I am like Amjad,’ “ says Issa in a phone interview from his home in Jaffa, the ancient port city that’s next to Tel Aviv.

A sign of the times: At Israel’s Ben Gurion Airport, security now treats Issa as a celebrity. Issa, who travels frequently outside the country for theater productions, says, “When I come through (security), they say, ‘Oh, hello.’ They pass me without many questions. It makes me laugh when I take photos with the security guy. They say, ‘Hey, you are from “Arab Labor” – come, come, come.’ I find myself hugging the security guy with guns.”

Unpredictable interactions happen frequently in “Arab Labor,” which in its initial months on Israeli TV angered some Israeli Arabs who believe it stereotyped Palestinians. Kashua pleads guilty, but he says the stereotypes were necessary to draw in and engage an initial audience.

Satirizing stereotypes

“All Israelis think Arabs steal cars,” says Kashua, who has a character in the first episode portray a corrupt Palestinian auto mechanic. Still, every character in the episode is flawed and funny, including Amjad’s best Jewish friend (“I didn’t kill any Arabs,” he says of his stint in the Israeli military) and the right-wing Jewish pundit who insists that Arabs are bad drivers. Kashua, who attended Jerusalem’s Hebrew University and who writes in Hebrew for the Israeli newspaper Ha’aretz, is an equal opportunity dart thrower.

The series’ executive producer, Danny Paran, has called Kashua “a coura-



LinkTV

“Arab Labor” features [from left] Clara Khoury and Norman Issa, joined by Fatima Vihye [Maya], Salwa Nakara [Grandmother], Salim Dao [Grandfather], Mariano Idelman [Meir] and Mira Awad [Amal].

geous writer who (writes) the way he feels about both sides,” but Kashua – in his typical deadpan style – deflects the compliment, saying, “I’m the most scared guy you can imagine. I’m not a fighter. I don’t have courage. I’m hiding, maybe, behind words.”

As a novelist of such titles as “Dancing Arabs” and “Let It Be Morning,” Kashua has been translated into 10 languages, including English. He never thought “Arab Labor” would have an audience beyond Israel’s borders, but Kashua – along with Issa and the series’ other stalwarts – is ecstatic that Americans will also begin laughing at their characters’ travails.

“This series (says), ‘We all have our bad sides’ and ‘We’re all human,’ “ says Clara Khoury, the Palestinian actress (“Rana’s Wedding”) who plays Amjad’s wife, Bushra. Khoury, who was raised in the mixed Jewish and Arab city of Haifa, says Kashua’s outlandish renderings are an essentially accurate portrayal of life inside Israel.

“He’s the only (Palestinian) man who could achieve this in prime time,” Khoury says by phone from Tel Aviv. “He admits he lives in Israel, and his identity is messed up. He admits he’s confused. Most Arabs here have to be very proud that we don’t recognize

Israel. He says, ‘OK – I live in Israel, I’m Palestinian and I’m facing the facts.’ ”

Two months ago, Kashua moved with his wife and children from an Arab section of Jerusalem to a Jewish section – a tonier area with better water pressure that mirrors a setting of an episode he already wrote for the second season of “Arab Labor.” “Next season, Amjad moves (from his Arab area) after he takes a shower at a Jewish friend’s place, and he discovers the stream of water. He wants to take good showers, so he convinces his wife and daughter to move,” Kashua says, before joking, “It’s not a show based on my life – my life is based on the show.”

Arab Labor: Comedy. 7 p.m. Saturdays on the Link TV satellite channel, which can be seen on DirecTV Channel 375 and Dish Network Channel 9410. The first episode can be seen for free from Saturday through Nov. 21 at www.linktv.org/arablabor

E-mail Jonathan Curiel at jcuriel@sfchronicle.com

Web Link: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/11/13/DDCS1434BO.DTL>



Sayed Kashua is the creator.