

JOAN MANDELL TALK

Mandell (09:47:22:05) I just wanted to give you a short introduction to our film. It's called "Arab-American Road Movie." And I was commissioned by the museum the year before it opened to do a kind of intro film that when visitors come to the museum they get a kind of overview, um, about Arab-American communities. And the reason they asked me to do this film is because about 15 years ago—almost 15 years now—I worked with Access on a film called "Tales from Arab Detroit." Umm, which is about American born children of Arab heritage in the Detroit area. And the film was very successful getting out and everything so they said, "Okay, here, now we have a new project for you. We'd like you to document, umm, the situation, the lives, the stories of people of Arab heritage in the United States from 22 countries, in all regions of the United States, in three waves of immigration, different religious backgrounds, all social classes, all ages...and do it in-depth, in ten minutes. So I, you know, pointed out that this was a virtual impossibility, would they like a slide show? No, no, no—we want it in depth, we want stories in depth and we want you to do it, we know you can do it—okay go away, do it. And they were, um, it was a great artistic experience, 'cuz ordinarily when I get commissioned by non-profits to work with them, there's a lot of micro-managing and "We need this" and "You should put in flip-charts of our organization saying how wonderful we are," and things like this. But in this case, it was really, really up to me. And I came back, I gathered some material and I come back every time and show it to the museum. And, um, there was very little dispute over anything so it was great for me to work with the museum on this. In the end the piece is 14 minutes—a little slippage. Umm, and we'll see how you feel about how I, uh, I-I- whatever I achieve. But anyway, I wanted to talk a little bit about some of the issues that went on, umm, in the making of the film...some of the issues of representation. And how I try to deal with them in the film. But I'm sure you'll have questions as well, so we'll take them after we see the film

"Arab American Road Movie"

FILM START: (09:49:51:00)

FILM END: (10:03:41:00)

(*Clapping*)

Mandell: (10:03:43:00) I have to tell you—it's a lot harder to edit a short film than to edit a long film

Audience: (10:03:48:00) How much footage did you have?

Mandell: (10:03:50:00) A lot. Umm, I just wanted to make—should I make a comment? Uhh or do you want to—okay. Umm, just in trying to imagine this film and put it together, um, I had about a thousand stickies on my wall with categories, 'cuz I was thinking, "Okay, how am I going to do this if I have a Palestinian basketball Muslim young girl, the next scene should be a Lebanese Christian elderly—you know, I would try to like be kind of proportionately representational at some point. Then I tried, umm, to just ditch all of that, and then what was it, and I kind of came up with some themes, umm, which really helped me a lot. One is: "How do people have conversations with each other? How do people talk about their issues together—when they're together, with a family, with a community, people who are not like them?" And then I kind of observed that. And so I tried to put in the film a lot of those types of conversations

