

The New York Times

‘Little Mosque’ Defuses Hate With Humor



Canadian Broadcasting Company

An episode of “Little Mosque on the Prairie” last week drew the CBC’s largest audience in a decade.

By CHRISTOPHER MASON

Published: January 16, 2007 New York Times

TORONTO, Jan. 15 — When it comes to producing a funny television show or movie in [Canada](#), producers here have a reliable stable of topics: French-English relations, urban-rural dynamics and anything that involves a bumbling politician or the United States.

But Islam — something of a third rail of comedy throughout the Western world — did not make the list, which is one reason the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s new situation comedy, “Little Mosque on the Prairie,” is attracting such attention here. “It is a risk doing a sitcom about what can be considered a very touchy subject,” said Kirstine Layfield, executive director of network programming at CBC.



But last Tuesday's series premiere attracted 2.09 million viewers, impressive in a country where an audience of one million is a runaway hit. The CBC had not had a show draw that size audience in a decade, according to the network.

The show follows a small group of Muslims in, of all places, a prairie town in Saskatchewan where, in the first episode, the group was trying to establish a mosque in the parish hall of a church. A passer-by, seeing the group praying, rushes to call a "terrorist hot line" to report Muslims praying "just like on CNN," which touches off a local firestorm.

Hoping to avoid making a stir in the town, the group hires a Canadian-born imam from Toronto who quits his father's law firm to take the job — career suicide, his father thinks. On the way, he is detained in the airport after being overheard on his cellphone saying, "If Dad thinks that's suicide, so be it," adding, "This is Allah's plan for me."

Later, a leader of the Muslim group is seen defending to a local person the plan to turn the parish hall into a mosque. "It's a pilot project," he says, leading the man to exclaim wide-eyed, "You're training pilots?!"

A bit hokey, perhaps. But light-hearted moments like these between Muslims and non-Muslims have been few and far between in Canada of late.

Last year, 13 Muslim men and five youths were arrested in the Toronto area in connection with a suspected plot to attack several targets in southern Ontario. Their case continues to wind through the courts. In September, an inquiry cleared a Canadian citizen, Maher Arar, of terrorism accusations — for which the United States deported him to Syria, where he was tortured — based on faulty intelligence from Canadian authorities.

The show's creator, Zarqa Nawaz, said that she was not trying to bridge all of the cultural gaps, but that she hoped the program could elicit laughs on all sides and perhaps foster a better understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims.

"I want the broader society to look at us as normal, with the same issues and concerns as anyone else," said Ms. Nawaz, who based the series loosely on her own experiences as a Muslim woman who moved from Toronto to the prairie. "We're just as much a part of the Canadian fabric as anyone else."

The CBC has committed to eight episodes of the program, and is negotiating with the show's producers for 13 more in the spring. Despite the initial success, the network is proceeding with caution, having hired a consultant to flag anything in the scripts that could offend audiences.

The show has generally been well received by Muslim leaders, who welcome the light touch it brings to issues that are normally debated in numbing seriousness.

“Muslims are a bit late in laughing at themselves, but we have to use humor to remedy these divisions, just like any community,” said Mohamed Elmasry, an imam and president of the Canadian Islamic Congress.

The show has been criticized for treating too lightly the threat posed by radical Islam and the imams who preach it. The newly hired imam in “Little Mosque on the Prairie,” Amaar Rashid, is clean-shaven, wears tight jeans and has the “ravishing looks of a soap-opera star,” as the columnist Margaret Wenthe wrote in the Toronto daily newspaper The Globe and Mail.

“If there’s an imam on Earth who resembles this one, I will convert to Islam, don the veil and catch the next plane to Mecca,” she added.

But what some see as a weakness, others see as a strength. Syed Asad Dean, chairman of the Meadowvale Islamic Center in Mississauga, a western suburb of Toronto, said portraying Muslims as moderate members of the mainstream could have a beneficial effect on young Muslims.

“More extreme Muslims are telling our youth that Canada is not interested in our community, so something like this works dead against that type of mentality,” he said. “The youth see it on television and say, hey, they recognize us and they actually made an investment to talk about us and our life in Canada.”

The program’s producers have spoken with television executives in the United States, Dubai, Israel, England, Germany and France among others. The first and second episodes have been sent to networks and stations that have expressed an interest.

In the United States, only cable stations have responded so far, but CBC officials say they are hoping to pitch the show to the larger networks.



Cast members rehearse on the set of "Little Mosque on the Prairie." "First and foremost, it's entertainment," says the show's Muslim creator. (By Christopher Brown -- Associated Press)



The Washington Post

Muslims Crack Wise in a Canadian Sitcom

By Beth Duff-Brown
Associated Press
Monday, January 8, 2007

TORONTO -- The bearded imam in traditional robe is railing against pop culture idols, warning Muslims to protect themselves from the evil influences of prime time.

