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UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



ART & THE AGA KHAN MUSEUM

December 13, 2013

A Cartoon and Comic Business

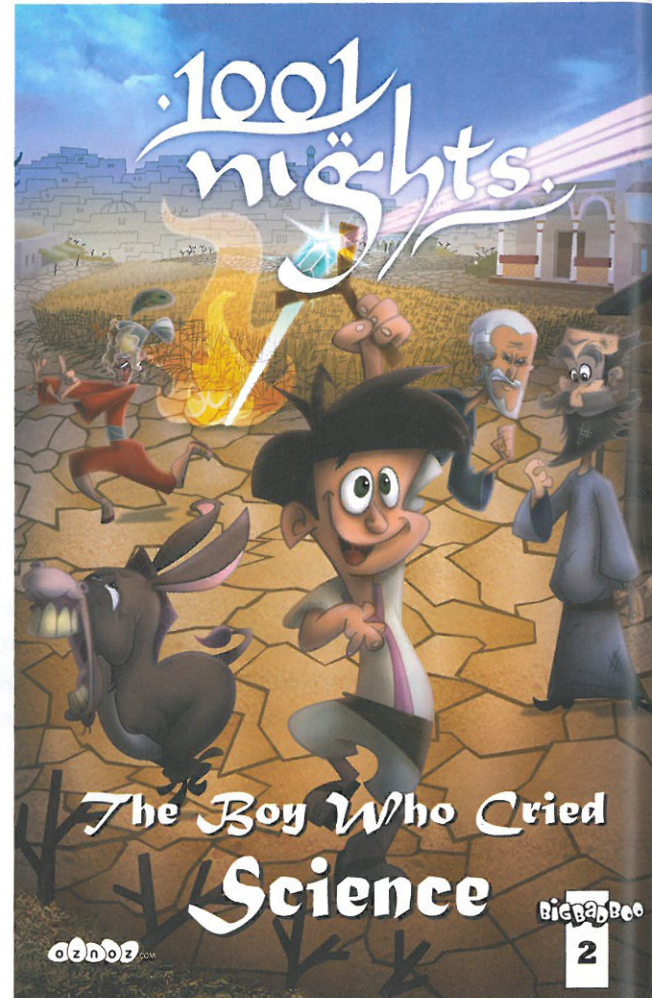
Nazim Karim



Aly Jetha and Shabnam Rezaei

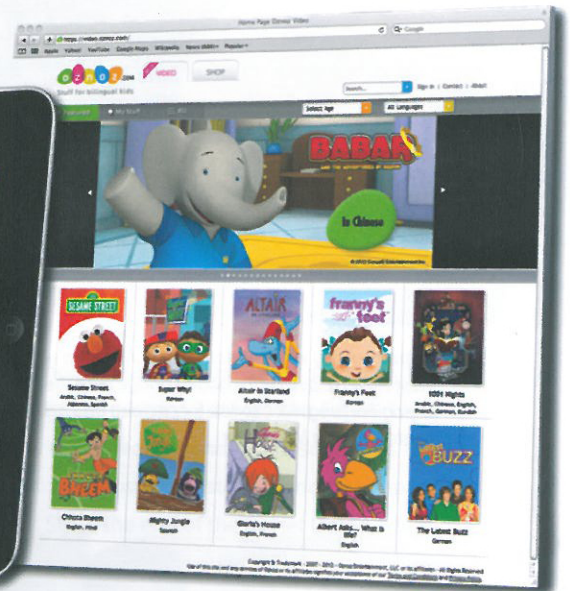
Big Bad Boo Studios and Oznoz.com may not be familiar names to most of us. But to international television networks and millions of children in over 80 countries, their products are viewed with anticipation and excitement. *1001 Nights*, for example, is a cartoon series developed by Big Bad Boo. In 2010, it was recognized as the single most network-requested children's program, out of over 1,200 entrants, at MIPCOM, the world's largest television festival, in Cannes, beating out shows like *Kung Fu Panda*, *Cars* and *Spider Man*. Their programs, which air on stations like Disney, Discovery Networks, Teletoon and PBS, have won a number of international awards, including 4 Leo Awards and a prestigious Prix Jeunesse in the last three years.

So how did Aly Jetha, a Berkeley Law School graduate and entrepreneur with a Telecom company, and his wife, Shabnam Rezaei, a University of Pennsylvania graduate fluent in five languages and working in the financial software industry, turn to cartoons? As a hobby, initially. In 2005, Shabnam was approached by an Iranian-American animator who wanted help creating a cartoon to teach children about Navruz. For fun, the couple got involved, invested and co-produced the cartoon, *Babak & Friends – A First Norooz*, which went on to air in over 80 museums, including the Smithsonian, Asia Society and British Museum. After Apple



Computers got involved and schools began using the cartoon to teach children about Iranian culture, the couple began receiving requests for cartoons about the Chinese New Year, Diwali and a host of other potential topics.

While keeping their day jobs in New York, Aly and Shabnam hired 30 animators and opened an animation studio in Vancouver to fund and produce a TV series called *Mixed Nutz*, "which is a lot like Peanuts, but the kids are from everywhere...through the cartoon, we learn about their cultures", says Aly. "We used to fly to Vancouver every weekend" he adds. By 2008, the couple, who were now fulltime cartoon creators, began developing *1001 Nights*, their second series, and Big Bad Boo, which develops cartoons that teach tolerance and diversity, grew to over



100 employees, becoming one of the largest 2D animation studios in Western Canada.

Late last year, Shabnam and Aly launched Oznoz.com to license cartoons from other producers and distribute them in North America using a platform similar to iTunes. Oznoz though, is unique because it offers this content in over 10 languages. "Oznoz was launched specifically to help families teach their kids different languages," says Aly, who credits Shabnam as the inspiration and "heart" behind this venture. "She speaks several languages and thinks all kids should!" To date, Oznoz has licensed over 1,000 hours of content, and owns exclusive rights to some of the most well known brands in the world, including *Sesame Street*, *Babar* and *Super Why!* "It's the only place in North America where you can

watch these shows in Chinese, Hindi, German, and a host of other languages" says Aly.

Internationally, the company has also begun working with UNICEF, the World Bank and other development partners to use their cartoons and comic books to teach literacy. Last month, the couple donated 40,000 comic books in Arabic to Syrian refugees in Erbil, a program that they are working to extend to camps in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. Hopefully, children there will receive some much needed entertainment and comic relief from the desperate conditions in which they find themselves. Achieving such international success and acclaim in a new venture within five years, is remarkable, illustrating that cartoons and comics, while entertaining and educational, are both a serious and a funny business. ♦