

TELEVISION

De Tocquevilles From the Middle East



Leon Shahabian

A jam session after the Sunflower River Blues & Gospel Festival in Clarksdale, Miss., in "On the Road in America."

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CAN a television series created for diplomatic purposes work as entertainment? The Sundance Channel is about to find out.

Its series "On the Road in America," originally produced by a nonprofit group with the hope of showing Arab viewers in the Middle East a broader and more nuanced view of America than that seen in Hollywood exports, has now come full circle back to the United States. Sundance will broadcast it Wednesdays beginning this week.

The 12-part series is a travelogue delivered through the eyes of four relatively Westernized Arabs — three men and a woman — with some outspoken political debate thrown in along the way. One minute during their summer 2006 R.V. road trip, the travelers are ogling New York skyscrapers, the next they are arguing over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at the Hamptons beach house of Robert Shaye, a co-founder of New Line Cinema.

As they cross the country the four are treated to a blues jam session with Super Chikan in Mississippi, ride horseback through Montana and mix a forum on Middle East-United States relations with massages at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, Calif. Some of the most intense debate comes from the spontaneous conversations between the Palestinian Lara Abou Saifan — whose departure for Washington from Beirut, Lebanon, was complicated when Israeli bombing closed the airport there — and one of the show’s cameramen, Guy Livneh, an Israeli, as it turned out.

The series had its genesis in the wake of Sept. 11, 2001, when Layalina Productions — a nonpartisan Washington nonprofit created to foster Arab-American understanding through television — asked the Institute for Creative Technologies at the University of Southern California to encourage Hollywood thinking about programming for the Middle East, said the Layalina vice president, Leon Shahabian, an executive producer of the series.

The idea for “On the Road” ultimately came from Jerome Gary, another executive producer, who had produced the feature documentaries “Pumping Iron” and “Stripper,” and was the institute’s strategic director. The series is produced by Layalina in association with Mr. Gary’s company, Visionaire Media, and was financed partly by a grant from the foundation of Richard Fairbanks, a Middle East peace negotiator for the Reagan administration, who is Layalina’s founder and chairman. The organization’s advisory board includes a long list of former American diplomats and Democratic and Republican administration officials, as well as former President George H. W. Bush.

Some 500 young people in Lebanon, Dubai, Jordan, Egypt and Morocco were auditioned, Mr. Gary said. None of the four — in addition to Ms. Abou Saifan, they include the Egyptian student Ali Amr, the Saudi student Sanad Al Kubaissi and a slightly older Jordanian, Mohamed Abou-Ghazal, who at the time of filming had completed medical studies — is a particularly observant Muslim. Some of the four drink alcohol, while Mr. Abou-Ghazal occasionally stays out all night. Mr. Gary called him “a terrible subject” for

complicating the shooting schedule by sleeping during the day but noted that he also had the most expressive politics.

Ms. Abou Saifan was technically enlisted as Mr. Gary's production assistant, because "three guys and a girl traveling across America would be unacceptable to certain Muslims in the Middle East," Mr. Gary said, adding, "I just wanted a woman to be in the mix, so I wouldn't go to sleep." The Sundance version was tweaked to restore material that was trimmed to avoid offending some Arab sensibilities.

Mr. Gary, who directed nine episodes, said that he wanted to cast a very observant Muslim, but that few auditioned. "The problem was, they were so threatened by America," he said, adding that he hopes to include more diverse religious views in a possible second season. (Layalina is also looking for funds to take Americans on a Mideast trip, possibly for Sundance.)

About 4.5 million viewers tuned in for each episode when the series was shown in 2007 on the Middle East Broadcasting Center, a Saudi-owned channel that broadcasts all over the Arab world, Mr. Shahabian said. In an interview in New York Ms. Abou Saifan said she hadn't encountered anyone in Lebanon, other than friends and family, who had seen it.

Even though Americans weren't initially the intended audience, Mr. Gary called his subjects "our own little Arab de Tocquevilles," referring to the 19th-century French author whose "Democracy in America" helped the fledgling United States understand itself.

The series appealed to Sundance because it "challenges people to dig a little deeper in terms of understanding the issues," said Laura Michalchyshyn, the network's executive vice president for programming. Citing Ms. Abou Saifan's criticism of the quality of news reporting she sees in the United States, Ms. Michalchyshyn said that the group of four "provides a viewpoint of America that is refreshingly healthy for us to hear."

She added: "You realize that this is a journey that we're going to be on with these young people," noting, "We have no idea where they will end up in their opinions of the country."