

## ON STAGE IN DUPEYRON'S FILM ADAPTATION OF *MONSIEUR IBRAHIM* THE PROBLEM WITH LABELS: ARAB, JEW, AND PROSTITUTE

The film *Monsieur Ibrahim* (2003), directed by François Dupeyron, raises the consciousness of students about the uneasiness associated with stereotyping. The rush to label, to stereotype one as Arab, another as Jew, still another as Prostitute, creates a fixity, a rigidity in the way people look upon the Other. Either by transcending a stereotype or by reassessing a label in a positive way, Dupeyron's film promotes good will. The film implicitly suggests what Éric-Emmanuel Schmitt hoped for when he wrote the *novella*, that is, a peaceful settlement of the problem in the Middle East where the Arab-Israeli conflict over Palestine continues (Schmitt, "Éric-Emmanuel-Schmitt, Le Site Officiel").

*Monsieur Ibrahim* is a worthy film to promote French studies. Students can develop a fresh approach to the enjoyment of the film by considering what theatrical elements the film may share with the stage, the typology of character, and the roles that characters embody.

In an audio commentary on the film, Omar Sharif remarked that his role as the Arab grocer shattered conventional ways of thinking about dissension among Arabs and Jews and that peace and harmony begin in the simplest way, with the friendship of a single Arab and a single Jew: "It is possible to love each other. It is possible to live together" (Sharif).

Schmitt, the author of *Monsieur Ibrahim et les fleurs du Coran*, wrote many plays before he turned to writing *novellas*. This work has been performed many times as a one-man performance with the character Momo as principal. In the film adaptation, the director incorporates specific aspects from theater and from the book. The film introduces the moviegoer to the young hero (*le jeune premier*) who is coming of age in 1960s Paris, a wise elder (*le sage*) who is there to guide him, and Parisian streetwalkers (*les filles de joie*) who ply their trade in one of the city's working-class Jewish sections. The streetwalkers, because they are typecast, are two-dimensional and contrast with the fully-drawn portraits of the Arab and the Jew. The marginalization of Arab, Jew, and Prostitute by the dominant culture intensifies their isolation, their sense of exclusion, and characters find in friendship, be it in the companionship of a single friend or in the camaraderie of a subculture, a way to circumvent the stereotypes.

This article will make a case that stereotypes in *Monsieur Ibrahim* are convenient labels, and when one looks beyond the labels, one may discover that the Arab and the Jew are other than what they appear. The labels "Arab" or "Jew" become inconvenient for Monsieur Ibrahim and Momo. As for the prostitutes, even they reserve the right to dream they may become an Other.

"*La rue Bleue, c'est une jolie rue, même si elle n'est pas bleue,*" says the dying Monsieur Ibrahim to his adopted son Momo. The street is not really blue, the houses are not painted blue, and the setting sun does not lend blue hues to the street. For observant Jews, blue represents the color of God's glory (Block, 3), and, in this context, the name *Rue Bleue* seems an appropriate choice for a street that is part of the fabric of a Jewish working-class neighborhood. Sharif, in his audio commentary, points out that the actual neighborhood of *Le Sentier* was used as the film location.

When the film opens, Timmy Thomas's plaintive song, "Why Can't We Live Together?" bursts forth, as if from the street itself. The song underscores the problem for people living together in a community composed of the marginalized in 1960s Paris, the Arab immigrant, the Jew, and the Prostitute.

"*Va chez l'Arabe,*" says Momo's father to his son. The Jewish boy has adopted his father's attitude, one of condescension, toward the neighborhood grocer, Monsieur Ibrahim. However, the grocer is not what he appears to be. "*Je ne suis pas arabe, Momo, je suis musulman,*" Monsieur Ibrahim tells Momo in the cozy interior of his store. The scene mirrors the status of immigrants who came from the Maghreb and often had shops on a busy street corner. They became known in the neighborhood as the "l'Arabe du coin." Ibrahim is not from the Maghreb; he is a Turkish immigrant who came to France long ago. Moreover, he practices Sufism that, according to him, is more a philosophy than a religion: "*C'est une façon de penser.*" Therefore, the "Arab" labeling of Ibrahim, while convenient, is incorrect.

