

Youth drama tackles religious tolerance in Lebanon

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MROUJ: “Kilna Bil Hayy” (“All of us in the neighborhood”) is a weekly Lebanese television drama that tells the story of six children who live in the same neighborhood and attend the same school.

The children are all from different religious backgrounds and ethnic groups that comprise Lebanon: Lara is Druze, Kevin is Christian, Nadim is Sunni, Sara is Shiite, Mohammad is Palestinian, and Pateel is Armenian.

The second season of began filming in August, and it features a brand new cast.

The six principal actors were chosen from their own religious and ethnic groups so as to avoid any accusations that a given group is being misrepresented by another; each of the six main characters retains their first name in the script.

However, the secondary characters were chosen based purely on their acting abilities, and in many cases they are playing the role of someone outside of their own religious or ethnic community.

Season 2 will feature 13 episodes that cover a variety of issues. All of the episodes are based on the theme of acceptance of the other; the stories range from defining the other in terms of religious differences, to socioeconomic differences, health and physical disability, and old age.

Some episodes deal with other universal issues such as bullying at school or the consequences of an unchecked competitive spirit and small lies. One episode deals with the topical problem of reckless driving.

The show targets children aged between 10 and 14 and is produced and created by the nonprofit organization Search For Common Ground, with funding from the Norwegian Foreign Affairs Ministry.

“Kilna Bil Hayy,” – which will be distributed to schools throughout Lebanon – is written by Jean Kassis, a Lebanese University professor and the head of the Actors Union, and the show is directed by Elie Habib.

Naturally, the show’s cast fully supports the message of tolerance, and believes that a youth-oriented – and acted – show is one of the best ways to promote this with the public.

“This is a wonderful country,” says Pateel Hadidian, 14, who resides in Fanar and is active in theater at school. “If they could stop fighting, people would finally understand what Lebanon is.”

Pateel says her older friends are supportive of her participation in the show and believe it's a great message, while her younger friends just want her to mention their names on television.

For first-time actress Lara Gharzeddine, a 12-year-old from Beirut, it's a chance to pursue a personal dream and get the right message across.

"My parents support me doing this because they always taught me to be friends with kids from all backgrounds," she says. "Kids should learn to be friends with any sect because we are all the same."

For 13-year-old Kevin Kehdy, it's his second time acting; he has appeared in commercials before and has worked with director Marwan Najjar.

"My dad told me I should live this lesson correctly in real life and that no one other than us children can deliver this message to Lebanon," says Kehdy, who adds that his friends are jealous of him and want to be on television with him.

Neither Kehdy nor first-time actress Sara Ghandour, 12, is likely to pursue acting as a career.

Ghandour notes the long hours required by the profession, but says her family supports her participation in the show, with a positive message.

"[Kilna Bil Hayy is] really good and very necessary. I don't like it in this country when there is a war. Everything is nicer when people aren't screaming at night," she says.

Another first-time television actor is Nadim Majzoub, 13, from Beirut. Majzoub is active in plays and puppet theater at his school, while his fellow 13-year-old, Mohammad Dgheim, is from the Palestinian refugee camp of Bourj al-Barajneh.

Dgheim appeared in a couple of episodes during Season 1 and says he would like to continue acting, but switch to directing when he is older, in order to yell directions at people to act properly.

Director Habib is extremely pleased with the cast, which he said needed only a few days to get used to what was being asked of them.

Habib said he agreed to direct the show because of its secular nature, which reflects his own orientation.

"We can live together even if we are from different faiths or ethnicities. The show delivers an excellent message, if people can understand it," says Habib, who adds that "Kilna Bil Hayy" will reach out successfully to children, but that their parents may be a lost cause.

The first season was filmed two years ago and aired last summer, on LBCI. It's based on an original series from Macedonia that ended up being a huge success.

Search For Common Ground describes the show as “socially responsible media” and it’s one of several outreach projects by the NGO.

“We have to follow up so that it doesn’t become just entertainment,” says the NGO’s director, Sarah Shouman.

“The goal is to bring societal transformation through linking projects together,” Shouman adds.

Focus groups were positive in their feedback on Season 1, since tolerance is a timely issue to address in a fragile country such as Lebanon.

However, some may insist the show is too ambitious in a country where sectarian and ethnic tensions, and identities, often define daily life.

Search For Common Ground believes that even though the idea is idealistic to some, a culture of tolerance must start somewhere.

The focus groups also indicated that some believed it was unrealistic to have six different groups living in one neighborhood, yet feedback from the same groups showed that “Kilna Bil Hayy” has indeed changed behavior.

Children were able to focus on what they have in common and accept differences, while their parents form an indirect target audience as well, since many children in Lebanon adopt their views from their parents.

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