



'Road' to understanding Show follows Arab students traveling U.S.

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March 23, 2007

March 26 – April 1, 2007 Issue

Layalina Prods. is attempting to succeed where the U.S. government has failed.

The Washington-based not-for-profit shingle, set up in the aftermath of 9/11 to produce TV programming for the Arab and Muslim worlds, has made a reality skein for pan-Arab satcaster MBC.

"On the Road in America" follows three Arab students as they travel through the U.S.

The 12-part, \$1.6 million skein, which preemed Jan. 18, airs in primetime on MBC 1, where it gets a regular aud share of around 12%.

While U.S.-funded newscaster Al Hurra is viewed suspiciously by many Arabs, Layalina's approach seems to have a better chance of promoting dialogue between Arabs and Americans in the media.

"The good thing about this show is that it offers a complicated view of the U.S. through the eyes of Arab students," says Mazen Hayek, MBC's group director of marketing and public relations.

The shingle was founded by Richard Fairbanks, who was Ronald Reagan's ambassador-at-large and a special Mideast peace negotiator.

Former President George H.W. Bush is honorary chairman of its board, which includes Henry Kissinger, James Baker and Lee Hamilton.

"We think that 'On the Road' and Layalina's efforts are effective tools to reach a broad and deep audience in the Arabic-speaking world," Fairbanks says.

The shingle's initial plans to set up its own satcaster were dropped after discovering the pan-Arab market was already saturated with more than 200 channels. The focus soon shifted to creating programming that could help foster positive representations for Arabs and Muslims.

Execs at Layalina are developing "Al Sa'at" (The Hour), an investigative news show like "60 minutes," with MBC's newscaster Al Arabiya, as well as sponsoring animated series "Ben and Izzy," which Jordanian shingle Rubicon is producing.

"As a nonprofit organization that does not accept funding from any government, Layalina has been accepted by our viewers, especially given the quality of the programming," says "On the Road" exec producer Leon Shahabian.

Skein's other exec producer is Emmy-winning Jerome Gray, who wrote and directed most of the episodes.

U.S. distribution for "On the Road" is being repped by New Line Television, which is shopping the series to U.S. cable networks.

There are also plans for a second series following American students as they travel through the Mideast.

"We look forward to bringing 'On the Road' to domestic audiences, as the need for increased cross-cultural understanding between the United States and the Arab world has never been greater," Shahabian says.