Monsieur Ibrahim, a Sufi Muslim who drinks alcohol and lives by the spirit and not by the letter of the law, accepts Momo as he is, the Jewish boy who steals regularly from his shop and penny pinches to pay for prostitutes. He even exhorts the boy to continue to steal from

his grocery: "*Si tu voles ...tu voles ici.*" Long before he adopts the boy, Ibrahim gives him gifts, a pair of shoes and a beautifully bound Coran. He listens to Momo with great patience as the boy recounts his romantic successes and failures. Ibrahim shows the adolescent unconditional love, a father's love, and a new role for the grocer.

After he adopts Momo, following the suicide of the boy's father, Ibrahim's generosity continues with the purchase of a red convertible and a road trip to his Turkish homeland. The popular 1960's song "Sunny" by Bobby Hebb plays in the background as the two leave on their travels, a song that underscores the bond between father and son. The selfless giving of a Sufi Muslim father to his adopted Jewish son contradicts conventional thinking about Arab and Jew living together.

Like the old wise man personality of the theater, Ibrahim is a *sage*: "*Je sais juste ce qu'il y a dans mon Coran,*" he repeats over and over. Ibrahim takes on another role, that of teacher, and he instructs Momo through conversations where each one comprises a lesson. The lessons are practical or spiritual, varied and abundant. There is the easy lesson on how to be happy simply by projecting happiness with a smile, the practical lesson of the need to take care of one's feet, the humorous lesson on how to be thrifty in order to visit the neighborhood prostitutes, the thoughtful lesson on the presence of beauty everywhere, the clever lesson of how to succeed with a woman, the spiritual lesson of the prayerful joy of the Sufi dance, and the ultimate lesson of how to die with dignity.

The grocer leaves everything to Momo in his will, his money, his shop, and his personal Coran that contains dried blue flowers. The flowers become a priceless legacy from Ibrahim to Momo, a remembrance of Ibrahim's love for his wife, for his homeland, and a reminder to Momo that for a time he had a father and a teacher to guide him. The single book of Ibrahim's Coran becomes a site of memory, a site of mourning, and a site of joy for the boy whose father transmitted to him the knowledge of a lifetime, or in the words of M. Ibrahim, "*tout ce que j'ai appris dans mon Coran.*"<sup>1</sup>

Although Ibrahim has lived a long time in France, he is still known in the neighborhood as the "l'Arabe du coin." In

his designated role of Arab grocer, Ibrahim is polite but silent. His silent smile to his customers portrays the cautious nature of one conscious of his Otherness and suggests the grocer's awareness that, while he has been in France for many years, he still wears the label of an Arab immigrant. When Momo runs to the grocer's shop after learning that his father has taken his own life, a policeman who enters the store asks Ibrahim how long he has lived in France, the implication being that Ibrahim may be *français de sol* but not *français de souche*. At the adoption agency, the bureaucracy involved in the adoption process when one is still considered an *étranger* is overwhelming; the obvious reluctance to allow Momo's adoption to go through bespeaks of a mistrust of Ibrahim because he is not French. Finally, there is the scene with the car dealer who hesitates to accept cash payment from Ibrahim, apparently suspicious of the source of the large wad of bills. In each of these scenes, the mistrust reflects an attitude toward the Other that implies that no matter how long Ibrahim has lived in France, he will be stereotyped as the "l'Arabe du coin."