that people would have because identity is so fluid—how we describe who we are, we describe it differently, even to our own selves, as well all know sitting in this room, umm, everyday differently, let alone to all kinds of people. So I wanted to include some of that there. Um, besides that, I kind of—I gather stories. The only collection I really have at home is my collection of conversations with people over the years. I don't really collect things, I just remember stories and vivid people and personalities, for example, um, the woman who was telling the "Blad" story, I had met her at a wedding nine years previously. And when I met her, I said: "Some day this woman has to be in a film." So, luckily she lives in Jacksonville, so luckily I needed someone in Jacksonville, I was like: "I'm going to go get that woman." Um, so I, but I, because I wanted to somehow represent a lot of kinds of people. Both the people I would know, who would tend to be more middle-class, live in the places I had lived, have the same sense of humor I have, but then what about all the other people, who aren't like me. So I started with the people that I knew, that were my friends, that were my family members, people that I've know, you know, for my whole lifetime. Um, and I thought: "Okay, who are these people?" I called them, most of them didn't agree to be in the film. (*Laughter*) But anyway—wisely so—no, anyway, some of the agreed and I kind of included them and, um, then I kind of, I-I-I looked for the holes. Um, the places in the country that I hadn't covered, the people from the different waves of immigration that I hadn't covered and, uh, anyway I tried various editing strategies and this is how it ended up. Umm, one thing I didn't talk about in the beginning because we're here at this artists conference so I think I felt compelled to talk about myself as an artist, but I don't really look at myself that way, I think I came to doing documentary film work through journalism. I came to journalism through student, you know, political activism. My curiosity, my loving to do research, you know, many reasons but essentially the thing that keeps me doing documentary work, umm, is that I just really love—I really love hanging out with all the people in my films. Umm, except for every now and then I have to have a bad guy in the film, but everybody else I just love. I love soaking up their stories and I really want to share those stories with other people. So that's the great joy of being a documentary film maker and you know a lot of it is also—we were talking at the conference and all the panels people have talked about this, like "Who do you talk to? Who is your audience?" So when you're making a film you're really clear—you're pretty clear about who your intended audience is at least. And you never really know who the people in the room are going to be, who's going to see it, how they're going to interpret it, but you have to start with some imagination. So first of all I knew it would be screened in the museum, I knew a lot of school groups would see this, a lot of family. And the museum is very much about cultural heritage and pride, so that's kind of a basic principle that had to be in the film. Um, and it has to be easily understandable by a lot of people. But also I knew that people coming to this museum would be, umm, many people coming through would be Arab-Americans whose stories have not been told in a positive light who are looking for themselves in the film. And also other people who have never thought about issues of Arab-American identity, who are going to be seeing the film. So it's like a little bit in there for everybody. Another issue I wanted to grapple with is you know, um, we have now in trying to develop an Arab-American identity, there's a tendency toward homogenization. As if there is a specific small community called "Arab-American" that's distinct from either other Americans, other Arabs other human beings. But we're all so multi-faceted it doesn't really work that way. So actually, although the viewers, the audience may not be, um, very conscious who of the people in the film is, I really worked hard to include people in this film who have all stripes of political viewpoint. So for example, um, the woman who's

speaking at—I don't know if you noticed, it's a pro-choice rally where she says we have to stand out on the streets, okay, she's Republican, she's in a group called Republicans for Choice. Um, and also, I was really struck, now there's a strong woman speaking about: "We have to take to the streets." And then we'd expect in a film about Arab-American identity she'd be taking to the streets to talk about what's going on in the Middle East. But why, I was marching through that rally, as was she, as was—let me introduce Rawan, who also worked with us on the crew that day, um, who's here visiting from D.C. You know, we were there with everybody else who cared about those issues, men and women alike. So you know, some of it in the film—there's some things related to the Arab world in the Middle East, some related to our life here and, uh, all kinds of people. Umm, the other thing I want to talk about is our-our people of Arab descent whose families have immigrated here from the Arab world who do not call themselves Arab-American...Are they Arab-American? Who decides? If we say that each person can determine their own identity and a person, for example, from Lebanon, um, this you know, is-is something we might often run into. Someone from Lebanon might say, "I'm Lebanese, I'm not Arab," for example. Then does that person get put in my film? Do I decide? And in the making of the film I-I compiled a whole bunch of outtakes for another film or an imaginary other film, which I call: "I Am Not Arab, Pass the Kidbee." And...(*Laughter*) So um, you know, a lot of people went to great length to tell me, "I am not Arab." Um, one of the people in the film who talks and calls herself Arab in this film is actually Armenian. Um, but she considers herself Arab because she grew up in Syria and she considers herself part of the Arab world. So those issue are not—they're more complex than just "Who's Arab and everything." But I just wanted to introduce that. I feel compelled since I'm here, ordinarily the people seeing the film don't get to hear me say that but um, one thing maybe that people, uh, who are not filmmakers, not documentary filmmakers don't realize or maybe you do, but we actually could be writing books on the subject of our film, we could be making feature films, we have so investigated and, um, rattled our brain over every little thing and we usually don't speak about our films, usually our films speak. We try to put all the meaning we can into film and let them go out into the world. So it's really a rare occurrence for me to, um, speak and talk about any decisions I made...that's it. Anyway, any questions? (*Clapping*)

Audience: (10:12:08:00) You have to make that "Kidbee" movie.

