

Public Diplomacy, TV-Style

By MARTHA BAYLES

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Americans hear a lot about Al-Jazeera, the Qatar-based news channel censured (and praised) for airing anti-American views; and Al-Arabiya, its more moderate Saudi-owned rival. We also debate the merits of Al-Hurra, the U.S. government-funded channel that is struggling to find an audience in the Arab world. Now there's a new kid on the block: Layalina Productions, a Washington-based nonprofit that makes Arabic-language programs for broadcast on the most-watched TV channel in 22 Arab countries: MBC (the Saudi-owned Middle East Broadcasting Center).

Layalina is the brainchild of Richard M. Fairbanks, former ambassador-at-large under President Reagan. Its mission is to project a favorable but non-propagandistic image of America through entertainment as well as news. Surprisingly, this concept was initially hard to sell. Founded in 2002, Layalina boasts an advisory board that is a Who's Who of media, business and diplomacy (George H.W. Bush is its honorary chairman). But as Mr. Fairbanks recalls, "there was a disconnect: Potential donors in the U.S. kept saying, 'The Arabs will never put it on,' and MBC said, 'We would love to broadcast Arabic-language shows made in America. But Americans don't make any.'"



Leon Shahabian/Layalina Productions

How do you say 'Yippie-Ki-Yay' in Arabic?

Now they do. Layalina's maiden effort, a 12-episode series called "Ala al Tariq fi Amrika" ("On the Road in America"), is in its fifth week on MBC. It is a "reality show," featuring real people coping with a real situation. The people are three young Arab men: Mohamed, a 27-year-old Jordanian doctor; Ali, a 22-year-old Egyptian; and Sanad, an 18-year-old Saudi studying in Dubai; and the situation is a road trip across America with a film crew that includes a 30-year-old Palestinian producer named Lara and a 40-ish Israeli-American cameraman named Guy.

Layalina chose the three Arab men in an audition that excluded women, because, vice president Leon Shahabian explained, many Arab viewers would object to seeing unmarried men and women traveling together. Yet Mr. Shahabian described producer Lara's presence as "calculated" and added that the same is true of Guy's: "Our thinking was, 'Let's hire this guy and see what happens.'" Part of what happens is fluff. The participants clown, MTV-style, while driving a limo through Manhattan, riding horses in Montana and surfing in Los Angeles. But beyond these fun-in-the-sun sequences, the show contains some all too real moments, as the visitors encounter not only a mix of Americans but also -- significantly -- one another.

Because this tour took place in the summer of 2006, the first notable encounter is between Palestinian Lara and Israeli-American Guy. Several of the Americans that the group meets -- a congressman, a Catholic priest, a zydeco musician -- offer platitudes about "breaking down stereotypes" and "going beyond political, cultural, and religious differences to celebrate our common humanity." And something like this happens between Lara and Guy, when their sniping about the war in southern Lebanon yields to a tentative, grudging rapport.

It's hard to know how this rapprochement is going over with Arab audiences. There are no Nielsen ratings in Arab markets. According to Mr. Shahabian, however, the participants are now celebrities in the region,

much sought after for interviews and other media appearances. In part, this is because the four look good falling off a surfboard. Yet that's not all. As a foreign-service officer posted to an Arab country recently told me: "Arab youth are in a serious mood. They want to be entertained, of course, but even more, they want to debate and discuss."

To its credit -- and in sharp contrast to most American "reality" shows -- "On the Road" makes (a little) room for serious conversation, including some grappling with national stereotypes. For example, when the group visits the King Fahad Mosque in Los Angeles, an impressive edifice built entirely by Saudi money (and in that respect not typical of American mosques), an argument breaks out between Sanad and Ali. Sanad chides Ali for equating Muslims with Arabs, reminding him that "the Prophet never said 'the Arab world,' he always said 'the Muslim world.'"

Does Sanad, the better-educated Saudi, triumph over Ali, the ill-informed Egyptian, because this show is airing on a Saudi-owned channel? Not really. Sometimes Ali wins, as when he, Sanad and Lara debate whether wealth makes people shallow and self-absorbed. The series has many episodes to go. So far, though, this conversation seems free-wheeling, open-ended and clearly enjoyable for the participants. And in terms of America's image, what matters is not who wins the debate but where it takes place. Without harping on "freedom and democracy," this program speaks volumes about the country that serves as its backdrop.

"On the Road" is funded by a grant from the Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation (established by the ambassador's father). For the foreseeable future, the other programs in production at Layalina -- an animated children's show and a version of "60 Minutes" -- must similarly rely on donations. As Mr. Shahabian explains, America-friendly Arabic-language programming is not at the moment a money maker: "The cost of this production (about \$1.6 million) has been low, but we only get back about one percent from MBC."

Yet when it comes to improving America's image, profit cannot be the sole consideration. There's no lack of commercial American programming on Arab TV. MBC alone runs two channels that carry only U.S. films and TV shows. Headlining the schedule this week is "Pepper Dennis," a forgettable (and forgotten) Warner Bros. comedy about an ambitious female TV reporter. To American eyes, it offers little more than stale jokes about one-night stands, wives leaving their sexually inept husbands and married men hiring prostitutes to liven up their poker games. To Arab eyes, however, such material reinforces the impression -- alluring to some, repellent to others -- of America as a land of unbridled hedonism and materialism.

Unlike Russians and East Europeans in the Soviet era, Arabs today are not starved for stimulation from the West. On the contrary, they are glutted with it. That's where Layalina comes in. As an enlightening exploration of America, "On the Road" will never win the Tocqueville Award, or even the Borat Booby Prize. Yet as a living illustration of the mysterious, wonderful chemistry by which all sorts of people feel free to speak their minds when standing on American soil, it may deserve the Public Diplomacy Medal of Honor -- a prize for which, truth to tell, there has been precious little competition lately.

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