

TV's "On the Road" offers Arab view of U.S. life

Wed Jun 04 19:01:20 UTC 2008

By Lisa Lambert

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The next level of reality TV rolls onto U.S. small screens on Wednesday covering a topic far from the typical bug-eating and mate-finding: how Americans and Arabs can overcome clashing cultures.

"On the Road in America" follows four Arabs in their 20s across the United States, and while its images of fashionable kids on an open highway may have a free-wheeling MTV vibe, much of the show centers on topical debates about U.S. history, its ties to Israel and differences among Arab cultures.

The series will air on cable television's Sundance Channel and is backed by Layalina Productions, a Washington nonprofit group that wants to use television to foster better understanding between the two worlds.

When the series was shown by the Middle East Broadcasting Center in 2007, it attracted 4.5 million viewers an episode from such countries as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait and Algeria.

Egyptian cast member Ali Amr said that "On the Road" provided the Arab world a glimpse into the diversity of the United States' 300 million people that is vastly different from what they see at home.

"They think Americans are spoiled. They spend money for nothing. They are fat," he said. "After my experience, when I traveled in different places, no, I found the people different."

But what will Americans see in a show about what Arabs see in Americans?

Amr hopes Americans see a group of young Arabs who are not potential terrorists -- a sentiment that pops up in almost all 12 episodes, including when they are barred from Chicago's Sears Tower because of their nationalities: Egyptian, Saudi and Lebanese.

"On the Road" changes tone frequently. At first, the three men and one woman cast, which was selected from an audition pool of more than 400 people, is put in controlled situations.

But after cast members rebelled, the producers decided the show should be more spontaneous, said creator Jerome Gary.

In the series' second part, the cast visits a California retreat to discuss Arab and American identities.

In the final segment, the cast and its American crew go to the cast members' homes in Beirut, Cairo and Dubai, United Arab Emirates, where the Saudi now lives.

Cast member Lara Abou Saifan left Beirut in the summer of 2006 to begin the 60-day "On the Road" trip just as Israel invaded her country. When the series begins, she is anxious about friends and family she left behind. Her experience comes full circle when she returns to see the damage, pointing out the window of her mother's apartment to the rubble that was all that remained of the garden where she used to play.

The view moved one of the American producers, who was Jewish, to tears.

Producers used the cast's preconceptions about the United States to show how they could, in fact, be misconceptions, said Layalina vice president Leon Shahabian.

"Then they come here and they're like, 'Wait a second, this wasn't how I envisioned it,'" he said.

Abou Saifan, who is Palestinian, said her biggest surprise was meeting Americans who did not support Israeli policies in the Palestinian territories.

"I was surprised that people were aware of what was going on," she said.

(Editing by Bob Tourtellotte and Doina Chiacu)

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