Mandell: (10:12:10:00) Do I? Okay. Oh, okay, here's another, a little—the Kidbee, on the Kidbee note. I don't know if you noticed the camel—another movie, um, "Have Pieces For," is camel collectors, Arab camel collectors. Now here's the thing about that—that's something that I would have to do totally independently because a lot of people—this-this is something, you know, when I was doing this research and going all over America I found everybody, everywhere not conformed to political correctness. Okay, organizations, umm, as a whole need to represent people as collective unities. It's very important and that work is very important, that's what built this museum. It's having, umm, the ways that we're all together, pulling for, you know...greater collective spirit of everybody. But also there's individuals, we're also societies and communities of individuals. So there was a man I met, um, he worked in a textile factory with mainly Portuguese immigrants and they were the single Lebanese family. And they called him "Camel" and he didn't mind. Now other people would say, "Well, that's a racist comment to call and an Arab a camel." But this man embraced it. Just as gays embrace the word "Queer." So for him "Camel" was fine. He had his ear pierced with a little camel. He had camel tattoos all over his arms and he has a camel collection. What could I say? That man is Arab-American and he's embracing camels. Or I was also shocked when I was in Jacksonville

and I was just filming in a Palestinian-owned All-America hot dog stand. Uh, when I noticed on the sandwich board the “camel-rider sandwich,” and I almost dropped the camera. And the family I was with, who was Palestinian, looked at me and they said, “The most precious moment in this film would have been your expression when you saw that on the sandwich board, not actually what you’re filming here. (*Laughter*) So I said, “But how could this be?” And then they just very calmly explained to me how in the seventies or eighties a Palestinian sandwich shop guy, you know, took like a bologna sandwich, put it in an Arabic pocket bread and there got invented this camel—and all of over Jacksonville, in the big grocery stores, everywhere you can buy it and, so what? Okay, me coming from the north, very involved in civil rights, um, anti-discrimination type work—I would be shocked but people there aren’t. So I feel also, um, I’m working on a longer form of this film with all my outtakes and I-I feel, um, with—hopefully it will include some of those kind of weird idiosyncratic type of things. Because all of those people, the people making the camel-rider sandwiches—they’re very proud to be Arab-American too. It’s a very—it’s many communities, many stories and we don’t need to create a new stereotype that there is “just one way of expressing things.”

Audience: (10:15:20:15) Um, has this film been shown in other venues? And it’s shown in the museum on, I guess, a regular basis?

Mandell: (10:15:29:00) Yeah, it was created to be for this exhibit. But um, I think we really need to put it out on DVD, get it out. I don’t know, it’s really , I don’t know, it can be used in some settings, I think it’s really good for a classroom setting, uhh, it’s kind of edited in a linear style, probably as a stand alone piece. Outside of the museum I might have edited it differently, but I think, uhh, hopefully they’ll put it in the museum gift shop, at least.

Audience: (10:15:58:15) Maybe I’m thinking of public television, maybe the longer version I’m thinking of, but the audience would be different. Certainly it’s important for the wider American public to have an understanding of Arab Americans these days.

Mandell: (10:16:16:05) That’s a good point. Uhh, anybody else have any questions back there.

Audience: (10:16:26:13) I can...Just your comments about the people who really embrace the camel and speak in certain ways or even, you know, being addressed on the phone, being called A-Rab and went by that name. I remember being in high school and my best friend, I go to her parents’ house and they lived in Detroit and they said, “We have this store owner down the street, we always go to the store, we don’t know his name so we just call him A-Rab and we just call the place A-Rabs.” And you know, I didn’t mind at the time , although I didn’t like it, but I also didn’t get all riled up. I was like 14, and so um it was like, “It’s her mom, it’s not her. And so you kind of rationalize and also there’s ways, umm, not to psycho analyze, but you internalize racism, so it’s like why don’t I make fun of myself before someone else does? Or I see this in the mainstream I’m not going to get wounded because it’s like “Let’s not take this seriously so let me collect camels.” And collecting camels maybe isn’t something that’s going to disrupt things as much as something else, you know what I mean, that is inline with the stereotype. It isn’t necessarily something that is going to offend the way that being called “camel” you know, or something. But I think it’s important to talk about race and American identity and constructions of whiteness and all that stuff. So it seems that a film that says “I’m not Arab except for the Kibee” would seem like a really...what we were talking about in the last session and what really is taboo to talk about and not talk about. It seems to me like race and racial issues is something people avoid and so...

