

The Taqwacores – Review

— *Written by John Parrot On 12th August 2011*

It's been a long time since rock and roll has been truly rock 'n' roll. Although 20 years ago Nirvana entertained us with their unique blend of teen spirit, you probably have to look even further back to Seventies punk for a genuinely threatening and questioning political, ethical stance. *The Taqwacores* takes the spirit of '77 and applies it to Islam with radical results.



Yusuf is an innocent Pakistani engineering student who moves into an Islamic centre/house share in Buffalo, New York State after getting fed up with the (presumably pissed up) antics of his fellow students in the college dorms. This student house is like no other however, they may be Muslims but they have a very unusual approach to their faith. These guys are Muslim punks or Taqwacores; Taqwa being the Arabic word for God-fearing or pure of heart (I'm sure a scholar could go on explaining it indefinitely), while the core comes from hardcore.

The walls of the house are covered in graffiti, punk posters, Islamic slogans and grime. "Is everyone here a Muslim?" asks Yusuf. "From a certain point of view" he's told. The man who gives him this answer is Jehangir (played by Iranian-American actor Dominic Rains), a mohican hairdo and studded leather jacket wearing punk who is the character at the centre of the film. Jehangir is the spiritual force inspiring and voicing the questing spirit of the Taqwacores, he's warm hearted, deeply concerned with his faith and not afraid to take a chance.

The rest of the house are no less interesting. There's Fasiq, an American of Indonesian descent who is never seen without his hash pipe, and Amazing Ayyub, a wire thin joker who never wears a shirt, even in deepest winter. Rabeya wears an Afghan burkha she has doctored with patches and badges expressing her feminist and anarchistic sympathies. The more orthodox side of Islam is represented by Umar, a brick outhouse, straight edge, deadly serious kind of man who desperately tries to keep the house from descending into anarchy and his friends souls from ending up frying in the fires of hell. That's just a few of them, and this disparate group would be the makings of a pretty wild drama even before Islam was added to the mix.

Rather than relationship trouble, funnycapers or plans that go awry, much of the drama in the house is provided by debate. *The Taqwacores* is filled with fascinating discussion and philosophical rumination, and deepening of personal understanding drives the film along. But we're not talking *My Dinner with Andre* here. The Koran, and possibly other Islamic scriptures, are quoted regularly – the characters see their lives in light of their faith, as Jehangir puts it “that was my jihad man. My struggle between me and my nuts.” So where do Mohicans and safety pins come into it? The characters' restless, questioning vitality takes the form of punk.

Such story as there is revolves around the daring idea to hold a concert with all the Taqwacore bands. As well as a whole load of fun, this gig will give the guys the chance to wear their punk Islamic colours with pride and provide them with the challenge of accepting a broad variety of other interpretations. This means welcoming in ‘the hate mongers’, a very stern, po-faced band called Bilal's Boulder, who don't approve of all this liberalism. This laugh-a-minute lot have to be invited or Jehangir and his friends will be shown to be as closed and narrow-minded as them.

Before the party, there are a couple of spiritual excursions. The group visit the local mosque to stand face to face with their God and Jehangir gives a very moving sermon before the Friday prayers. It is Jehangir's speech which serves as the **film's manifesto**: “Islam is a fuckin' surrender...Allah is too big and open for my Islam to be small and closed.”

Directed by Syrian American **Eyad Zahra**, *The Taqwacores* is based on a 2004 novel by an American convert to Islam, Michael Mohammed Knight. Brought up a Roman Catholic with a father who used to beat him, Knight ran away to study Islam in Pakistan aged 17, but by the early 2000s felt stuck between the strict teachings he learned there, his American upbringing and the truth he felt existed in Islam. Writing *The Taqwacores* was his way to resolve it. The film might have some patchy acting in parts, although Dominic Rains is a magnetic Jehangir, but overall it does Knight's vision justice. With only a small knowledge of Islam, I was shocked by some of the scenes. I can't think of many films I've seen recently with such unusual and sympathetic characters. This could be the most punk film since *Jubilee*, and as far as the Islam goes – Allahu Alim (God only knows).