

Jammin' in the Middle E

A STUDY GUIDE BY MARGUERITE O'HARA



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Since the events of 9/11 in America, as well as the subsequent bombings in Spain, Bali and London, many Muslims living in Western countries, including Australia, have been stereotyped and sometimes demonized. Such stereotyping has been fuelled as much by ignorance as by media reports. We rarely see depictions of family life of Lebanese background Australians or other Muslim groups, let alone in a comic style. **Jammin' in the Middle E (Kim Mordaunt, 2007) is the kind of film that should both contextualize and normalize the lives of people often seen as other in Australia. It is fast, funny and entertaining.**

Synopsis

An Australian-Arab family is caught between two cultures in this rollicking tale of rap, cars, comedy and finding romance in Sydney's little Lebanon.

Naima (19) and Ishak (27) are sister and brother from a terribly nice, but awfully conservative, middle class Muslim family in Western Sydney. Ishak is a car-crazy dreamer who lays about his parent's home fantasizing on winning street races against his archrival Sharief and of being the world's greatest rapper.

Naima on the other hand is going to university and is sick of rap, tired of the boys having all the dreams and sick and tired of the car-cult that dominates her brother's and his friends' lives. Naima's ambition is to break from her traditional role of pampering males and putting food in her family's mouths while loosening the paternal clutches of her loving but overly-protective father, Said.

Ishak's dreams and Naima's ambitions, however, are suddenly put to the test after Ishak decides he can repair his clapped out street racer by winning an illegal car race. Ishak's in way over his head with Sharief and his intimidating gang and, as usual, Naima feels duty bound to come on board to try to dig her brother out.

Ishak is forced to seek help from the local car mechanic, Rafi. But Rafi knows Ishak only too well and refuses to be involved until he catches sight of the beautiful Naima. Naima catches sight of Rafi too, but the last thing she, or indeed her father, wants, is for her to become romantically involved with a car mechanic.

Rafi can't fix the car but he can make a deal to have a rap battle between Ishak and Sharief's boys instead of the race. A deal is struck to use Said's wedding reception hall. The trouble is: no one's bothered to ask Said.

Rafi and Naima's budding romance, Ishak's ongoing battle with Sharief and Said's determination to come to grips with his children's lives in Australia all collide in a frantic comedy of errors that plays out during a rap battle, at a traditional Lebanese wedding reception hall, in downtown ... Bankstown.

Curriculum Relevance

Jammin' in the Middle E is suitable for middle and senior secondary students studying Cultural Studies, SOSE (HSIE), Religion and Society, English and Media Studies. With its depiction of contemporary society, especially



the world of rap music and cars, it should appeal as much to males as females and is fast and funny rather than polemical or preachy.

Background Muslims in Australia

Facts

There are believed to be about 300,000 Muslims living in Australia from more than sixty ethnic groupings; this is about 1.5% of the population. While approximately one third of Muslims were born in Australia, others have come from countries including Indonesia, Lebanon, Turkey, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Pakistan and Afghanistan. More than half of Australia's Muslims live in New South Wales, many in Sydney's western suburbs, including Bankstown and Lakemba.

Perceptions

Since the events of 9/11, Islamic militants are often seen as the 'new enemy of the West'. These militants are from a number of different countries, including Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia, as well as the British-born London bombers. Some aim to bring the West under an umma - one Islamic state with no territorial boundary - which naturally would be in conflict with Western interests. However militant Islamic groups constitute a negligible minority out of 1.2 billion Muslims worldwide and the majority of Muslims are moderate people. However, radical members have contributed to a negative perception of Islam. They have declared a jihad (holy war) against the West and used an extreme interpretation of the Quran for their own purposes. This is affecting Muslims in Australian society, the majority of whom have no interest in establishing or supporting a separate Muslim state.

Attitudes to Muslims in Australia

An article headed Schoolchildren cast judgements on Muslims by Chee Chee Leung appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald on 6 February 2006. Here is some of what the survey found:

More than half of 551 Year 10 and 11 students surveyed in Victoria in late 2005 believed Muslims are terrorists, while forty-five per cent said Australians do not have positive feelings about Muslims.

Waleed Aly, a member of the Islamic Council of Victoria, said the results were troubling:

What it demonstrates is that Muslims are being viewed in a way that is really subhuman ... The only way you can combat this kind of prejudice is on a personal level. It's much harder to hate people when you know someone in that social group.