" 'American Idol,' 'Canadian Idol,' I say all idols should be smashed," Baber tells a small congregation sitting on the floor of a makeshift mosque. " 'Desperate Housewives'? Why should they be desperate when they're only performing their natural womanly duties?"

Rayyan, a gorgeous young woman in a head scarf, whispers to her mother: "Hey, did you tape last night's episode?"

The scene is from the first episode of the CBC comedy "Little Mosque on the Prairie." (It airs tomorrow in Canada. Only some Americans in border states will be able to view it.)

The producers hope the topical humor about Islam and Christianity -- with a backdrop of bumbling buffoons and everyday cross-purposes -- will be as funny as it is fresh.

"To me, this is not a political show, this is not about the Iraq war, it's not about 9/11," said the show's creator, Canadian Muslim Zarqa Nawaz. "First and foremost, it's entertainment."

It may not be about 9/11, but it often feels like it. In the first episode, a handsome young Muslim man is dragged by police from an airport line after he barks into his mobile phone: "If Dad thinks that's suicide, so be it. This is Allah's plan for me."

He is talking about his decision to leave his father's Toronto law firm and become the spiritual leader of the small Muslim community in the fictitious prairie town of Mercy.

Another scene has a character named Joe stumbling upon the new makeshift mosque housed in the parish hall of an Anglican church, then rushing out to call the "terrorist attack hot line" when he sees the Muslims bowing to pray, "just like on CNN."

Nawaz noted that while the classic sitcoms "All in the Family" and "The Jeffersons" dealt with bigotry and racism for the first time on American television, their success was based on the hilarious delivery of those issues, not on preaching to viewers.



"If it humanizes Muslims, that's great," she said during a recent taping in a studio outside Toronto. "But we live and die by the ratings, and whether people find it funny."

In another scene from the first episode, the Muslims are arguing about the start of the holy month of Ramadan, when Muslims fast from dawn to dusk. The imam, Baber, insists Ramadan begins when the crescent of the new moon is observed with the eye.

But Yasir, a Lebanese Canadian construction company owner, suggests: "Why don't we just log on to Moonsighting.com and let the starvation begin!"

His wife then offers: "Why don't we just do what the Christians do: Pick a month and just stick to it? I mean, what's wrong with December? Shorter days for fasting and way, way better shopping."

While Nawaz and the executive producers don't want the show to be pegged as a Muslim comedy, they believe the time is right for TV to tackle the treatment of 800,000 Muslims in Canada and some 6 million in the United States.

"It really is a show that focuses on relationships and families; it's not about terrorism," said executive producer Mary Darling. "But we're not afraid of introducing those issues."

"Since 9/11, what we see on the news nearly every day portrays Muslims in terms of conflict," said Nawaz, the 39-year-old mother of four who dresses in jeans and sneakers, while covering her hair with a traditional hijab.

She moved from Toronto to the prairie town of Regina, Saskatchewan, a decade ago when she married. Much of the show reflects the conflict and humor she experienced in the more intimate and conservative mosque.

While some media have questioned whether the show might insult Islamic fundamentalists -- as did the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad -- Nawaz believes Muslims deserve more credit.

"This assumption in the media that Muslims are going to riot in the streets, freak out and get upset is ridiculous," she said. "It's just a comedy."

January 9, 2007

Little Mosque on the Prairie

Globe and Mail Update

Little Mosque on the Prairie, the new CBC comedy about Muslims living in a small prairie town, generated tons of conversation and hype before it even premiered on Tuesday night.

The show's creator, Zarqa Nawaz, kindly agreed to join The Globe and Mail for an online discussion Wednesday at 2:30 p.m. EST. Your questions and Ms. Nawaz's answers will appear at the bottom of this page.

The inspiration for the show's storylines comes from the real-life experiences of Ms. Nawaz, the creator, consulting producer and writer. She was born in Liverpool, raised in Toronto, and moved to Regina ten years ago with her husband and children.

"I think people are assuming because of the title and the subject matter that it's going to be really controversial and political. But it's just a comedy that happens to have Muslim people in it, and it's meant to make people laugh," Ms. Nawaz said before the show's premiere. "It's about relationships and human interactions and life in a rural setting. But it's really the first comedy of its kind in North America, and that's why it's so intriguing."

Ms. Nawaz worked as a freelance writer/broadcaster with CBC radio, and in various capacities with CBC *Newsworld*, CTV's *Canada AM*, and CBC's *The National*. Ms. Nawaz got into filmmaking in 1996, when she took a summer film workshop and made *BBQ Muslims*, a short comedy about two brothers who are suspected of being terrorists after their barbecue blows up. In 2005, Ms. Nawaz's documentary entitled *Me and the Mosque*, a co-production with the National Film Board and the CBC, was broadcast on CBC's *Rough Cuts*. She has recently finished a feature-length screenplay entitled *Real Terrorists Don't Belly Dance*.

