



# The Art of Comic Relief

An Interview with Political Cartoonists  
Shujaat Ali and Jean Plantu



By Suzanne Baroud

A fantastic and thought-provoking exposition, displaying some of the most distinguished and contested political cartoons decked the walls and halls of the lovely French Cultural Centre near the Corniche in Doha.

In a joint endeavour between dignitaries of Qatar and of France, sponsored and hosted by Sheikh Hamad bin Tamer Al Thani, the President of the radio and Television Authority in Qatar and HE Alain Azouaou, Ambassador of France in Qatar – 'A Special Glance at

the News' enthralled visitors.

The unique exhibit was launched to celebrate and promote the remarkable work of two world-renowned political commentators and cartoonists, France's Jean Plantu and Pakistan's Shujaat Ali.

Undoubtedly the most famous cartoonist in France, Jean Plantu has been the front-page cartoonist for France's *Le Monde* (The World) for 30 years. His often-controversial work has been celebrated as well as scorned on nearly every continent in the world.

A renowned artist in his home country of Pakistan, Shujaat Ali is also making a name for himself worldwide as

the chief cartoonist at Qatar-based Al-Jazeera.net, the internet arm of Al-Jazeera channel. He has been the recipient of awards from countries such as Japan, Iran and he has even been honoured by the United Nations for his work.

While listening to the enthusiasm of the viewers at the exhibition as they assessed the works in French, Arabic, and other languages, and while children freely critiqued works themselves, people flocked around the two celebrities, hoping for a handshake and maybe even the opportunity to have their portrait drawn. The audience surpassed all



# AWARD WINNING CARTOON

TOKYO-JAPAN 1997



ジュブジャート アリ (パキスタン)  
Shujaat ALI Pakistan



cultural, language and age barriers –the presentation was universally understood.

Over steaming hot coffee, *Qatar Today* sat down with the two artists to get their views on their work and its impact on the world around them.

### Vision

Asked about the aspirations of the two artists, their goals were in union as was their work. After brief thought, Plantu declares, “My mission is to transmit my love and passion for political life to readers, from all generations, young and old.”

Likewise, and without pause, Ali states, “my mission is to present the views of not only myself, but the people. And while this is my mission, it is also one of my greatest challenges, to keep in the forefront of my mind the thoughts of the people, rather than being overcome with my own individual views of any particular topic. I want to create something that can capture the attention of art lovers, intellectuals and little children all at the same time.”

The Frenchman sees himself as an ambassador travelling to Qatar: “I came to Qatar to show the point of view of the French towards the current situation in the world and to meet colleagues in Qatar, in an attempt to understand their unique views on these important issues. Clearly impressed with Ali’s work, Plantu stresses, “I have been deeply touched by how Shujaat is able to express himself without restraint and get straight to the reality

of a situation. He can critique and criticise a situation freely, and I am greatly impressed with the support given by Al-Jazeera. This kind of freedom of expression should be an example throughout the world.”





**Windows**

Although natives of France and Pakistan, there was a very clear and consistent thread highlighting heated issues in the Middle East, such as Iraq and Palestine in the work of both artists.

"I have met a lot of cartoonists throughout the world", says Plantu, "but Shujaat is different. He has unequalled talent and his passion for issues such as Iraq and Palestine are



plainly depicted in his work.

"And while we naturally are not going to see eye to eye on all issues, I have to admit that one of the greatest contributions Shujaat makes through his work is that he provides a 'window' into the Arab and Muslim world for us living in the West. You simply cannot walk away from his work and not be affected by it. Through his efforts, he is an active par-

ticipant in this world-wide debate, and even though his presentation may surprise or even shock the people of France, at the same time it creates understanding."

**Common Ground**

Not only did the exhibit bring hundreds of admirers to the French Cultural Centre, but it brought some very unique surprises for Ali and Plantu as well. To their surprise, they found that throughout the years, they had commented on particular world events by creating nearly identical car-

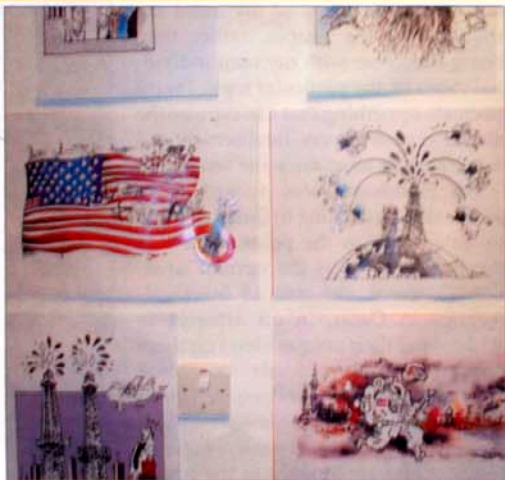


toons. One of the more notable examples was a pair of cartoons drafted shortly after the attacks of September 11 in New York.