While the way in which surveys are conducted can skew the results, many of the reported attitudes suggest a mix of intolerance and ignorance about the beliefs and lives of a diverse group of the Australian community. The full text of this survey can be accessed at <http://smh.com.au/news/national/schoolchildren-cast-judgements-on-muslims/20>

It should make for some lively discussion in connection with the film.

Muslims in the media

If you were to make a study of stories about Muslims appearing in the Australian media, both print and electronic, you may see why community perceptions about Muslims tend to be negative and fearful. During the first week in April, 2007, here are some stories that appeared.

1. Difference of Opinion - television discussion program about perceptions of Muslims in Australia. (ABC television, 2 April 2007)
2. Letter in The Age newspaper about the oppressive practices - social, legal and medical - that women in some Islamic fundamentalist societies are subjected to. (The Age, 2 April 2007)
3. 'Terrorists see the error of their ways, say Saudis'. An article from the English newspaper The Guardian reprinted in The Age newspaper (The Age, 3 April 2007)
4. 'Al Qaeda regroup in Pakistan: New leaders on rise'. (The Age, 3 April 2007)
5. Women of the Holy Kingdom - documentary about the struggle for women's liberation in Saudi Arabia. (ABC television, 5 April 2007)
6. 'ISLAMOPHOBIA' - headline on the front page of the Melbourne Herald Sun about a Government decision to deny entry visas to two Muslims scheduled to speak at a conference in Australia. (Herald Sun, 7 April 2007)

While not all these articles and/or programs presented negative views, they were all premised on the idea of Muslims being problematic, threatening or backward in some way, i.e., 'the other'.





The filmmakers

The genesis of this film evolved through drama workshops run by Enda Murray, the producer of the film with twenty-three young people from the Arabic community in Bankstown in Sydney's western suburbs in 2003. They drew on their own experiences to create characters and short stories. Director Kim Mordaunt and scriptwriter Howard Jackson then joined the project and developed this raw material into a TV drama script - *Jammin' in the Middle E*. The film was produced by Virus Media. Information about their projects can be accessed at <http://www.virusmedia.com.au> There is a section of the website (*Jammin' in the Middle E*) that is totally dedicated to the film (and includes extras like a Production Diary) AND a section of the website (*Westies*) which outlines the devising process of workshops and contains some of the original stories which the young people brought to the workshops.

Key Crew

Director	Kim Mordaunt
Producer	Enda Murray
Writer	Howard Jackson
Director of Photography	Joel Peterson
Editor	Adrian Rostirolla
Original Music	Caitlin Yeo

Cast

Ishak	NOMISE
Naima	Julie Kanaan
Rafi	Matuse
Said	Fadl Abdul Hay
Musa	Mohammed Jajatieh
Hakim	Marouf Alameddine
Grandma	Armida Croccolo
Thana	Susan Chamma
Sarwa	Elissa Mukhtar
Mom	Chadia Gedeon Hajjar
Sharief	Anthony Hawwa
Policeman	David Scott
Layla	Issra Jajatieh
Omar	Pino Scurio

Despite having no previous acting experience, the young people from the drama workshops became the stars in the film production, gaining invaluable acting experience, and an insight into the film business along the way.

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

Activity 1 Before watching the film

1. How many people in your class are from Lebanese or other Middle

Eastern backgrounds? Are they all practicing Muslims?

2. What is the largest Muslim country in the world, in terms of population?
3. In which parts of Australia, and its cities, do people of Lebanese, or other Middle-Eastern backgrounds live? If necessary, research figures for your own area or state.
4. Is it possible to generalize about Muslims or Christians or Jews or Buddhists or any other faith in relation to beliefs and cultural practices?
5. What do you know about how Muslims live in Australia: e.g. do they send their children to separate religious schools? What do they believe? How are their religious practices different to those of Christians or Jews? Do they have similar aspirations for their children's education to other Australians? How is family life both different and similar to that of other Australians?
6. What were the 2005 Cronulla beach riots about? How were they reported in both the Australian and overseas press?
7. How representative of student attitudes do you believe the survey from the Sydney Morning Herald to be?
8. If you were a student of the Muslim faith how would you feel about your place in Australian society after reading this survey?
9. Can you name any prominent Australians of Lebanese background in sports, politics, film and television?
10. If you were to move to another country, would you live in an area where people spoke your language and shared your cultural and religious beliefs?
11. Why do you think the wearing of clothing such as the Hijab, or veil, has become such a focus of media attention in relation to the Muslim community? How might such dress be seen as different to the wearing of other signifiers of religious affiliations such as the Jewish yarmulke or skull cap worn by orthodox Jewish males and crucifixes worn by some Christians?