On Tuesday, Globe and Mail television critic John Doyle **praised the *Little Mosque* pilot** [<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/rtgam.20070109.wxdoyle09/bnstory/entertainment/home>] as the smartest thing the CBC has done in years. "It's hokey as hell," Mr. Doyle wrote. "But it's terrifically good-natured, has a few terrific jokes and its mere existence is a grand-slam



assertion that Canadian TV is different and that the best of Canadian TV amounts to a rejection of the hegemony of U.S. network TV."

But Globe columnist Margaret Wentz **was less impressed.**

[<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/rtgam.20070109.wxcowent09/bnstory/entertainment/home>] "It is so risk-averse, so painfully correct, it makes your teeth ache. No sacred cows were gored, or even scratched, in the making of this show," Ms. Wentz wrote in Tuesday's paper. "The only possible offence in this show is to the intelligence."

What do you think? Please **send in your questions**

[<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/rtgam.20070109.wlivezarqa0110/commentstory/specialcomment/home#comment>] for Ms. Nawaz, and join the conversation on Wednesday.

Rebecca Dube, globeandmail.com: Welcome everyone, and thanks to Ms. Nawaz for joining us online today. There are a ton of reader questions, so we'll try to get to as many as possible. There are also a lot of comments, so I'll try to post those too after the discussion is over.

Alejandro Munoz from Victoria, BC writes: Hello Ms. Nawaz, I enjoyed watching the show tonight. I see the show as way to show young Canadians that it is possible to live in an ethnic community peacefully despite religious differences. However, do you think that Muslims and Westerners will ever be able to live in the type of harmony that is presented in the show? I like the characters interpreting the Muslim women. They are so cute and pretty. Good luck to you.

Zarqa Nawaz: I would say we live in that harmony now, in North America. I think North America is one of the most harmonious environments for Muslims and non-Muslims living together. I had a wonderful experience growing up as a Canadian of Muslim faith and I feel that's what informs the comedy - it comes from a good place.

Pat Foley writes: I saw the show last night and decided that if the regular Wednesday timeslot conflicts with Jericho's return in February, I will have to find a new time to watch Jericho. The show has a lot of potential. While the first episode touched somewhat on fear and racism, I am wondering if it will get deeper into issues, or be just light and funny? At any rate, I think it is high time that Muslims are portrayed as regular people who can be fun and ditch the stereotype. And what the heck is wrong with having a hunky Imam anyway??

Zarqa Nawaz: We try to find the comedy in everyday situations and in relationships, and sometimes there are deeper issues that we will delve into, such as next week's show, which deals with gender segregation in the mosque.

Fred Smuts from St Johns Canada writes: How much are you paid by Al Qaida to produce your show to try to soften up the Canadian public for an attack? The idea is to reduce our suspicion of these lovely humorous Moslems so they can do their worst. Does the young



Ontario man who wanted to behead the Prime Minister have a part in the show? Next time a Moslem buys a ton of nitrogen fertilizer, it's supposed to be a big joke. Right?

Zarqa Nawaz: I don't think Osama is going to be very happy with this show, because I think he'd rather Muslims be fearful of non-Muslims. So, unfortunately, I don't think we'll be getting any funds from his organization.

Jim Heller from Victoria Canada writes: Your first episode left me thinking that you're determined to explain away all fear and criticism of Islam and its adherents as confused and mistaken and that any differences between Muslim beliefs and western pluralistic values are merely trivial. Do you yourself believe these things? Really? Based on what? And, if, on the other hand, you agree that there's a legitimate basis for concern about Islam in western society, how, if at all, will this ever be reflected in your show?

Zarqa Nawaz: Although this show is a comedy, I don't want to whitewash the issues of racism, extremism and sexism that exist within both communities. But I don't believe that these issues come from the faith; they come from patriarchy and years of male bias in the interpretation of the scriptures. I have dealt with these issues in my documentary, *Me and the Mosque*, if you're interested in what my take is on these type of subjects.

I don't believe there has to be a contradiction between Muslim beliefs and Western pluralism. The fact that I can be comfortable with my Canadian identity along with my Islamic identity proves to me that it's working.

Maurice LaBorde from Winnipeg writes: I saw the debut last night and loved it!! It's sure to become the next great Canadian sitcom in likes of "The Beachcombers" or "Degrassi." I look forward to watching it with my family for years to come! Just out of curiosity, how do you balance your faith and the secular world at home?

