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TELEVISION REVIEW

E7

Finding humor and truth amid conflict

'Arab Labor' on Link TV gives Israeli-Palestinian strife an 'All in the Family' spin.

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TELEVISION CRITIC

In many ways, "Arab Labor," which premieres tonight on Link TV, is a standard albeit unusually addictive situation comedy. A hapless but good-hearted journalist darts in and out of amusing and poignant confrontations with his sassy wife, their smart-as-a-whip daughter, his overbearing parents and his hound-dog younger friend.

Except "Arab Labor" has subtitles, since it's set in modern-day Israel, and the journalist is a Palestinian named Amjad (Norman Issa), whose biggest problem seems to be that he is not Jewish. "How the hell do they know?" he complains to his wife, Bushra (Clara Khoury), as they are stopped again at a military checkpoint. "All the money I spend on fashionable clothes. I listen to Israeli radio. So how do they know?"

That this is the opening scene of the show's first episode immediately explains why the groundbreaking Palestinian-Israeli comedy is a big but controversial hit in its country of origin. Created by Sayed Kashua, a 32-year-old Israeli-born Palestinian journalist, "Arab Labor" is a valiant, consistently hilarious attempt to explore the tensions and contradictions of everyday life among the Israeli minority. (Link TV can be found on DirecTV and Dish; the series is also available for one week on www.linktv.org.)

In early episodes no one is spared,



LinkTV

UNIVERSAL TRUTHS: Clara Khoury and Norman Issa play a Palestinian couple who are trying to fit in.

from the thieving Palestinian auto shop owner to the sanctimonious and racist head of the Hebrew "Peace School." But Amjad, being his creator's alter ego and the show's Arab Everyman, takes the brunt of the satire.

Good-hearted but perpetually dissatisfied, he longs to pass as a member of Israel's elite, going so far as to wear seat belts, which causes his father much distress as the sight of an Arab in a seat belt makes everyone else in the village think the border patrol is on its way. When his Jewish photographer friend

Meir tells him the reason he keeps getting stopped is his car -- "Only Arabs drive Subarus" -- he immediately buys the more Jewish Rover. When the head of the Jewish kindergarten in which he hopes to enroll his daughter tries to discourage him by saying that students are encouraged to play Israeli soldiers and shoot at the enemy, he shrugs and smiles. "Let kids be kids."

Not every joke is rooted in local politics. Amjad's irritable relationship with his parents knows no nationality, and the ongoing debates with his editor

'Arab Labor'

Where: Link TV (on DIRECTV and DISH systems)

When: 7 tonight

Rating: TV-PG (may be unsuitable for young children)

over sex versus substantive could just as easily be taking place in New York or Los Angeles.

In Israel, the show has received mixed reviews, with many Palestinians arguing that it perpetrates stereotypes. Certainly Amjad is an assimilator, but Issa is as lovable a leading man as you will find on television, and like "All in the Family," to which it has been repeatedly compared, "Arab Labor" uses stereotypes to illuminate more discreet truths. While the setting and the politics of modern Israel make the show groundbreaking and amazing, comedy and pathos only translate this well if they are transcendent and universal.

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