Glossary

Rumi - Name of a thirteenth century poet whose works Said, the father, reads and quotes from. Rumi was a Sufi, a mystic revered for his poetry which expresses absolute love of God.

Rap and hip-hop - Urban tribal music and street dance style originating in the ghettos of American cities such as New York and Chicago in the 1970s but now adopted as a style of expression all over the world. It incorporates rhyme, chanting and dancing, often with an underlying expression of anti-authoritarianism in the lyrics. In this film the two styles of poetry - rap and Rumi - collide and come together in unexpected ways.

Rap battle - A 'rap battle' (otherwise known as a freestyle battle or MC battle) is a kind of a one-on-one competition where contestants make up rhymes on the spot to embarrass or 'diss' (disrespect) their opponent. The knockout competition takes place in front of a live audience and the winner is the one who gets the most applause from the crowd. The film *8 Mile* has some great footage of 'rap battles'.

Rosewater - A widely used ingredient in Lebanese cooking, used particularly to flavour cakes and sweets.





Activity 2 Watching the film

Part 1.

Meeting the family

- The film opens with a distinction being made between the attitudes and expectations of young males and females. How is this shown?
- What are the three things that Naima says the boys are interested in?
- What are the three things girls are expected to be a part of 'inside the house'?
- Describe how Ishak and his friends are dressed?
- From what culture does rap-dancing and gangsta rap, wearing caps backwards and wearing 'bling' originate?
- How is Ishak proposing to finance the repairs to his car?
- What errand is Naima asked to do, and who takes her on this drive?
- Why is she not allowed to drive there herself?
- Why do the police pull up and speak to Ishak? Does this look like harassment?
- How does Ishak translate what the police tell him to his grandmother?

Part 2

Setting up the challenges

- How is Said - Ishak and Naima's father - presented?
- What is the reaction to Thana wearing the hijab when she visits Naima?
- How do we know that Naima likes Rafi?
- How does Ishak get out of going through with the drag race?
- What is Ishak really investigating on the internet and what does his father think he is doing?
- How is Said persuaded to get the planned wedding reception at Adeel's Palace moved to another venue?
- How is the reception centre transformed into a rap contest set?
- What are Said's objections to Rafi as a boyfriend for his daughter?
- What does Said mean when he says to Ishak about his rap 'poetry' recording, 'I am immunized ... I can't be shocked ... I think it's profane ... there's too much swearing in it'?

Part 3.

Getting it all together, losing the car and jammin' at Adeel's Palace

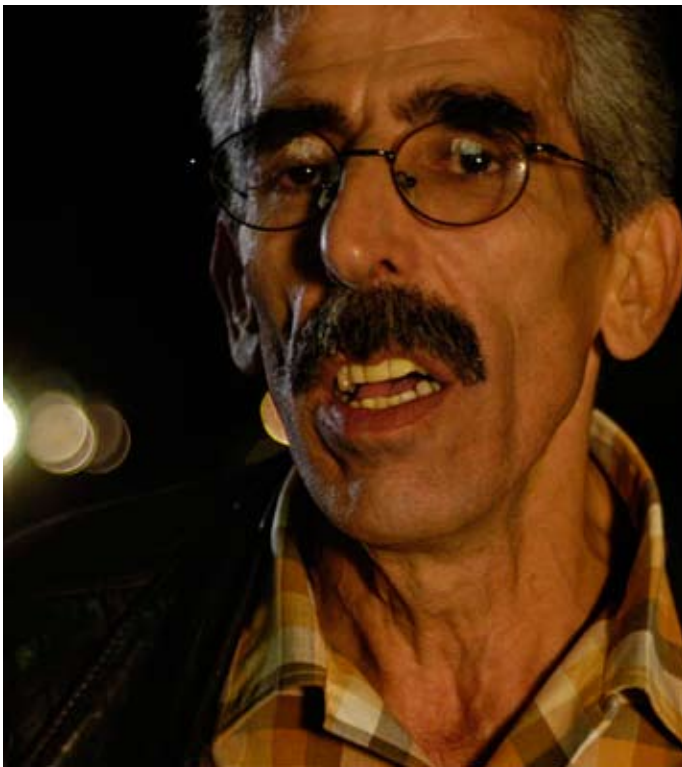
- When Omar's family turn up for their wedding reception, what is going on at the centre?
- What problems do 'the three amigos', Ishak, Musa and Hakim have in hotwiring and torching Ishak's car?
- What finally happens to Ishak's car?
- How does Said add to the entertainment?
- How does the singing and dancing at the reception centre demonstrate Said's wish that everyone should 'join the new insanity, the new millennium'?
- When Naima's grandmother tells Said to 'give them freedom and they won't sneak around', what is she referring to?
- How does grandma take part in the celebrations and show herself to be a Lebanese B-girl at heart, as Naima describes her?

