

Culture

Telling the story of Arab-Americans on film

Abe Kasbo's *A Thousand and One Journeys: The Arab Americans*

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Washington

“Arab-Americans have been in the weeds of American history for too long and it’s time for the flower to blossom and tell this story” says Abe Kasbo, chief executive officer of Verasoni Worldwide. A Syrian immigrant, he is the man behind the new documentary *A Thousand and One Journeys: The Arab Americans*. “Particularly in the wake of 9/11,” Kasbo said, “I saw how incredibly important it could be if average Americans knew who their Arab-American neighbours really are and about the aspirational values we share.”

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His goal in making the film was to “bring a really important story to the public about our shared values and the remarkable contributions made by Arab-Americans in all the professions over two centuries”.

Americans are familiar with the narratives of Irish and Italian immigrants, refugees from World War II, Asia and now Latinos “but few know the story of millions of Arab-Americans”, Kasbo said.

The film is essentially a string of vignettes of interesting lives. These up-close-and-personal conversations tell the Arab-American story.

Commenting on impressions left by the intense, and mostly negative, media focus on the Middle East, Kasbo expresses frustration: “Arab-Americans are not ISIS (the Islamic State). It’s simply not relevant to this story, to who we are as proud Americans contributing every day to the fabric of this great nation. That’s not the dialog we need to be having.”

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So, who are the Arab-Americans? People may self-identify as Arab-American if, like Kasbo, they emigrated from an Arab country and became US citizens or if they were born in the United States to Arab parents. Like all immigrants to the United States, Arabs sought brighter futures for their families and many became prosperous. According

to the US Census Bureau, citizens identifying themselves as Arabs or Arab-Americans enjoy a higher than average level of education and income than the national average.

“These are good solid citizens,” says Kasbo, “besides including some remarkable characters that most people have no clue are Arab-American.”

One Thousand and One Journeys celebrates this vibrant community but also highlights vulnerabilities, such as increased federal monitoring of Americans of Middle Eastern descent.

All immigrants experience discrimination for one or two generations but few other ethnic groups have been as demeaned as have Arabs. And today, being Arab and Muslim brings added scrutiny – and often, added insult.

Fears stoked by some politicians and the media, combined with the Middle East’s unrelenting conflicts, have steadily intensified more negative views of Arabs. As Arab-American comedian Dean Obeidallah quipped, “On September 10, I went to bed as a white guy and on September 11 I woke up an Arab.”

Anthony Shadid, the New York Times foreign correspondent who died in 2012 while covering the Syrian civil war, was a major supporter of Kasbo’s film. “Growing up in Oklahoma,” he said, “you always had this notion of being Arab-American but at the same time, not wanting to be too different.”

