

“America 1979” – An Interview with filmmaker Lila Yomtoob

 muftah.org/america-1979-an-interview-with-filmmaker-lila-yomtoob/

Growing up in my Iranian-American household, a passion for ‘film’ was the forbidden fruit. My early interest was quickly shunned by my father who equated film acting to pornography and thought of filmmaking as a high-risk, low reward venture. For me, however, film was always a beautiful and mesmerizing language, spoken in scenes and moods, through beats and filters. And it was a language that transcended my ‘clash of cultures’ upbringing, and allowed me to belong.

Ultimately, a film is a journey for anyone who decides to sit in a theater or press play, relaying an experience that prompts one to think, “Hey, I kinda know what that feels like.”

Lila Yomtoob is hoping to start that kind of conversation with her short film, “[America 1979](#),” which revolves around [a young girl’s experience](#) with discrimination during the Iran Hostage Crisis, and the consequences it has for her family.

Thanks for taking the time to sit down with me. Could you start off by telling me a bit about your background and how you ended up on the path of filmmaking?

When I was in high school, I did a lot of photography, painting and creative writing. Eventually I got my hands on a video camera and started making experimental videos – videos that more resembled art than a story. I was very lucky to attend a summer program called California State Summer School for the Arts, that solidified my identity as an artist. I ended up going to New York University, at first for a liberal arts education, but since my videos were being shown at art galleries already, I thought maybe I should go to film school. I didn’t really fit in at film school, since I was more interested in experimental film.

My interests shifted after I graduated from college and visited Israel. In Israel, I could feel the stories coming out of the ground. Every place you go has a deep significance. I all of a sudden had a deep understanding of the role stories play in our lives, how important it is to see reflections of ourselves and the world around us – whether they are realistic, comedic or fantastic. Stories can help us understand, and they can help us escape from reality. So my interests shifted to narrative story telling.

A few years later, I made a feature film, “High Life.” I was a very ambitious kid, and put all the expenses on my credit card. I thought to myself, “*This movie is going to be good, and I’ll make my money back, and then people will hire me to make films.*” I didn’t realize that it’s not that simple. I am very proud of “High Life;” we went to film festivals and got great reviews and I think some people consider it an underground hit. I’ve been working in the industry for 15 years in different capacities, and was lucky enough to win an Emmy Award for sound editing on an HBO documentary called “Baghdad ER.”

Now I work as a marketing and consulting producer. Besides for the feature I directed, I have made a bunch of short films, but my new project, “America 1979” is the most important thing I have worked on since “High Life.’

What about the way you grew up do you think influences your work most?

My mother was very influential. She was an artist, and she taught me how to look at things, how to notice beauty. She taught me how to be an observer of the world. My sister is also very creative and gave me my first camera. My parents taught me to never give up. To make films, you have to be incredibly determined

and detail oriented because it's a lot of work and there are many pieces to balance.

In general I was not encouraged to have a creative career. Like most Iranians, I was expected to be a doctor or a lawyer, make good money and live the American dream. Because I went against my parents wishes, I have had a constant need to prove myself, so I work very hard.

Do you feel there is a disadvantage to being a female filmmaker – and an Iranian-Iraqi female one at that?

It's hard to boil down what advantages or disadvantages are because of any certain quality. Because I am an Iranian Iraqi Jewish American I have a very particular world view, and I like that I have a particular way of seeing things that are unique. I think that's an advantage.

It would be great if Iranian Americans were a bit bolder about supporting the arts. A lot of minority groups have grants and organizations that will support artists who are taking chances. We don't have that yet.

As far as being a woman, It's no fun when you are in a work environment that is 90% men, and there are Victoria's Secret catalogs or *Popular Mechanic's* Pinup Edition in the bathroom. It's also no fun when you get to a certain age and have to choose between your work and having a child. Men do not have to make that choice. Otherwise, I don't like to subscribe to generalizations that might keep me down. If I suspect sexism, I try to ignore it, or if I can, prove them wrong.

