

TELEVISION EUNY HONG KORAL

Sensual Arabian Nights captures cultural flavours

ARTS

An even greater challenge to the filmmaker is that the stories in *Arabian Nights* span cultures beyond the spice route. He is thus faced with the humiliation of showing ignorance about not just one culture, but dozens.

To be fair, cultural accuracy is probably not terribly important for tales about genies and talking animals. But Hollywood's retrograde solution historically has been to toss turbans all over the set and hope for the best.

It is surprising, therefore, that in a new ABC mini-series, *Arabian Nights*, the producers have adapted six stories, each shot with the distinct cultural fla-

vours of its setting (ABC. Shown in two parts, on Sunday, April 30 at 8pm ET/PT, and on Monday, May 1 at 9pm ET/PT).

This is the first rendering I have seen in which the Aladdin story is set in China - true to the text - and played by Chinese actors, including a surprise cameo by Burt Kwouk, best known as Cato in the *Pink Panther* films.

Each vignette is a lush mini-epic with its own blend of diluted David Lean sensuality and Disneyesque romanticism.

The ABC network is in fact owned by Disney, which perhaps explains why this production's royal palace looks like a Disney-

land version of the Alhambra. But it is a negligible flaw in an otherwise reverential and diligent production.

Turkish tailors were hired to create most of the 4,750 costumes and 400 pieces of jewellery used in this film - putting to shame Elizabeth Taylor's 65 costume changes for *Cleopatra* (1963).

One tale, which takes place among the Jews of Constantinople, is presented as a cleverly farcical homage to the Catskills comedians of yore. "My mother was so ugly," says one character, "that at the wedding, everyone kissed the groom."

A courtroom scene in this

vignette is borrowed from the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup* (1933), including that old joke in which the judge bellows: "Order in the court!" and the witness responds: "I'll have a shish kebab." (Needless to say, this was not the food used in the original gag.)

Scheherazade is played by Milli Avital, a talented Israeli actress with such an other-worldly look that she played an ancient Egyptian from outer space (in *StarGate*). She has perfected a hypnotic, unblinking gaze for this role as an enchanting raconteuse.

The creators of this production appear to be in their element in this story about storytelling. Just

like Scheherazade, television execs might find themselves beheaded the next morning if they fail to churn out entertainment that makes audiences want to tune in night after night.

In her development as a narrator, Scheherazade discovers the homilies that every Hollywood screenwriter keeps in his holster: "Never tell the same joke twice"; "Always leave your audience wanting more."

To wit: at the end of the first part of the mini-series she interrupts the Aladdin story, leaving her sultan - and the audience - hanging. "Tomorrow night..." she says tantalisingly.

Lord Cromer, England's representative in Egypt at the turn of the century, said: "The mind of the Oriental, like his picture, is eminently wanton and symmetrical. His explanation generally be lengthy, and ending in lucidity. He will contradict himself half-a-dozen times before he has finished his story."

This cultural stereotype has been passed on to our day, no doubt reinforced by the narrative style of *Arabian Nights*'s primary exposure to the west's primary export - near eastern literature.

It is easy to forget that the traditions of all cultures - just the Moslem world - are ABC's mini-series seem to be a subversive and repugnant cognisant of such nuances manages to tell a captivating multi-layered story with exaggerations of Arab cul-

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