

MIDDLE EAST TIMES

Reality better than fiction

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What happens when an Atlanta radio talk-show therapist called Spirit meets a television talk-show host from Cairo named Bothaina? Or when Mike, an Alabama cowboy trades places with Mahmoud, an Egyptian horse trainer? "The Bridge" is a one-hour reality show that documents the relationship between two Americans and two Egyptians who have never visited one another's countries as they share their cultures and their lives.

The show blends elements of documentary style film-making with reality TV. Viewers watch as the participants visit each others' countries for the first time, crossing the real and imagined boundaries that exist between the United States and Egypt.

Through the interactions of Spirit, Bothaina, Mike, and Mahmoud, stereotypes about "the other" are dispelled as the audience watches to see whether their similarities will trump their cultural, political, and religious differences. In one of many exchanges in which the four characters discuss similarities and differences, Mahmoud calls in to Spirit's talk-show from Mike's car in Alabama and voices his traditional attitude toward women. Bothaina – in Spirit's studio in Atlanta – is quick to point out: "I disagree! Who told him we needed protection? We might both be Egyptians, but we are very different!"

Discussions such as these, chip away at the myths that surround the two cultures and viewers join the different characters in considering whether friendships between Arabs and Americans are not only possible, but may also be enlightening in many ways.

"The Bridge" is a co-production of the Egypt-based Video Cairo SAT, Common Ground Productions in Washington DC, Baraka Productions and Downtown Community Television, the last two of New York City. It is directed by Tami Alpert and Shannon Sorenstein of DCTV, which was co-founded by Emmy award winning Jon Alpert (Bagdad ER). This behind-the-scenes cooperation of multiple production companies in the United States and Egypt is not only key to the success of the show, but is as important to the creation of the show as the on-screen relationships.

The collaboration was made possible by the visionary partnership between John Marks, founder and president of Search for Common Ground and Muhammad Gohar, president and founder of Video Cairo SAT. Gohar and Marks are friends as well as business partners. When asked how the relationship came about, Marks said, "I'm a social entrepreneur and Gohar is a social entrepreneur. We share an interest in making television that moves beyond stereotyping of 'the other,' television programming that demonstrates our common humanity."

Television as a tool for conflict transformation and social change is the mandate of Common Ground Productions, the media arm of Search for Common Ground. The producers consider this the pilot episode of what they hope will become an ongoing series. If that happens, audiences worldwide can look forward to seeing similar exchanges between Americans and Middle Easterners.

On Dec. 30, Faith and Values Media will present, "The Bridge: Egyptian-American Exchange" during its 11:00 AM (EST/PST) time-slot on The Hallmark Channel. Faith and Values Media is the nation's largest coalition of Abrahamic faith groups dedicated to media production, distribution and promotion.

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