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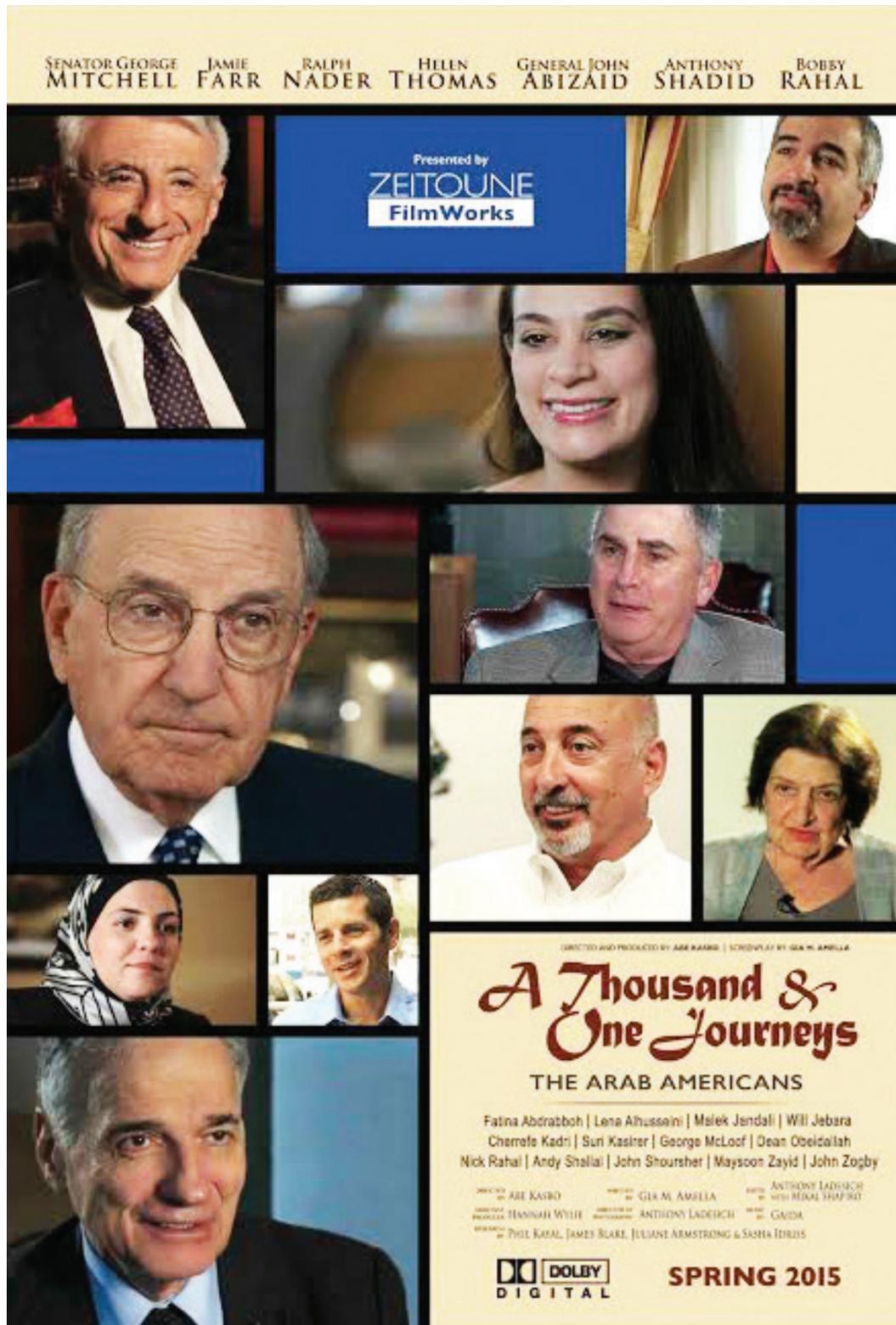
Many viewers will be surprised to see that some highly successful and widely known Americans are of Arab descent and how their heritage has affected their lives. Retired US Army General John Abizaid, for example, tells how “as an Arab-American, it’s always interesting getting on an airplane and all of a sudden you’re selected for a special search.

It happened to me as a retired four-star general that led our forces in the Middle East.”

Other Arab-Americans who have crossed into the American mainstream include Dr Michael DeBakey, who invented the artificial heart and the Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (MASH) units. Coincidentally, another Arab-American, Jamie Farr, played the role of cross-dressing Corporal Maxwell Klinger in the *M*A*S*H* television series.

Consumer advocate Ralph Nader recalls his father saying, “When I sailed past the Statue of Liberty in 1912, I took it seriously.” Nader explains, “He meant freedom... free speech was a reason for being.”

Composer Malek Jandali, a Muslim, describes working as an organist in a Christian church for ten



years. “I was so amazed by [their] decision to embrace another human being of a different religion,” Jandali says. In the style of Ken Burns’ documentaries, Kasbo paints a rich tableau of the Arab-American community in their own voices, reinforced with solid source material. Cameo appearances are interspersed with voice narrative and images of photos and mementos conveying the

community’s contributions to American society and the interplay of conversations with facts nicely reinforces the theme.

This film marks that moment of “before” and “after,” to establish a positive appreciation and identity for a people who’ve been living in relative anonymity for generations. It presents a convincing case for the vitality and contributions of Arab-

Americans to the fabric of their adopted country.

A Thousand and One Journeys: The Arab Americans is expected to be released in summer 2015. A trailer about the film can be found at: www.arabamericathefilm.com.

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