Momo appears to be a Jewish boy. He lives in a Jewish section of Paris, and he has grown up on *Rue Bleue*. His given name is Moïse. His father is a depressed Jewish lawyer who pours over his law books every night. As *le père* Schmitt does not observe his faith, Momo is a nominalist Jew. Whereas Momo's girlfriend Myriam observes Shabbat, the boy does not even bother. Being Jewish for Momo, as he explains to Monsieur Ibrahim, is nothing more than an inconvenient, tiresome label: "C'est juste un truc qui m'empêche d'être autre chose." Momo lives on the edge of the neighborhood's Jewish culture and engages in behavior not befitting an observant Jew. He breaks his piggy bank to get money to frequent prostitutes; he steals from his father and from Monsieur Ibrahim. Momo adopts the same mind set as his father every time he steals from Ibrahim's grocery: "Après tout, c'est qu'un Arabe!" The adolescent is a rather sad boy whose father has not given him any value system, except to reinforce negative stereotypes and to insist upon the virtue of thrift, an economics lesson Momo has chosen to ignore.

The problem with labeling Moïse Schmitt is a slippery one. When Momo chooses Monsieur Ibrahim to be his father, he chooses to redefine himself. The boy does not like the sad, hypercritical, legalist role-model named Schmitt, a father

who has even created an imaginary brother for Momo to model. Momo is ready to take on a set of values that have been handed down, not through the tradition of Judaism but from the "father" he has chosen to follow.

With Ibrahim as his mentor, Momo enters onto a path of self-discovery. The boy begins to smile; he eagerly listens to what the wise man has to say. As a result, Momo sheds his former label, a Jewish boy seemingly raised in the Jewish tradition, and he puts on a new identity, the adopted son of a Sufi Muslim grocer known as "l'Arabe du coin."

Since happiness is a choice, Momo chooses to follow the path of Ibrahim, and the boy finds smiles, music and dance, sunlight and blue skies, and a shiny new red convertible that takes father and son to Turkey. In Turkey, Momo discovers a new music, a new dance to give meaning to his life, a dance quite unlike the popular Madison of the 1960s, the Sufi dance of the whirling dervishes. Seeing the dervishes pray through their dancing allows Momo to free himself of his bad feelings towards his natural father. The unconditional love of Ibrahim has brought about a change in the young man. Momo's character begins to evolve in a positive fashion, except for the immature behavior he exhibits towards his mother.

Perhaps the most moving scene in the film is when Momo meets his mother who has come looking for her son. The boy hides his identity from her; his hatred for her because she abandoned him comes out in the words, "Moi, c'est Mohammed." In claiming the name "Mohammed," Momo conceals his identity of Moïse Schmitt, and he pretends to be an Other, whose name is the same as the Muslim prophet.

The curiousness of Momo's name is that the diminutive "Momo" straddles two worlds, both Jewish and Arab. If a name is way to identify, the name "Momo" encompasses both traditions.

The final scene of the film finds an adult Momo giving a small boy a lesson on stereotypes. "Je ne suis pas arabe, Momo," he tells the boy who has just stolen a can of food from his grocery store on *Rue Bleue*. Momo may be a French Jew; nonetheless, like his adopted father, Momo is known on the street as the "l'Arabe du coin."

Labels can be tricky on *Rue Bleue*, even when accurate. The derivation of the word "prostitute" comes from the Latin *pro* (in front) and *statuere* (to cause to stand), a label that suits the girls who parade themselves in front of passersby (*Le*

*Petit Robert* 1, 1553). Although the prostitutes may be considered typecast, as in the theater, they are still the leading ladies of *Rue Bleue*. They are "on stage" nonstop and brazenly approach men who pass by or boldly wave at them as they drive by. The street becomes their stage; their boudoirs are their hotel rooms, behind the scenes. Their potential clients watch their high heels clickety-click on the street; male shoppers pay attention to hand-held dainty purses that contain a day's earnings before deciding to go "backstage." Their clients may well share the point of view of Monsieur Ibrahim who states matter-of-factly to Momo that "[l]e Paradis est ouvert à tous."

The most challenging role for these secondary characters is for them to appear to be Other than who they really are. In reality, the *filles de joie* generally come from the working class. They are good at playing the role of a seductress. Once they have snared their client, they are all the same; it is the money up front; serving the client comes later, after the cash slips into purses. The prostitute is, when the day is done, just another working class girl, but with a difference.