What do you value most about doing the type of creative work you do?

I think it adds to my life, and I hope it adds to other peoples lives. Filmmaking is a fleeting thing. Filmmakers spend a lot of time and money on something that is basically intangible. You watch it, and then it's gone. But if you can touch someone's heart with what you've made, it can be more valuable than material things. It's very ephemeral. It's the thing I love and the thing I hate the most about filmmaking.

How did you arrive at the project “America 1979”, and what motivated you to push forward with it?

Writing this short film was a self-exploration. It was a side project that I would visit over many years. It was a much different story at first, a very personal one. Now the story does not reflect my personal experience at all, and so it feels more comfortable to put it out there in the world. I decided to move forward with it once I was able to receive support for the project. When I first started talking about the project, I received resistance from the older generation, those who were adults when the Hostage Crisis hit. But when I started talking to first generation Iranian-Americans the need for this film became very clear. First



Iranian Hostage Crisis Demonstration in Washington, D.C., 1979
(Marion S. Trikosko / Library of Congress)

generation Americans that I had never met before would email me and tell me their personal stories or offer to meet up. Clearly I hit a nerve. I also started thinking about the bigger picture, and how this story has become an American archetype over and over again: *racial or ethnic groups are vilified by the media,*

and then all members of that group suffer a backlash, including the children. I got a grant from the Brooklyn Arts Council, which greatly encouraged me to make the film.

Why “America 1979”? Why a young girl who experiences discrimination instead of focusing on the adults that experienced it?

1979 was the year that the American perception of the Middle East changed. Before the Hostage Crisis hit, Iranians immigrants were just some unknown minority from “that” region of the world. Once the Hostage Crisis hit, we turned from “unidentifiable brown person” to “hostage taker.”

I am showing the child’s perspective, because I was a child at the time, and it had a profound effect on me. I was six years old and feeling the heat of racism. No one in my family was prepared for that. I strongly feel that the way the event was handled by the media affected the way my identity formed. The hostage crisis was televised every night for it’s full duration of 444 days. There was also a nightly news hour hosted by Ted Koppel that focused on it! The hunt for Bin Laden was bad enough for Afghans, but imagine if there was a nightly news hour devoted to it? So imagine a white family, seeing the Hostage Crisis every night on television and talking about it. And young children are seeing it too, and maybe not fully comprehending what’s going on, take those snippets of information and use it as ammunition against a little Iranian girl at school. What are the long term implications of that? Furthermore, we can extend this concept into our understanding of what most minorities in the country have faced at one point or another. This doesn’t just happen to Iranians, Afghans, Iraqis and Muslims. It happens to Mexicans, gays, African Americans, etc. You get my point.



Do you see yourself or any of your life experiences in the script?

The little girl in the script is very much me, and I would say that some of the traits of the brother in the script match my brother. The dynamic between the two siblings is very similar to the one I had with my brother. I was cute and manipulative and got a lot of what I wanted and he had to bear the brunt of it. In the script, the little girl steals from her big brother as a way of taking her anger out on an easy target. I did that when I was a kid, and have always felt horrible for it.

As for the racial element, there was a moment in time when my mother told me that I was Persian and not Iranian. This was a very confusing moment for me. As I mentioned earlier, I had to depersonalize the script quite a bit so that it would be a story that I felt comfortable telling. I am kind of a private person and am not that interested in telling my life stories, but am more interested in telling stories people can relate too.

What conversation and discussions would you hope to spark for viewers of this film?

I want to talk about how the Hostage Crisis immediately affected the Iranian American identity and continues to misinform the perception of all Middle Eastern people up through post 9/11 America. I want to help start conversations about who we are in this country, and empower an Iranian American voice.

If we don’t speak up about our identity, we will continue to be left out of the larger conversation on race and ethnicity.

Finally, what changes do you hope for when it comes to the way ethnic groups are treated here in America?

I hope one day we can all respect and celebrate our differences, and not feel like we have to be anyone but who we are. Sorry if that’s hippy dippy, it’s just how I feel.

