

"Zohan" or The Art of Middle-Eastern Maintenance

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'Zohan' Embraces Palestinians and Israelis - Middle East rivalries set aside for Adam Sandler comedy By Robin Rowe for [Hollywood Today](#)

HOLLYWOOD, CA (RUSHPRNEWS) 6/7/08 – “Comedy brings people together,” says Rob Schneider, who stars in Columbia Pictures ‘You Don’t Mess with the Zohan’. “The Zohan is ridiculous, so ridiculous that, I hope, everybody takes a step back and laughs together.” Adam Sandler stars as Zohan, a top Israeli commando who fakes his own death in order to pursue his dream of becoming a hairstylist in New York.

“I play Salim, a Palestinian cab driver who came to New York to fulfill his dreams,” says Schneider. “He has some residual bitterness. He’s harbored a grudge ever since, as a young man, a goat that he was very fond of was taken from him by Zohan. That stuck with him, so when he sees Zohan in New York, he’s shocked by it and plans his revenge.”

“I was very flattered that Robert Smigel wrote this part for me,” says Schneider. “It reminded me of our best ‘Saturday Night Live’ days. He handed me a great character and I knew that I had to knock it out of the park. So I had all my lines completely down, with the accent.” To master Salim’s accent, Schneider was coached by a Palestinian physician in Milwaukee.

“I’ve got it on paper, spelled out phonetically, and then Adam starts to adlib,” says Schneider. “I’m like, ‘Ohhhh.’ Fortunately, we had Palestinian actors on the set. I would go up to Ahmed Ahmed and ask him, ‘How would you say this?’” Ahmed Ahmed was the Arab comedian in Vince Vaughn’s ‘Wild West Comedy Show’.

“We went from Israel to Palestine to New York to Anaheim, all over Los Angeles, to find people from the Middle East, Israelis and Arabs alike, to be in the movie,” says director Dennis Dugan. “I think we read every SAG and non-SAG acting aspirant for this movie. With 175 roles in the movie, we had to do that.”

Daoud Heidami plays Nasi, a Palestinian cab driver who joins his friend Salim on the wild goose chase to catch Zohan. “In the Middle Eastern culture, it’s like everybody is cousins, even if you’re not really related,” says Heidami. “So if my ‘cousin’ calls me and says he needs help, I go. Everyone’s family when you need a favor.”

“I grew up watching Rob,” says Heidami. “When I found out I was going to have the opportunity to work with Rob, I was really excited. It was exciting to watch and work with him. He’s helpful and encouraging in a lot of ways. He always has such a great energy that it’s really easy to work off of him.”

Sayed Badreya plays Hamdi, another Palestinian cab driver in New York. “I’m a product of war and peace,” says Badreya. “When Sadat made peace with Israel, I had the opportunity to come to America to study film [at NYU]. When I first came here in 1979 and first sought acting jobs, the only roles available were roles as terrorists. I was young and fit and too good-looking to be a terrorist, so I couldn’t get a job. I grew my beard, put on weight, and got a job right away. Since then, for twenty years, I’ve had one line in every movie I’ve been in: ‘In the name of Allah, I kill you all.’”

“One of the great things on the set, and we didn’t do this intentionally, was that we had many scenes that involved all the Arab guys and the Israeli guys in the same scene, meaning they were all called to the set together,” says

writer Robert Smigel. “Everyone would be eating lunch together. They had a lot of passionate discussions, but it was very friendly, very healthy, very open-minded. It was really cool to see. Some of the guys have said to me that it’s the most they’ve every talked to an Arab or an Israeli before.”

Ido Mosseri plays Oori, an Israeli who becomes Zohan’s guide to all things American. “I’m always happy for the opportunity to work with Arab actors,” says Mosseri. “On the Zohan set, the first time the Arab and the Israeli actors met each other, I think we immediately became friends. We have a lot in common.”

“Toward the end of the shoot, I heard from some of the actors that they’d grown up hating or mistrusting all Israelis or all Arabs, until they came here,” Smigel adds. “They actually said the shoot was a life-altering experience. Even though we make the point in the movie, I think it was a shock to everyone to see how much they all had in common.”

About Mosseri, Smigel says, “When I was writing the Israeli characters as horndogs, I worried if it was too much of a stereotype. Fortunately, Ido fulfilled all my dreams. At one point on the set he was raving about Tel Aviv, the scene there, and how I had to visit. Then he paused and asked me if I was married, and I said yes. He said, ‘Well... maybe you don’t need to visit.’”

‘You Don’t Mess with the Zohan’

Release Date: June 6th, 2008 (US)

Rating: PG-13 for crude and sexual content throughout, language and nudity

Distributor: Columbia Pictures (Sony)

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