The Middle East Film Initiative: A Conversation with Ruth Priscilla Kirstein

“It’s often Terrorist 1, Terrorist 2, Terrorist 3, and for women it’s even worse.” Matt Hanson talks to Dr. Ruth Priscilla Kirstein, the founder of The Middle East Film Initiative in NYC, about discriminatory practices towards and lack of representation of Middle Eastern cultural practitioners, and about some new community-based methods offered by MEFI for addressing them.

Conversation / Matt Hanson November 6, 2018

The Middle East Film Initiative (MEFI) is an EEO (Equal Employment Opportunity) nonprofit organization in support of US media and entertainment professionals who are of Middle Eastern descent or are working on projects of importance to local Middle Eastern communities. MEFI is reinventing socially-engaged art and addressing diversity-related issues in the media, among other topics through on-location and community-based filmmaking.

Founded in 2013 by the actor, dancer, director, fencer, and set and costume designer Dr. Ruth Priscilla Kirstein, holder of an MD and a PhD degree in Medical Ethics and History, MEFI is likely the first such project in the US.1 I initially conducted this interview in October of 2017, yet have continued to update its content and focus in correspondence with Dr. Kirstein since then. It is based on an interview, but it is also the result of thorough revisions in writing between interviewer and subject over the course of the past year.

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[1]Cast of MEFI's “Double Lives” workshop, held at the Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies at New York University
(Credit: MEFI)

Matt Hanson: How did you arrive at the point where it became inevitable for you to pursue MEFI with respect to your artistic career and practice?

Ruth Priscilla Kirstein: MEFI grew out of a personal need and lack that I perceived in New York City, where there was no place where people who are interested in working on topics that are relevant to local Middle Eastern communities, or are part of these communities, can gather and inspire each other and network and create opportunities for each other.

These very diverse populations have largely been off the radar of the [entertainment] industry’s diversity-related efforts. I started it very small in 2013, and my friend Imad Khachan was kind enough to let us use the back of his chess store and it grew wonderfully. Later on, NYU co-sponsored some of MEFI’s interdisciplinary workshops and it turned out that there are tons of people who have the same needs and interests and didn’t have a place to go. It’s turning into quite a wonderful network and opportunities have already grown out of it for the participants. MEFI also stands out in the industry in that it is not affiliated with political or religious entities, or with entities based abroad.

What ties all of my work together is that I want to move, inform, connect and help people in novel ways. I like to do that using trans-disciplinary techniques, bringing in the abilities I have in science, entertainment and athletics.

MH: How is MEFI responding to the lack of meaningful representation of media professionals of Middle Eastern descent in America

RPK: We're doing it through educational programs, workshops, curriculum development, advocacy, but also project development and consulting. And with the project development we've recently been working on a web series [2] about Little Syria, which should be one possible tool to connect present communities with their forerunners in an empowering way.

The series is informed by the creative spirit of Manhattan's Little Syria [3].2 When you look at these people who lived in the neighborhood during a very vibrant time in a New York that seemed very cosmopolitan, possibly more cosmopolitan than it is today, you see how they found creative ways of making sense of their Eastern and Western identities in a way that can inform us today. We are bringing them back to life by creating something in the present in response to a widespread thirst for meaningful entertainment opportunities.

index.jpg **[4]**



[5]"Lebanon Restaurant (Syrian), 88 Washington Street, Manhattan." 1939.
The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library.

Lydia Nofil - Introduction **[6]**

Video of Lydia Nofil - Introduction
مقابلات مصورة نادرة أجرتها MEFI مع سكان سابقين في سورية الصغيرة، والتي شكلت مصدر الهام للمسلسل على الانترنت. (MEFI)
(Credit: MEFI)

MH: When exactly did MEFI come together for you as a new concept?

RPK: MEFI came through conversations with people. In my case, speaking with people, learning about their experiences and needs. This is also how MEFI keeps growing now and evolving. People from all over the US are reaching out to MEFI. It's all about the direct human contact.

I too want to bring my skills in acting, movement, fencing, science, and languages to the camera. As I'm pursuing this path I'm facing the same difficulties as other people in the group. And you see literally every day the casting notices that come in.

If you don't want to undress, if you don't want to shoot a gun, there's very little work for women to do. This is a very serious situation for people who have a lot to give and want to do meaningful work on camera. Generally speaking, the bias of casting notices is something that everybody [in acting] experiences. There are additional challenges if you are a part of certain ethnic groups, and if you have certain artistic sensibilities. These challenges are added on. It's a specific situation that concerns many people and should be addressed independently, inside and outside of the industry.

Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People **[7]**

Video of Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People
Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People, 2006, 50 min., (dir. Sut Jhally, Jeremy Earp). Media Education Foundation
Media Education Foundation

MEFI includes people from all types of professions involved in the making and life of US film, TV, and new media, so not only actors. These professions are experiencing similar challenges accessing the opportunities they are qualified for. The interesting thing worth mentioning is that people who are of Middle Eastern descent and people who are working on topics of importance to Middle Eastern communities are facing similar difficulties. This discrimination by association is a phenomenon that deserves attention.

In my own personal journey, auditioning and meeting with casting directors and agents, seeing how

they handle certain roles, how they interview, what pressures they are under from producers, or writers, definitely increased my sense of urgency in terms of starting this film initiative.