Ali says, "I was shocked to see my colleague's depiction of the New York skyline. There where the twin towers had been stood two huge smokestacks, symbolising oil wealth in Iraq. Ironically, and within the same time-frame, I had created a cartoon that was extremely similar, yet I replaced the towers with two gigantic gas pumps."

Laughing, Plantu explains that this was just one of several examples of

"As a bored teenager in high school, I used to occupy my time in class drawing satirical cartoons of my teachers. Ironically, I realised that my abilities had some potential when my teacher threatened to expel me. I guess I felt that they must be good if I'm getting so much attention!"



nearly identical cartoons that the artists had created, although this was their first meeting. Another cartoon drew criticism to Arab/Muslim nations that had supported the American invasion of Iraq, was the image of a man holding a large book, symbolising the many human rights resolutions exhorted by



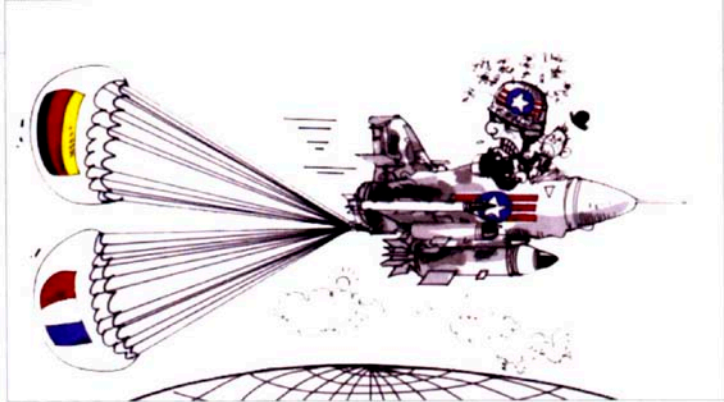
the United Nations, and preaching, while right beside him an Israeli soldier was shooting a Palestinian man. This cartoon, which exposed the complacency of the Arab world regarding the Palestinian crisis, was another nearly identical image drawn by both Ali and Plantu.

### Bridging the Gap

The two artists expressed mutual 'relief', that although the issue of 'a clash of civilizations' inundated the news and world media in the past several years, they were pleasantly surprised to see that the reading of many events among the French are more in tune with the Arab and Muslim world than one might think. Ali explains, "It is



important to stress that when we create these works, we are not only stressing our personal points of view, but we are doing our best to represent the people in our respective nations. This is why I find these similarities and this common



ground among the two of us very promising, because not only does it reflect a similar conviction among the two of us, but the like-mindedness among the people of our different worlds. This is what is amazing about this project."

"Our brains are like machines", Plantu elaborates, "processing information in the form of symbols and metaphors, and it is amazing how many metaphors we share."

### Impact

For all artists, there are those experiences that mould and shape your work forever. An enriching and artistic encounter with the late Palestinian president Yasser Arafat was a very significant moment in the career of Jean

Plantu.

"During our exchange, and going out on a limb, Arafat showed me a drawing that he had created himself; it was a pedestal which held a menorah. Above the menorah was a cross and atop of that was the crescent, representing the three major religions which comprise Israel and Palestine today. He explained to me that it was his aspiration to have the symbol embossed onto the currency when Palestine would finally be a free nation."

As the crowds died down and the chattering faded, Plantu and Ali both smile, feeling that perhaps their work to bring a little humour into this increasingly grim world situation had once again succeeded. Many people agree. ■

Obtaining his Bachelor's degree in 1980, Plantu launched his cartooning career with the newspaper *Phosperous*, and continued there until 1986. From his early years, his drawings sparked controversy and upon occasion his work was censored. Such interest was taken in his work by the people of France that even one Ph D student of the esteemed Sorbonne used Plantu's work as the theme of his doctoral thesis. The pinnacle of his career came in 2002, when he celebrated his 30th anniversary with *Le Monde*, and 15,000 published drawings with the French newspaper.