Zarqa Nawaz: I don't really have problems balancing my faith. I find it more challenging balancing my role as a mother of four young children with an intensely demanding career! I'm very fortunate to have an incredibly supportive husband who doesn't mind being a "single parent" and going on family vacations without his wife a lot of the time.

Daniel U from Dartmouth Canada writes: I was really hoping that this show was going to be amusingly entertaining: it was not. What was the aim of the show? Was it to show that all non Muslim Canadians are ignorant and bigoted? I guess it's okay to suggest that Christianity is a dying religion by scripting that the priest only rented the church because he did not have enough parishioners to pay the rent. Why could you not just imply that Christians do not worship on Fridays and the church was free? Were the creators advised by the CBC's executives or did you just come up with this on your own?



Zarqa Nawaz: First of all it's a comedy, and comedy often comes out of stereotypes. Every character is flawed in some way, and we try to put the stereotypes in context. For example, even though Baber, as a conservative orthodox Muslim, is very self-righteous and judgmental, later on in the episodes we'll see him interacting with his teenage daughter, where he'll have to learn to compromise.

And Fred Tupper is a right-wing radio shock jock who at first seems very one-dimensional, but as the show progresses we learn he has a great fondness for Fatima, the Muslim matriarch of the show, and it's an interesting development for his character. So you have to create characters with some place to go. I think you should give the show a chance, and hopefully it'll grow on you.

M Phillips from Canada writes: First of all I watched your show last night and I thought it was quite good. I like the characters and the actors chosen to play them. I wish you well for the future. My question is this, How do you intend to have your new Imam "modernize" Islam on TV while staying true to the traditions of this religion? I thought the example of "cucumber sandwiches and curried goat" showed this possible tension in a light way.

Zarqa Nawaz: Essentially Islam is an abstract set of principles of choosing good and forbidding evil. How you do that varies according to the times you live in. So it's not as much about modernizing Islam as it is about getting some Muslims to think about issues in a new way while maintaining the integrity of their faith. For example, the issue of gender equity in a mosque is a big deal for me. We deal with this subject in the second episode of the show. But ultimately the show is a comedy and its purpose is to entertain, so I leave the social activism to the mosques.

R Swift from Forest Canada writes: You're going to get criticism from people like previous commenter Fred Smuts. Do you also anticipate getting criticism from fellow Muslims, for different reasons? BTW, I enjoyed the first show last night and plan to watch more, although I wouldn't mind if it became a bit edgier.

Zarqa Nawaz: I think a sign of a healthy show is debate. I know I can't make everyone happy, otherwise the show would be watered down to nothing. As a Muslim I would not make a show that would offend my sensibility much less that of my community. But at the same time, you have to push a little to grow and evolve. Last year I made a documentary entitled *Me and the Mosque* about gender inequities in North American mosques. I did not make that doc in a reactionary or spiteful way. My community responded with support and agreed it was time to discuss this subject in a public forum. This proves to me that you can bring up issues that need to be addressed without inciting anger. I think the key is in the approach.

Rebecca Dube: Thanks to Ms. Nawaz for answering questions, and thanks to everyone who tuned in for this conversation. I'm sorry we couldn't get to all the questions - as I mentioned, there were a lot - but you can still add your thoughts using our comment function.

theguardian

NEWS
BLOG

Little Mosque on the Prairie

A new Canadian sitcom tackles post-9/11 humour, the lives of the country's Muslims and what happens when a big city imam takes up a new job in the sticks.

Canada has a reasonable track record in comedy, counting Dan Aykroyd, Mike Myers and Jim Carrey among its sons. Its latest bid for laughs is the sitcom [Little Mosque on the Prairie](#), the pilot of which follows a Toronto imam dispatched to tend to the Muslims of the fictionalised rural town of Mercy.

First of all, let's get through the bad jokes from the last few days' write-ups. **Popped Culture** plays with the title of a US sitcom for its [Everybody loves Ramadan](#) headline. The [review](#) from Canada's **National Post** remarks that the "good news is the new show doesn't suck, thereby sparing us no end of 'Little Mosque Bombs' headlines."

When you are done, this is the [show](#) (21mins 37secs) from broadcaster **CBC** on Google Video.

The humour (and situations) are firmly post-9/11. The episode begins with the clean-cut lawyer-turned-imam Amaar queuing for his flight to the prairies as his mother calls to try and persuade him to stay.

"Don't put dad on. I've been planning this for months, it's not like I've dropped a bomb on him. If dad thinks this is suicide, so be it. This is Allah's plan for me."

An alarmed woman in front decides not to fly. Soon after, a police officer pulls Amaar out of the queue. In police custody he attempts to explain he was joking. "Muslims around the world are known for their sense of humour," he says. "I did not know that," says the police officer, completely straight. "That was another joke," the imam fruitlessly explains.