MH: Could you describe some of the main pitfalls for media professionals of Middle Eastern descent in the industry?

RPK: The challenges pertain very often to the interaction with casting directors. As they are casting roles that are meant to be of Middle Eastern descent they very often have a lack of knowledge of what the reality and people look like on the ground. They will have a certain limited perception of what somebody would look or act like. And they're trying to implement that.

Casting directors cannot be seen as separate entities. They execute the wishes of producers and writers, who frequently have their own pressures and limitations. Very often, they will ignore the fact that it's all about what the person can portray and not what a person is. To cope with this type of insecurity, they will actually revert to asking questions, such as people's place of birth, actual ethnic background, actual nationality which you are not supposed to ask in an interview, in any type of job interview. That puts the person who wants the job in a difficult situation. How do you answer these questions?

Another common thing, and that pertains to all languages other than English and Spanish, is that once they're needed in a work of fiction, but also commercials or voiceovers, the casting personnel or the people behind the project very often will try to get services for free, like translation services and interpreting. Rather than hire a professional and prepare a translation of the piece that they want acted in, let's say Arabic, they will call someone in to be auditioned, present them the piece in English, and say, Why don't you just translate it into Arabic. And they record this. They will not give the person the job, but they will use the translation in their further work. It's a very common issue and an additional source of exploitation of professionals with diverse talents.

MH: How do these challenges in the media profession become roadblocks for women of Middle Eastern descent in particular ?

RPK: When it comes to women, now suddenly everyone talks about it in the media, but it's been an ongoing issue ever since I can remember, and many years before. Even if you mark in your online casting profile, hosted by the major companies that run this interaction with the casting industry, that you are not interested in nudity or sex scenes, you will still be bombarded on a daily basis with job offers requesting this type of work. It's also mostly dissimulated so you only see it once you click further. Besides a waste of time, it's offensive as you're paying for something, a service, and clearly mark that you are not interested in certain things, yet this is the majority of things that you receive. Again, professional support organizations will not take a stance in this.

Many actresses who are of Middle Eastern descent represent a "different" type of woman, physically, in terms of sensibility, in terms of aesthetics that you don't see that often, unfortunately, represented in mainstream media. There's little access for them to mainstream jobs. Just as men will take on terrorist roles to get into the business, some of the women will be ready to do certain jobs that are based on this perceived exoticism and physical attraction in order to break into the business. These are a day-to-day concerns, day-to-day obstacles.

You find yourself, if you don't want to do it, having to abandon essentially the majority of job offers because requests are being made that are not appropriate. Audiences should care about the human cost at which the entertainment they consume is being created. Placing these phenomena in a more global context, you can see, for example, in Germany during Napoleonic times, members of the Middle Eastern diaspora there, Jewish ladies, would be perceived as "the beautiful daughters of the Orient." Men were attracted by their exoticism, by their perceived sensuality, over-sexualized them, and found them attractive as possible partners, not only due to this, also due to other more mundane reasons.

Ruth Priscilla Kirstein Headshot Internet1.jpg **[8]**



[9]Ruth Priscilla Kirstein, founder of MEFI.
Photo: Jerry Pantzer

MH: Why is the focus on Middle Eastern communities particularly important in the US, as related to your professional arts experience in Europe and elsewhere abroad?

RPK: When I launched MEFI in New York City in 2013, I had just moved back from Paris. In Paris there was a wide array of possibilities literally every evening to experience film and cultural events and speak with people with an interest in a Middle Eastern or North African environment or artistic sensibility. Many or most of these things, as there are many cultural centers in Paris, were free. Many people who were willing could actually get themselves an education, in a way, for free, by meeting people, by going to things.

These opportunities pertaining to Middle Eastern and Mediterranean cultures clearly do not exist in New York City. I felt that lack much more strongly when I returned from Paris. In a way, the launch of MEFI was an answer to that as well. In the US, there's quite a specific situation as many of these Middle Eastern communities, as you see with the Little Syria project that I'm working on right now, they've been here since the 1880s and they're still facing the same difficulties in terms of the media industry and diversity in the media industry.

A big challenge is getting actors professional opportunities that they are qualified for. Studies like the [USC] Annenberg Center's Inclusion Initiative [10] reports for 2016 and again 2017 showed little to no meaningful change in the representation of diverse groups in popular movie content. The focus here is on "meaningful".

Yes, people are being offered roles. Are they representative? It's often Terrorist 1, Terrorist 2, Terrorist 3, and for women it's even worse; but that doesn't constitute meaningful and empowering work that you want to do as an artist. Comparing the last two annual reports of the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, the percentage of identifiable characters of Middle Eastern descent dropped by 50%, from 3.4% in 2016 to 1.7% in 2017 in 100 top-grossing, popular, fictional US films.

This is a sign that -- following a prolonged period of silence -- shrill, "tabloid-y," self-centered, exclusive, or polarizing media diversity campaigns, often highlighted by social media or by corporate and public media, do not work and are not aimed at genuinely helping people on the ground.

- 1. The Initiative does not accept funding from foreign, religious or political sources. Jack Shaheen, the writer and media critic best known for the book and documentary Reel Bad Arabs [11], who passed away in July, 2017, to great honor in the international press, had initially joined MEFI as a board member.
- 2. Little Syria's foundation was destroyed by Robert Moses during the construction of the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel.

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