Student Activity 3

Responding creatively and critically to the film

1. Write a diary entry as Naima, Ishak or Rafi, reflecting on the events of the week, ending with the rap contest and wedding reception. Try to employ the voice each one uses in the film, e.g. Ishak's entry could take the form of a new rap poem





8. How is the preparation and sharing of food shown to be an important part of life in traditional Lebanese families? Is this important in other cultures?
9. Did you find the picture of the rap-dancing grandma believable in the context of the film?

Student Activity 4 What's funny and what makes you laugh?

Comedy means different things to different people. What makes one person laugh can seem plain stupid, not funny or even offensive, to others. From Charlie Chaplin to Mr. Bean, Ali G, Seinfeld and Little Britain there are numerous comic takes on the world and people's behaviour on film and television.

Stand-up comedy and comedy festivals provide opportunities for both established and new comedians to present their material. Comic representations of ethnic groups are often presented by people from the group being 'sent up' e.g. *The Wog Boy* (Aleksi Vellis, 2000), *The Kumars at No. 42* and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Joel Zwick, 2002) all have their origins in stand-up acts.

Akmal Saleh is an Egyptian-born comedian from Sydney who has had enormous success at comedy festivals throughout the world. He deals with hot topics in a mostly non-offensive way as he touches on issues such as religion, terrorism and life in Australia today. He appears regularly on television on *Rove Live*, *The Footy Show*, and *Thank God You're Here* as well as having regular gigs on radio and on the stand-up comedy circuits.

At the 2007 Melbourne International Comedy Festival Aamer Rahman is one of the finalists in the Raw Comedy talent quest. He says of his style, 'no matter how racist or closed-minded a person is, if you can joke about something, Australians really respect it'. For Rahman, the rise of Muslim comedians is a reflection of the need to change attitudes in the broader community. He goes on to say:

There's no way of separating it from a response to the racism directed at Muslims in the wake of September 11. People in Australia didn't really know what Muslims were. They thought it was the same as Buddhism or Hindus...now it's about community self-esteem, speaking the mind of a community under siege.

... Today Tonight plus shock jock Alan Jones plus the Federal government plus ... whatever. Whether anyone likes it or not, we [Muslims] are under the spotlight.

Rahman's material covers the Australian Muslim experience, touching on racism and terrorism, as well as attitudes expressed by callers to talkback radio.

Or

2. Role-play a conversation between Rafi and Naima when they meet up after the evening at Adeel's Palace reception centre.
3. Prepare a story outline about a time when your values, and wish to do your own thing, conflicted with your parents or grandparents in a way that was finally resolved through humour and a bit of deception.
4. How do you think this film deals with the difficult issue of the very different expectations placed on males and females in the society shown in this film? Do other cultures place similar restrictions on young women and why?
5. While the boys are shown to have much more freedom than the girls, how do they express this in their lives and chosen activities?
6. What are some of the positive aspects of family life as it is shown in this film?
7. How do you think the next generation of this family will approach family life and expectations placed on females and males? Are Ishak and Naima likely to follow the traditions of their parents?





Make notes about the following questions and then discuss your answers with classmates.

- Here is a list of comedies of different styles recently on television. Choose three that make you laugh and see if you can explain why you find them funny in the right-hand column. How far do they depend on an understanding of the culture in which they originate?