Other than that, the situations explore the comedy of a city dweller out of his natural environment ("You don't make cappuccino? What am I doing here?") and the standard sitcom fare of misunderstanding and rivalries - in this case both between Muslims and Mercy's Muslim and non-Muslim residents. It's not the sharpest, most innovative, comedy you'll ever see, but that does not mean lines such as "It's not Canadian Idol they hate ... it's freedom" fail to raise a smile.

The reception is generally positive. The **Foreign Policy Passport** blog hopes that each episode's "dose of laughs" [succeeds in demystifying Muslims](#) while **Dr Blogstein** argues that, if shown in the US, it could do for Islamic Americans what the *Cosby Show* [did for African-Americans in the 80s](#).

[Still, there's no pleasing everybody](#). **Political Mavens** describes it as an "interesting case study in the mental workings of more-tolerant-than-thou liberal television producers here in the Great White North".



Posted by

[Simon Jeffery](#)

Friday 12 January 2007 11.20 EST guardian.co.uk





Canada Chuckles at 'Little Mosque on the Prairie'

by Richard Reynolds

January 18, 2007

A new sitcom on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation is getting attention around the world. *Little Mosque on the Prairie* deals with a group of Muslims living in a small prairie town in Canada.

The name may bring back memories of the long-running U.S. drama *Little House on the Prairie*, but that's where the comparison stops. This 30-minute comedy is more akin to British comedies than American ones. There is no laugh track, few obvious jokes, and the humor is rather gentle.

In a scene from the first episode, the mosque's new imam is arrested at the airport after someone listening to his conversation becomes concerned.

"If Dad thinks it's suicide, then so be it," a character says. "This is Allah's plan for me. I'm not throwing my life away. I'm moving to the prairies."

"To run a mosque?" his companion asks skeptically, quickly followed by this from a security guard:

"Step away from the bag — you're not going to paradise today."

The show's creator, Zarka Nawaz, says it's a pretty standard formula: the fish out of water. In this case, the fish is the mosque's new imam, a liberal man who quits his big-city law practice to take over the tiny mosque, which is in a rented church hall.

"Every artist writes from their own experience," Nawaz says. And she's Muslim.

According to Nawaz, the show's setting provides a rich vein of misunderstanding from which to mine its humor. The small-town people are, well, provincial. The town's tiny Muslim population seems a bit out of place, and it's a strange group to say the least.



In the second episode, one of the mosque's members tries to erect a barrier between men and women in the prayer hall, and the resulting dispute makes the Muslims and the town's non-Muslims look equally silly.

But the show has a definite subtext, although Nawaz denies it's intentional. Canadians love to laugh at their southern neighbors in the United States.

John Doyle, the TV critic for *The Toronto Globe and Mail*, says many viewers will be thinking of the U.S. as they chuckle.

"The kind of redneck attitudes from some of the locals in the small town toward the Muslims is very much reflective of an American suspicion of Muslims and not a Canadian suspicion," he notes.

Muslims in Canada watched the show with some anticipation but there were few vocal complaints. Some thought the show's portrayal of Muslims and Islam was insulting, but when pushed, most admitted that the portrayal of the non-Muslims in the show was just as insulting.

"I would expect that if you had this kind of comedy in a church or in a synagogue, you'd have a similar reaction from different parts of the community," says Walid Hejazi, a university professor and a Muslim. "But again, because of the image that Muslims have in the media, this particular show generates extra interest in how the community's going to react, in light of other things that have been in the media about Islam."

When the show was first announced, there were suggestions that CBC may be making itself vulnerable to the same sort of issues that arose when a Danish magazine published cartoons of the prophet Mohammed.

The CBC has hired a consultant and worked with several imams to ensure there is nothing in the show Muslims might find offensive, and the network insists there is no risk of real controversy.

Yet they need look no further than *Little Mosque on the Prairie* to see how things sometimes spin out of control:

"Is this terrorist attack hotline?" a character asks. Then: "You want me to hold?"



Katie Couric Does Islam Special, Talks About Muslim TV Shows (VIDEO)

First Posted: 01/19/11 01:50 PM ET Updated: 05/25/11 07:25 PM ET

Katie Couric made waves with her statement that the U.S. needed a Muslim version of "The Cosby Show" to familiarize people with Islam and counteract anti-Muslim bigotry. On Wednesday, Couric devoted her weekly web series "@KatieCouric" [webcast](#) to a special on Islam in America, and she raised the subject again.

One of Couric's guests was Zaib Shaikh, a Canadian actor who stars in a television show called "**Little Mosque On The Prairie.**" As she introduced him, Couric noted that the show "is sort of like a Muslim 'Cosby Show.' Who knew?"

Later, she asked Shaikh to talk about the show. In doing so, she brought up her opinion that culture can change peoples' attitudes.

