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THE MOST POPULAR LEBANESE STORY EVER TOLD... IS A WEB PHENOMENON

The world's first Arabic web drama series presents life in Beirut – and much more

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...The series is a collaboration between the BBC World Service Trust and Batoota Films, a production company headed by Katia Saleh, a veteran of Al-Jazeera English and Channel 4.

Saleh put out a call for contributors in late 2009 and settled on a team of six writers -- four Lebanese, an Egyptian and a Palestinian. They have been coached in developing the concept by British scriptwriter James Payne, who has worked on television shows such as "Eastenders". Helming the series is Amin Dora, who comes to web drama from TV ads and music videos.

"Shankaboot" (meaning 'moped') tells the story of Suleiman (newcomer Hassan Akil), a 15-year-old roof squatter who earns a living making deliveries on his white moped. His labours all look authentic, except that he wears a helmet, rare among Beirut's hoards of moped drivers.

Complementing Suleiman since the show's first season is the comely Ruwaida (Samira Kawass, who studied dramatic arts in Paris), the product of a traditional marriage who has fled her abusive husband and now yearns to become a star. Rounding out the principal cast is



(L) Exec producer Chris Carrey, producer Katia Saleh, script writer Bassem Breish and project manager Toni Oyrri receive the top prize for best web series in the fiction category

Suleiman's older friend, Chadi (Nasri Sayegh).

The lead writer for "Shankaboot" is 32-year-old Lebanese filmmaker Bassem Breish, who first attracted international attention when his debut short "Both" was chosen for Cannes' 2007 Critics Week selection. "Web drama is a new form,"

Breish notes, and developing the show has been distinct from his film work.

"When we started, nobody knew what a web drama was," he recalls. "All the other series we were competing with for the Emmy were different. There's no single approach.

"We started from characters and a

set of places. Then we asked ourselves, 'How can we link them?' We knew Suleiman was the main character because he's young, and young people are our target audience. As a delivery boy, he can open many doors and thereby lead to so many stories.

"Chadi's character began as a hacker, but then the show needed him to change, so he developed into a drug addict. Conventionally, people assume drug abusers are bad people. We decided to convey him as a sympathetic character from a f***ed-up family.

"We started with characters and places, then we moved to developing the stories thematically.

"We worked on a domestic workers' theme. Other dramas have worked with it too, and one was sarcastic about domestics in Lebanon. As far as I'm concerned, the way domestic workers are treated in this country is a major problem. You have to be responsible, both politically and in entertainment terms. It's amazing how people take their cues from



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Muriel Abouelrouss

what they watch on television.

“Okay, delivery boys aren’t necessarily the nicest people. They drive on the sidewalk and they irritate people. But no one asks why and how it is that these teenagers are working instead of being in school.”

Breish says web drama comes with

“We ask our audience [via Facebook poll] what issues they want us to deal with. Palestinian camps? Homosexuality? During season five, many people wanted us to deal with homosexuality. At the end of our third season, we asked people what ending they wanted and we shot it for them.



Director Amin Dora, producer Katia Saleh and actor Hasan Akil

“Each season has an average of 10 episodes – that is, between nine and 11 episodes. Ideally, the episodes should be seven minutes long. Many of them are five minutes. The reason is the internet in Lebanon. Some people say they don’t watch “Shankaboot” because the internet is so slow, it can take 20 minutes to download a seven-minute episode.

unique challenges. Interactivity, for instance, provides both inspiration and critique.

“People tell you right away that something you’ve just posted is bullshit and you have to respond. If an episode has a woman meeting a man and sleeping with him immediately, some respond by saying, ‘This isn’t believable!’ It happens all the time, of course, but you have to take people’s beliefs into consideration. You can’t preach. People already get preached at – by politicians, priests and sheikhs.

“It’s no problem if you can afford a super fast internet connection, but that’s not our audience. We want to reach the kids on the street in Dahyeh [Beirut’s southern suburbs].

Since winning the Emmy, Breish says the show has attracted more international attention, particularly from France and New Zealand, giving the team reason to contemplate growth.

“The ideal now is to take ‘Shankaboot’ outside Beirut and outside Lebanon. One goal is to bring it to the streets of the Arab revolutions. Trying to impress on

people that revolution is not just about removing a president. There has to be change at a deeper level. Art has to change. The way people behave has to change.

“As far as I’m concerned, ‘Shankaboot’ is designed for the web. The natural place to shift it to isn’t TV, though if we did, it would immediately increase the audience. I’m more interested in communicating with the audience.

“We’re definitely thinking about moving ‘Shankaboot’ into film. But we need to find the single idea that needs 80 minutes to be developed. When we find such an idea we can go for it. But none of us is pushing for it right now. There are stories that can be done in the series. A film requires a different kind of story.

Hits:

“‘Shankaboot’ is connected to YouTube. It had 900,000 hits yesterday. We have nearly 24,000 Facebook fans and thousands following us on Twitter.

“In terms of audience hits, most of the audience is Lebanese, but second place is always switching from Egypt to the US to Saudi. Okay, there are Lebanese in Saudi and the US, but chances are that anyone watching in Egypt is Egyptian.”



Suleiman - the hero

Lebanon’s sectarianism drive?

“We all went out to the demos. Of course, we didn’t hold a ‘Shankaboot’ banner or anything. It’s difficult to embrace any of these issues overtly, but there are always hints as to how the characters feel about things.

“Back in season one, a year ago, Suleiman asks another character if she’s Muslim. She responded, ‘I’m a Shankabooti.’ But there are hints. These characters are responsible. Suleiman has to be a good person. There’s nothing in his character that suggests he gives a damn about someone’s religion.”