When Brigitte Bardot comes to *Rue Bleue* for a film shoot, the entire street turns out to view a star who exudes sexuality. Although she plays a role where she is rather common looking, the star is stunningly beautiful in the role of a sensual woman who goes off with a well-to-do man in a shiny red convertible, every prostitute's dream.

The Dupeyron film suggests that the *filles de joie* identify with the star because in the film scene from Godard's *Le Mépris*, the leading lady is going have an affair with the handsome man in the red convertible. Sylvie, an attractive blonde streetwalker, remarks that "elle (the star) couche aussi," as if to give her approbation. The Godard film suggests to the girls that they can be the stars of *Rue Bleue* and, like Brigitte Bardot, can leave *Rue Bleue* with a rich and handsome man in a fancy car. Like Brigitte Bardot, the girls are performers who get paid for their performance. Their mistake is to fantasize, if only for a moment, that they have put on a different label. Bardot can lure men and use her sensuality to move beyond her present condition in Godard's film, but watching the scene fills the streetwalkers' minds with mistaken notions about who they are.

The final scene in the film finds an adult Momo sitting on a stool in his grocery counting change. Momo has become for the neighborhood the "l'Arabe

du coin," like his adopted father. He turns the radio on, and the Timmy Thomas song that opened the film, "Why Can't We Live Together" offers a final invitation for peoples of different ethnicities, races, and colors to live together and accept the beauty of Otherness.

The leading men and ladies of *Rue Bleue* have played their parts convincingly, either eluding convenient stereotypes like Ibrahim or Momo or embracing them like the prostitutes of *Rue Bleue*. François Dupeyron's film adaptation of Schmitt's *Monsieur Ibrahim* issues a caveat to moviegoers, namely, that labels can be problematic, except when affixed to canned goods in the "corner Arab" grocery store.

#### **Suggested Activities for the University Level**

- A. Perform one-act plays choosing key scenes in the film, for example, the pivotal scenes between Monsieur Ibrahim and Momo that take place in the grocer's shop or scene selections from their conversations together on their travels to Turkey, or Monsieur Ibrahim's final lesson to Momo.
- B. Class study of the songs of the 1960s used in the film and how the songs directly relate to events and their relevance within the film.
- C. Host a Guest Speaker Series on campus, sponsored by the French Honor Society, an interdisciplinary series where lecturers speak about various aspects of the 1960s; political, social, historical, cultural.
- D. Host an International Film Festival on campus with the title "Coming of Age" films sponsored by the Modern Language Department.

#### **Suggested Community Activities:**

- A. Invited guest speakers to participate in a Public Library Lecture Series, including a film viewing and then discussion of the World's Great Religions, Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, and Orthodox that play a part in the film.
- B. International Film Festival Focus sponsored by the Public Library on the genre "Coming of Age" cinema (see D in University Level Activities).
- C. Visits or group excursions: The film *Monsieur Ibrahim* and Two Great World Religions: Islam and Judaism. Visit to the local mosque and an invited guest speaker to give a lecture on the Muslim religion; visit to the local synagogue and an invited guest speaker to give a lecture on Judaism (this works well in larger communities or in proximity to larger communities).

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#### **Note**

<sup>1</sup> While it is not the purpose of this study to delve deeply into Sufi philosophy, to reconsider Momo's coming of age in relation to the Sufi path would be a rich area for future scholarly research. Ibrahim's guidance of Momo includes a spiritual dimension; as a Sufi Muslim, Ibrahim assumes to some degree the role of a murshid or spiritual guide. Since Momo seeks out or has chosen Ibrahim as his father, his guidance would include a spiritual aspect. In my opinion, the film implies, although it is not expressly stated, that one aspect of Momo's relationship to Ibrahim is that of Ibrahim's disciple or *mureed*. For more on Sufism, see works of Celia Genn and Carl Ernst indicated below.

#### **Works Cited**

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