"I'm assuming [the show is] educating people or at least normalizing Islam to a lot of people who are unfamiliar with it," she said. "That was sort of the point of my suggestion, that popular culture can be incredibly influential in just making things less a novelty, and less something to be feared or less of the unknown."

THE **Hollywood** **REPORTER**

AXN Spain Buys Little Mosque Sitcom

11:52 AM PDT 3/22/2011 by Etan Vlessing

Sale follows U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton praising sitcom for fostering cross-cultural unity.

TORONTO -- The Canadian sitcom *Little Mosque on the Prairie* has been sold to Sony Pictures Entertainment Networks' AXN channel in Spain and Portugal.

Series producer WestWind pictures and LUK internacional S. A. sold the Sony station 80 episodes of the comedy about fish-out-of-water Canadian Muslims in Saskatchewan.

Little Mosque will shortly start production on a sixth season of 13 episodes for the Canadian Broadcasting Corp.

The Spanish sale brings to 82 world markets that *Little Mosque* now airs in after a recent launch on RAI TV in Italy, ahead of Slovenia's Pro Plus launching the Canadian series in April.

The comedy is also set up at 20th Century Fox TV, which has the U.S. format rights to *Little Mosque*.

American interest of a different kind for the Canadian sitcom also recently surfaced among the Wikileaks U.S. cable revelations when U.S. Embassy officials in Ottawa reported back to Washington, D.C. that the *Little Mosque* sitcom offered negative stereotypes of Americans.

The series' executive producer, **Mary Darling**, a dual American and Canadian citizen, appealed to U.S. Secretary of State **Hillary Rodham Clinton**, who wrote back to support the series' attempt to fight prejudice and misunderstandings about Muslims with comedy.

"I appreciate your good cheer and thank you for everything you are doing to foster cross-cultural unity and understanding through comedy," Rodham Clinton wrote in a Dec. 8, 2010 letter to Darling.



Created by **Zarqa Nawaz**, *Little Mosque* focuses on a small Muslim community in a fictional Saskatchewan town.

The show premiered on CBC in early 2007 to extensive international attention and strong ratings.

The fifth season's finale will air March 28 with a cliff-hanger: the hip Imam Amaar, played by **Zaib Shaikh**, is set to wed Rayyan (**Sitara Hewitt**), until he receives an out-of-town job offer that tests his bride-to-be.

'Little Mosque' receives Gemini nominations

1:45 PM PDT 10/14/2010 by Etan Vlessing, AP

'Flashpoint' lands 15 noms; Winter Olympics grabs 17 in all

Finally, some Gemini Awards love for the Canadian Muslim comedy "Little Mosque on the Prairie."

After being shut out of the industry kudosfest since 2007, the WestWind Pictures-produced chuckler for the Canadian Broadcasting Corp. snagged a best comedy nod Tuesday as the Geminis, Canada's TV awards, unveiled nominations in Toronto.

And two "Little Mosque" directors, Jim Allodi and Michael Kennedy, also made the Geminis cut by being nominated in the best comedy direction category.

"Little Mosque on the Prairie," a comedy about fish-out-of-water Muslims in rural Canada in a post 9-11 world, received international attention when it bowed on the CBC in 2007.

The series was also credited with reversing a rating slide for Canada's public broadcaster.

WestWind Pictures also unveiled a deal with Twentieth Century Fox Studios in 2008 to create an Americanized version of the Canuck comedy.

The CTV/CBS cop drama "Flashpoint" will lead all comers with 15 nominations going into the November industry kudosfest, including best drama.

And coverage of the recent 2010 Winter Olympic Games by a consortium of Canadian TV channels grabbed 17 nominations in all. The 25th annual Gemini Awards will take place across three nights, and climax with a live-to-tape telecast on Global Television and Showcase on November 13 from Toronto.

Cultural Exchange: The world cottons to 'Little Mosque on the Prairie'

The gentle Canadian sitcom is seen in 83 countries, but the U.S. isn't one of them.

April 10, 2011 | By Marcia Adair, Special to the Los Angeles Times

Reporting from Toronto — — The land of hockey, toques and the apology. Cast your eye a little farther down the list of things Canada has given the world (past zippers, Jolly Jumpers and five-pin bowling but well before Céline Dion) and you come to Canadian television.

There was "The Beachcombers," "Due South," "Kids in the Hall" and "Road to Avonlea," but unlike Australia, the U.K. or Quebec, which have thriving industries, English Canada's approach to homegrown programming has been more tortoise than hare.

Happily, the fortunes of Canada's television have improved with the success of "Trailer Park Boys," a mockumentary about life in a Nova Scotia trailer park, middle-of-nowhere comedy "Corner Gas" and co-production "The Tudors." The show that has been the calling card for the possibilities of Canadian TV, however, is "Little Mosque on the Prairie."