Table 1

Program	Why is it funny?
The Simpsons	
Ali G / Borat - Sacha Baron-Cohen	
South Park	
Seinfeld	
Everybody Loves Raymond	
Friends	
Frasier	
Fawlty Towers	
Family Guy	
Little Britain	
Kath and Kim	
The Chaser's War on Everything	
The Office / Extras - Ricky Gervais	
The Footy Show - Sam's mailbag and Trevor Marmalade in particular	

- Comedians of Middle Eastern background like Saleh and Rahman believe that their ethnicity is the key to being able to walk the fine line between the acceptable and the offensive. Are programs that 'send up'/take the piss out of' ethnic groups only funny when they are made by people of that ethnic group, e.g. Irish, Polish, Aboriginal, Muslim and Jewish people telling jokes about themselves?
- Are there topics and areas that should be 'off limits' to comedians and not the subject of humour, e.g. the tsunami, 9/11, famines, terrorism, the Holocaust, the disabled, anti-Semitism, religious figures such as Mohammed and Jesus, drug taking by elite sportspeople? If you think these are not appropriate subjects for humour, explain why. If you think nothing should be 'off limits', justify your response.
- A lot of comedy relies on the comedian making people who take themselves seriously look ridiculous. Charlie Chaplin's 1940 film *The Great Dictator* starring Chaplin as Adenoid Hynkel lampoons Hitler and makes him look absurd, as does Ricky Gervais in *The Office* and *Extras*. These comedies are part of a long tradition. Do any of the comedies you have chosen as funny belong in this tradition?
- What kind of humour is shown in *Jammin' in the Middle E*? Which scenes and characters made you laugh and why? Consider the type of humour shown in the following scenes: the meeting with the policeman and Ishak's mistranslating of what is said to his grandmother, the two mates trying to hotwire the car, Said listening to Ishak's rap music, the scene in the reception centre when the two generations and styles come together.

The actors talk about their experience making *Jammin' in the Middle E*

Local rapper NOMISE plays Ishak.

The character I play, Ishak, it's a journey for him; he starts off being very confused. I think he's a very naive kinda young man who's just going through that stage of manhood. Learning to take responsibility for himself... he's got aspirations but whether he can stay out of trouble long enough to reach those aspirations I don't know.

Another local rapper, Matuse, plays the mechanic Rafi, the love interest in the story.

Me and the character, Rafi, we are similar in a sense that he knows the streets ... and I can relate to that because I've been on both sides of the fence ... He's similar to me but he ain't as beautiful as me!

For Julie Kanaan this is her first major role.

I play a character called Naima. She's a university student and she has a lot of expectations from her family ... basically she wants her freedom. I identify with the character ... we're quite close actually. I find that I can bring a sense of realism to the character, which is good.

Cast member Susan Chamma who plays Thana (the girl in the hijab) said about her experience making the film:

When this film started I realized that I wasn't the only Leb or wog who was into this kind of stuff... who was into making films or trying to make a difference in your community and it made me feel proud.

Taking it Further Media Watch

Make brief notes of any references in the Australian media to Muslims - on television, radio, magazines and newspapers - appearing in a single week and share what you have found. Decide how many of these stories are likely to encourage understanding and broaden our views, and how many essentially encourage stereotyping or a sense that Muslims are 'the other' in Australian society.

Habibi Jammin'

The *Habibi Jammin'* documentary takes us beyond the headlines and into the lives of the four main characters in the *Jammin' in the Middle E* production. This is much more than just your average 'Making of', as NOMISE, Julie Kanaan, Susan Chamma and Matuse talk us through the unique devising and workshop process that resulted in the making of the film. We also follow them through the production and launch stages of the project and explore the tricky topic of Arab/Australian representation and how the project has impacted on their real lives.

References

Other films and documentaries exploring similar themes

Silma's School (Jane Jeffes, 2006) - a film about the struggles and triumphs at a school for Muslims in Sydney.

Veiled Ambition (Celeste Geer, 2006) - a film about a young Muslim woman's attempts to establish a clothing business in Coburg, Victoria.

(Study guides for both these films are available from ATOM)

The Namesake (Mira Nair, 2007) - a film exploring generational and cultural differences faced by an Indian family who relocate to America.

Websites

<http://www.afic.com.au/api10.htm>

Australian Federation of Islamic Councils' site providing an overview of Muslim history in Australia and an outline of religious and cultural practices.

(Accessed 8 April 2007)

<http://www.theage.com.au/news/general/the-making-of-muslim-australia/2005/10/22/1129775997101.html#>

Article outlining the particular characteristics of Muslim life in Australia

(Accessed 6 April 2007)

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/tv-reviews/jammin-in-the-middle-e/2006/02/15/1139890793783.html>

Review of the film.

(Accessed 5 April 2007)

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1 From an article by Daniel Ziffer, *The Age*, 7 April 2007, p.8.





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