

## Q&A: Iranian Jewish Filmmaker Lila Yomtoob on “America 1979” film

Emmy-award winning Iranian Jewish filmmaker Lila Yomtoob.

*In 2007 I had the special opportunity to interview [Lila Yomtoob](#), a New York based filmmaker who became the first Iranian Jew in the U.S. to win an Emmy. She received the award for her sound editing work on the HBO television documentary film "Baghdad ER". Since then she has gone on to continue a successful career in the entertainment industry and made her own independent films.*

*Again I recently sat down with her to discuss her latest short film “[America 1979](#)” which reflects on the life of an Iranian immigrant family living in the U.S. during the U.S. hostage crisis in Iran. The film focuses on the difficulties a young Iranian American girl encounters from her schoolmates during the hostage crisis. The film has screened at the Screen Actors Guild Short Film Showcase (NYC), the Noor Iranian Film Festival in Los Angeles and will screen on April 28 at the [Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival](#).*

*The following is a portion of my conversation with Yomtoob...*



**You were very young during the Iranian hostage crisis in 1979-1980, what motivated you to do a short film about the impact of the crisis on Iranians living in the U.S. at that time?**

At a certain point, I realized that the crisis had affected me, even as a young child. It turns out that I'm not the only one who feels this way, it's just that no one talks about it. I think this time in our history as Iranian Americans deserves a dialogue. Also, I realized that the same story keeps happening – after 9/11 middle-eastern young people and families were affected in the same ways. That's why the story is still relevant.

**In your short film “America 1979” you tell the story through the eyes and experiences of a young girl. Why did you choose the perspective of a child to share this experience that mostly older Iranian Americans experienced at that time?**

Kids repeat stuff in school they hear at home, and parents are on edge. It's easy to think that kids aren't affected, and it's important to acknowledge that they are, because kids carry and process things differently than adults do. In making this story about Regina and her brother Bobby, I could address a controversial issue in a softer, perhaps more digestible way. It's also a bit of homage to Iranian cinema in the way that a lot of Iranian cinema uses stories starring children to represent deeper issues that can't be expressed because of censorship.

**In your film you do not identify the religion of the Iranian family. You hail from an Iranian Jewish background yourself, why did not choose to specifically tell the Iranian Jewish experience in America in 1979 during the hostage crisis?**

This was a difficult choice. At the end of the day, this movie is a slice of life showing how an Iranian American family coped with the personal fallout of the crisis. Religion is such a hot button topic, and I didn't want alienate any potential

viewers by making the family Jewish - or Muslim or Bahai for that matter.

**Getting funding and making an independent film is not easy, can you please share a little bit with us about the journey for this film?**

We had a very successful Indiegogo crowd funding campaign to help fund the film, and have received three grants – The Brooklyn Arts Council, New York State Council on the Arts, and the Puffin Foundation. We were very lucky to have powerhouses Ali Reza Farahnakian and Sondra James join our cast, and work with other award winning talent like our composer Lev “Ljova” Zhurbin, who has worked with Francis Ford Coppola amongst others, our DP Adrian Correia, who had two films at SxSW this year. We’ve created a nice community around the film, it’s the most I could hope for.

**Many Iranian Americans who lived in the U.S. during the late 1970s and early 1980s experienced significant backlash from average Americans because of the situation with the American hostages. Yet many of these same Iranian Americans I have spoken to today consider this past history and do not want to relive or remember this sad period in time. So why did you decide to bring up this subject matter in the public eye?**

When I was fundraising for this film, I had a few older Iranian Americans get mad at me, literally scold me, for wanting to make this film. This reaction was just as important as younger people telling me that they wish they knew more about what their parents went through, because no one talks about it. Not to mention the people who thanked me for telling this story, because it isn’t talked about. Clearly, it needs to be talked about! All of these reactions inspired me to make this film, hoping that people would talk. Or at least allow themselves to feel. I’m looking forward to having community screenings, where this can be explored further.

**There are not that many Iranian Jews in the entertainment industry nowadays because of the taboo from many Iranian Jewish families who wish to see their children in professional high paying careers. Do you see this changing in the near future? What do you think will bring down this community taboo?**

It’s tough to say. I am seeing more Iranian voices emerge and I think it’s very exciting and interesting. I think the more Iranian Americans make themselves visible in the arts, and the more we support each other, the more it will encourage others to follow their passions.

**In 2007 you won an Emmy award for your sound editing work for an HBO film and you’ve worked in the industry successfully since then. What projects or stories do you personally want to pursue in the realm of film or television?**

I would love for America 1979 to become a television miniseries. I also have a few comedy scripts, and a few documentary ideas about the Iranian American community that I would like to pursue. One of those is the America 1979 documentary archive, which would be a series of interviews with Iranians telling their personal stories about life around the crisis.

For more information on Yomtoob’s film visit the [America 1979 site](#).

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