"Mosque" was conceived in the wake of the 2005 Danish Muhammad cartoon crisis by producer Mary Darling, her husband, Clark Donnelly, and writer Zarqa Nawaz when they met at the Banff Television Festival. The basic premise was: What would it look like if a Muslim born and raised in Canada became an imam?

As the concept developed further, the conceit became a second-generation Canadian imam from Toronto arrives at his post to discover the mosque is in the parish hall of the local Anglican church. Culture clash and its resultant hilarity ensue.

Mercy, the fictional small Saskatchewan town in which "Mosque" is set, is populated by characters designed to play with our ideas of Other. The liberal imam is ex-lawyer Amaar Rashid. He eventually marries Rayyad Hamoudi, whose parents, Sarah and Yasir, also live in town. Sarah converted to Islam to marry Yasir. Completing the main cast is Fred Tupper, a shock jock radio DJ/bigot; Fatima Dinssa, a conservative Nigerian Muslim who owns a popular cafe in



town; Baber Siqqidi, the local grump; and the mayor, Anne Popowicz, who doesn't care what anybody does as long as it results in less work for her.

The humor is deliberately gentle — more "Vicar of Dibley" than "Twin Peaks." Explained Darling, "We wanted the show to also have heart, kind of like Archie Bunker exploring racism in America. Comedy dilates the heart and makes things more palpable." The general rule for the show's writers is that they never make fun of the sacred center of either faith.

For Nawaz, exploring the issues in her community was more important than creating something purposely controversial. The widely held view that Muslims are humorless pedants just didn't connect with Nawaz's experience as a second-generation Canadian Muslims. Showing that modern Muslims are self-aware and can laugh at themselves has been a big part of "Mosque's" success. The program drew 2 million viewers for its first episode, and an average of 1 million for the rest of its first season.

In an episode titled "Jihad on Ice," viewers find the answer to the question on the nation's lips: Can Muslims curl? It turns out they can. And rather well at that.

All Canadian television networks are required to have at least 60% of their content produced in Canada, but most get around it by counting news broadcasts, reality shows and daytime television programming. The rest of the time is filled with shows from the U.S. such as "Grey's Anatomy" and "Dancing with the Stars." "Mosque" is broadcast on Canada's national public broadcaster. The CBC is different from PBS in that it is supported directly by the government and therefore obligated to create programming that reflects Canadian culture.

"I think the show talks about the success of multiculturalism in Canada and integration," Nawaz said. She grew up in Toronto in the 1970s with parents who immigrated from Pakistan via Britain. "I am a Canadian of Muslim faith. I don't have a chip on my shoulder. No one cared if I wanted to pray five times a day or wear a hijab. I could just do my own thing."

The genius of "Mosque" is that the characters resonate with viewers all over the world. The show is broadcast in 83 countries, including the United Arab Emirates and Turkey; the format was sold to 20th Century Fox in 2008 for a U.S. remake but nothing came of it. Nawaz's explanation: "We didn't have 9/11, and we have a public broadcaster. 9/11 affected the American psyche in a major way, and you have to be sensitive to that."

Last autumn Canadian-American relations were put to the test courtesy of Wikileaks. It seems an unnamed U.S. diplomat posted in Ottawa found the show "noteworthy as an indication of the kind of insidious negative popular stereotyping we are increasingly up against in Canada." The incident in question? Baber, the town grump, runs into a "rude and eccentric" U.S. consular officer while trying to get his name off the no-fly list. Although treated as a matter of amusement

in the Canadian press, it was enough to prompt Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to write "Mosque" producers a letter praising the show for fostering cross-cultural unity.

Filming of the sixth season is beginning this spring, and although ratings are lower than they were in the first season, they are holding steady at 500,000, considered good here. Against all odds, this gentle, occasionally earnest show is well loved by Canadians and Americans living close enough to the border. "A comedy about a mosque in the middle of the prairie being a success?" said Nawaz. "No one saw that coming."



Is the US ready for 'Little Mosque on the Prairie'?

By Catrin Nye
BBC Newsnight and BBC Asian Network



Influential American broadcaster Katie Couric has suggested a way to change attitudes to Muslims in the US.

Pointing to the success in the 1980s and 90s of TV sitcom *The Cosby Show* in improving relations between African-Americans and whites, she argues that a Muslim version of the show may counter some Americans' negative perceptions of the community.

But just across the border, in Canada, this "Muslim Cosby Show" already exists. *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, made in Toronto, is recording its sixth and final series.

On the set, actors and crew are getting ready to record this season's big opening scene.

The production team are giving pointers to the show's main characters, who are standing at the check-in desk in a disused ferry terminal that is doubling as an airport:

"You're expecting to be racially profiled, so you're already offended before he's done anything, you're wound up, ok? Let's try the scene one more time."

