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In The Mix...

ROAD PICTURE

A Reality Show that Took Arabs Across America Gave Participants—and an Unknown Number of Viewers—a Fuller Picture of Life in the U.S.

By Ann Farmer

It's impossible to determine how many Middle Eastern viewers tuned in to the twelve-part reality series, *On the Road in America*.

Produced for Arab-speaking audiences by the Washington, D.C., nonprofit group Layalina Productions, in conjunction with Visionaire Media of Los Angeles, the series aired on satellite television across the Middle East earlier this year. In that part of the world there are no sophisticated Nielsen-type ratings systems. To estimate the popularity of a program, researchers typically go door-to-door, inquiring if the residents watched it and how many times. Channel surfers often get clumped with real viewers.

Even tougher to ascertain is to what extent this travelogue—which features three appealing young Arab men who go on an eye-opening RV trip across America—has contributed to a better cross-cultural understanding between Arabs and Americans.

The prime-time show aired from January through April on MBC (Middle East Broadcasting Center), the most watched pan-Arab free-to-air satellite broadcaster in the region. Thus it's not surprising that early feedback indicates it found an audience. Middle East newspapers featured stories on it, and the cast members became sought-after local stars, speaking at universities and appearing on talk shows.

Reached in Dubai, Saudi Arabia, the youngest cast member, nineteen-year-old Sanad, says that he is frequently approached on the street. "Whenever I am in a public area," he explains, "I will always have someone who is just staring at me and then walks up to me and will be like, 'Aren't you that kid from that show?'"

He says, inevitably, the next question concerns whether the program truly is a reality show. "People are shocked that that's how things are in the States," says Sanad, referring to the lifestyle and the freedom Americans have to say

what they want. “Some of them assumed it was fixed or scripted. I keep telling them, ‘Trust me, it’s not.’ “

Sanad was one of 600 men in the Middle East who auditioned. “We picked curious people. People who wouldn’t take things on face value but would engage with Americans,” says executive producer Leon Shahabian, describing how they also chose Mohamed, twenty-seven, a doctor in Beirut, Lebanon, and Ali, twenty-two, from Cairo, Egypt. In addition, a female Palestinian producer and an Israeli-American cameraman were brought on board.

The group’s first stop was Washington, D.C., where they met with politicians and attended a political rally that pitted pro-Israeli against pro-Palestinian protesters. From there, they crisscrossed the nation, soaking in the diversity of New York, poverty in Mississippi, horse camping in Montana and so on. In Los Angeles, they visited the mosque where two of the World Trade Center bombers prayed. Everywhere they talked to Americans about the conflicts in the Middle East, among other issues.

Creator, director and executive producer Jerome Gary, who also took on a den father role, says he was pleased with the natural story arc that played out. “We didn’t try to control what they said. We let what happened happen.”

What did transpire was a change of heart that cast members had as they experienced a fuller dimension of America, versus what they’d seen in movies and television. “All of them were pleasantly surprised by Middle Americans,” says Gary adding, “Their attitudes changed about America, but not about American policy.”

Ali reported that many Egyptians have since given him a pat on the back for the show’s originality. What they weren’t sure of, though, were the producers’ motivations. However, he added, “In my country, a lot of people like the show because they want the other side—the American people—to understand Arab people, to lessen the gap.”

“I think it accomplished its purpose,” says Richard Fairbanks, founder of Layalina and a former peace negotiator under the Reagan administration. He became determined after 9/11 to create television shows for Middle East audiences, independent of the U.S. government, to encourage critical thinking. “When we initially had the idea and were raising money, people said that while it was a great idea, Arab networks would never show it. I said, ‘That’s totally wrong.’ “

Shahabian now jokingly laments that it might have been a good thing if *On the Road* had received a stronger negative reaction in the Middle East. “It would have been great if we’d gotten a fatwa saying, ‘Kids, don’t watch this.’ That would have made it must-see-TV.”

Which is not to say that *On the Road* hasn't received its share of criticism. "The French hate it. They see everything as a conspiracy of foreign policy," says Gary, referring to the fact that Layalina's board is heavily populated with such political bigwigs as former President George H.W. Bush and former Secretary of State James Baker.

That kind of participation provoked observations like: "[The American government] doesn't think it has to change its foreign policies," says Gary. "It can just do a television series on Americans as nice people, and that will change everybody's minds in the Mideast."

In a similar vein, Sanad has gotten flack from friends in Dubai who question some of his newfound favorable opinions of America. He says, "Some people would give me the kind of talk, like, 'So what are you trying to tell us? America is good?' And I am like, 'Not at all. You get to watch and you get to decide if it's good or it's bad. It has both—I'll tell you that—like any other place.'"

Getting people to watch is exactly what Layalina executives hope will happen with its other television projects for Middle East audiences, including a children's show, a scripted comedy about an Arab teaching Arabic to Americans and a one-hour news program that Don Hewitt, one of its board members and the creator of *60 Minutes*, is helping to launch.

"Now that we've busted down that door of credibility," Fairbanks says, "we're trying to raise our profile, raise more money and do more shows."