

## US & Canada

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### US Muslims seek to change on-screen image



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US Islamic groups have long complained about how Muslims are portrayed by the media. Now Hollywood is moving to change that: at a screenwriters' workshop in Los Angeles, young Muslims are encouraged to offer their own stories as a more authentic voice, the BBC's Rajesh Mirchandani reports.

"There's room for humour in every film, almost. Room for some kind of relief," says Ed Driscoll, an Emmy-award-winning comedy writer who is leading a class one Saturday morning in south Los Angeles.

This screenwriting workshop focuses on comedy and is the last of four weekly sessions, giving practical tips to people who want to make it in the cutthroat world of Hollywood.

What differentiates this class from countless others in America's entertainment capital is that 19 out of the 20 students are Muslim.

One of them, Nida Chawdhry, explains why she came. "I was actually looking for an opportunity to meet some writers and, as a Muslim writer, for some inspiration, for someone to tell me you can actually have a voice, a platform for your voice to be out there."

The class was organised by the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), a national advocacy group, which wants to redress what it says is a skew in American media.

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End Quote Nida Chawdhry Screenwriting student

Films like True Lies (1994) and Rules of Engagement (2000) are often cited as portraying Muslims as violent extremists.

"A Muslim is a terrorist, that's how they used to be portrayed," says Ahmos Hassan, who runs a talent management agency and is a member of MPAC.

And Mr Hassan says news broadcasts still paint Muslims as "a terrorist or someone with irrational beliefs".

But what is the cumulative, filtered effect of news coverage of the Afghanistan war, Iraq, the Middle East, so-called "homegrown" terror plots: does it translate into real life discrimination?

"I love it here, most people are open and friendly, but still when [I] go to the grocery store, there's someone who tells me 'go back to your country'," Ms Chawdhry says.

She points to her headscarf: "When I walk into job interviews, they see this, they don't see me.

"They're not looking inside to see, is this the next energetic passionate person they can hire? They see something else that scares them or something that worries them.

"It's offensive and disconcerting but I think it's something that's accepted in the Muslim American experience."

She has come to the class in a bid to change that, saying: "We need to diversify those images if those images are troublesome."

### 'Information gap'

She and her classmates are not here to learn to create falsely positive images, but rather to bring real Muslim lives to the screen.

Another student, Elenia Kaya, says: "The Muslims that I know, the Arabs that I know in my life are not the people that I see on the screen and I think there needs to be something done to change that.



US Islamic groups say Muslims are too often painted as extremists by Hollywood

"If there's one thing that I learned from this workshop, it's that there are a lot of people out there who have an incredible amount of talent... who have stories that are poignant and moving and relevant and who need to be portrayed, whether it's on TV or in movies."

Elenia is herself Jewish and served two years in the Israeli army.

"I know within my own community, there's a great deal of misinformation, and I think it's because of an information gap," she says.

Elenia is concerned about the atmosphere and make-up of the "writers' rooms", the term for the teams that create what is seen on screen. How diverse are they, what happens when someone makes a joke that is offensive and is there sensitivity training, she asks.

"It's pretty much understood in comedy that you check your sensitivities at the door," replies Mr Driscoll.

He believes writers' rooms are becoming more diverse, but acknowledges that there are shows aimed at African-American audiences written largely by teams of black people, and the equivalent for productions where the majority of those watching are white.

'Hilarious life'

Later in the class, executives currently working in Hollywood answer questions from students. Many ask about practical issues, such as how to get an agent.

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End Quote Tim McNeal Hollywood executive

But I wanted to know if American TV networks and film studios actually want more realistic Muslim characters.

"Stereotypes do sell but there is definitely a need and an appetite for authentic voices in TV or film," says Tim McNeal, who develops new shows for the US network ABC and Disney. "Otherwise, you do get a distorted view of cultures.

"Just from my own culture, the African-American culture, the stereotypes are so pervasive about what a black person is supposed to be and those stereotypes have permeated around the world."

He encourages more Muslims to enter the industry as a way of creating more rounded, believable stories but he warns that if Muslims do not write their own characters, others may do so - less accurately and less kindly.

Does he see a day when a Muslim character is the lead in a TV or film production?

"Yes, but it's going to have come from the perspective of it being a universal story, not a typical Muslim story," he says. "It has to be something that has universal appeal to a broad audience."

Ms Chawdhry, who aspires to be a comedy writer, thinks she fits that bill.

"I have a hilarious life and I want to be able to share that with people, the way they share their hilarity with me."