Amaar Rashid, played by actor Zaib Shaikh, and his wife Rayyan Hamoudi, played by Sitara Hewitt, are returning from honeymoon. Rayyan is expecting comments at customs because of her appearance.



“ Even the executives who made *Little Mosque* were worried when it went on air ”

Zarqa Nawaz, programme creator

"My dad decided to stay in Lebanon, even though - and wait for it - he's Lebanese... but he's not a suicide bomber. Not ALL Muslims are suicide bombers you know," blurts Rayyan to the customs officer.

"Why would you say that?" mouths husband Amaar, and tries to change the subject.

Rayyan interjects: "Oh, and before you ask, no, my husband doesn't make me wear this hijab, I choose to wear it."

The man from customs simply pokes fun at the couple for arguing.

Muslim resistance

Little Mosque on the Prairie is not all terrorist jokes, but there is a decent helping. Although its humour has been described as more like the gentle UK sit-com *Vicar of Dibley* than the black humour in film *Four Lions*, which followed a group of would-be suicide bombers.

This is a sitcom about Muslims and Christians trying to live in harmony in the fictional town of Mercy in Saskatchewan, Canada and it charts the arrival in town of a modern Canadian-born imam.

"Even the executives who made Little Mosque were worried when it went on air, about how 'the community' would react," says Zarqa Nawaz, creator of the programme.

"For sure, some very orthodox Muslims said this is wrong, that we shouldn't be doing this. But I felt overall the majority of the Muslim community felt it was innocuous... it was funny... they formed their opinions based on whether they liked the show or not."

Of course the show has not escaped controversy, but not always from the most obvious places.

Last year Wikileaks published a diplomatic cable from the US embassy in Ottawa to Washington warning that the programme was guilty of what it called "insidious negative popular stereotyping" of Americans in Canada.

This was thanks to satirical depictions of an over-zealous US border official on the show.

Stereotype busting

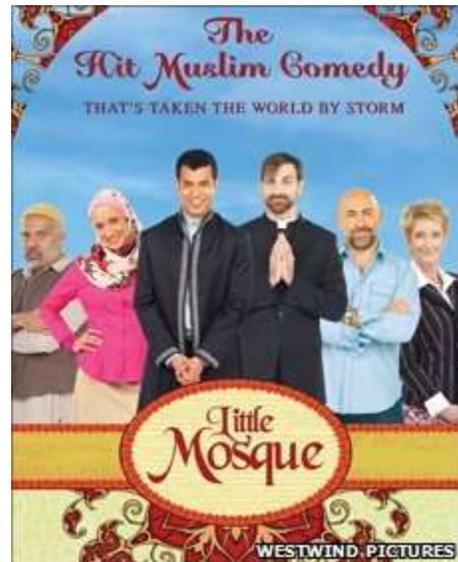
On hearing about this minor diplomatic spat, American/Canadian executive producer Mary Darling immediately sent a package to the White House - the "offending" episode of Little Mosque wrapped up in a bow.

To her surprise a reply came back from US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton herself, thanking the show's makers for "everything you're doing to foster cross-cultural unity and understanding through comedy".

Ms Darling is adamant they try hard not to lecture on the show.

"At the end of the day we're talking about the oneness of humanity, normalising the 'other'. But comedy isn't earnest, comedy isn't preachy."

Those involved in the making of the show insist it is about normal life, and want to show that Muslim parents take their kids to football or hockey practice too.



Little Mosque has been shown in over 80 countries, but not in the UK or US



But they also stress it is important that Muslim characters do not always have to be potential extremists or bear labels, such as the "lesbian Muslim".

US version

Zaib Sheikh who plays the central character of Amaar, the liberal imam, does however defend the need for a few border control jokes.

"I think that's reflective of the times that we live in," he says.

"As a Muslim, I myself am involved in moments of deep hilarity in real life when I'm at the check-point and someone says 'random check' and checks my passport.

"I look across the line and no random checks are going on for anyone else who is not my skin colour, and doesn't have my last name of Sheikh. I have to laugh at that."

The rights for Little Mosque were acquired by US TV network Fox, but the show was never remade.

Creator Zarqa Nawaz says she has come up with something at least very close to the "Muslim Cosby Show" four times already, but nothing has made it to the pilot stage in the US.

Actor Zaib Sheikh thinks this is a shame:

"I think Katie Couric was right," he says. "Our show has allowed people, whether they're Muslim or non-Muslim, to look at each other and say: 'Oh yeah I get it!'"

"We had a fan of the show who said: 'I love what you do on Little Mosque and that's pretty high praise coming from a Jew!'"

**“ Our show has allowed
people, whether they're
Muslim or non-Muslim, to
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'Oh yeah I get it' ”**

Actor Zaib Sheikh