Mandell: (10:18:05:05) Those are very good points and actually the camel collector, his sister is on the National Board of the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee. So um you know his other sister is very involved in the Marynite Church, and very proud to call herself Arab-American. So you know there's another thing, people think sometimes people who say "I'm Marynite and I'm Lebanese." Isn't going to proudly say, "I'm Arab-American, too." So you know, and it's all in the same family. Umm...so...anything else?

Audience: (10:18:48:05) What do you think is neglected in filmmaking in terms of this community, just because you did so well with it? not just what are your fantasies for what you'd like to produce if someone gave you ten million. But also, even if you're not going to do it, what are some things you think need to be done or haven't been said?

Mandell: (10:19:05:00) I'd much rather be a series producer for a television station than making my own films at this point. I'd much rather be an executive producer doling out money to other people, umm, feel free to hire me. (*Laughter*) But really I feel, there are so many stories and anyone person can't do them it's much...I-I especially love... and as you know I also teach. And I love helping my students with their films and telling their stories and that's really the direction... I'm-I'm getting less interested, although I do slowly make other films, I'm less interested I feel much less interested, I feel less compelled to make my own films and much less compelled to work with other people in giving them the tools to make their films so that's something that I'm much more...and you know the areas—it's all wide open, it's all really wide open, umm, I'm trying to umm, I could answer the question in a couple more ways. One is I belong to a co-op of independent filmmakers. And when I tried to join this co-op 20 years ago with my first documentary *Gaza Ghetto: Portrait of a Palestinian Family*. It was you could kind of categorize in the genre human rights, you know, political film. The film was rejected and I heard via the grapevine it was rejected on political reasons because at the time many people in the co-op could stomach that, it was a film that was very—definitely talking about the Israeli military occupation. And they couldn't just go along with that and have it in the co-op. But ten years later when I produced *Tales from Arab Detroit* which was, umm, a more cultural, light-hearted film, it got into the co-op. Of course, people change, we all change, new generations come up, anyway and so the film got in. So I asked, "Could I have in the catalog a place, umm, for this film or otherwise it's going to be lumped and no one's going to find--." I consciously brought this film to a collection that had no other films about Arabs or Arab Americans. I didn't want the film to be ghetto—ghettoized. It's in also Arab film distribution has the same films. But I didn't want it only to be ghettoized as an Arab film. I wanted it there with all the communities of all urban studies, all anthropology, and American studies groups. Oh no, we can't put Middle East studies even, uhh, because we only have your films. Okay, so finally I struggled through that and finally we got a category in the catalog that said "Middle East Studies," under which these films resided. Well, this year they said what category do you want for your films and I said, "Well actually, for one films I want immigration, I want for one film....."

NEW TAPE

Mandell: (23:57:46:17) Umm, saying, you know, "We're very concerned. We want to bring other people into the co-op. Even if we only have this one film, *Tales From Arab Detroit*, we want other films about Arab Americans. So we left at that, we'll have that title in the catalog, even with only one film on it, for now, for now because we want to encourage other people and I think things are so rapidly changing. If you see who's presenting at this conference and you see

what people in their 20s and 30s are doing, burgeoning, many people doing what a decade ago were unimaginable. So things—things are really opening up. You know, it's um every community, every community and every group of communities and however you want to describe community goes through many stages. In the beginning, it's very important—very important to have many productions, many art pieces, many educational vehicles out there that are very positive, that are very embracing, that are very inclusive, that are very supportive of those communities both within the community and for talking to people outside the community. And as you go along, more and more cutting edge things will appear as well. And more critical things will appear. And there will be more place for it because there will be a basis, umm, but also the other things is other films that umm, where issue that are relevant and many of the issues that have been discussed today about Arab Americans, about the Middle East, about U.S. foreign policy, all these kind of issues are part of a larger scene so we also need to make sure and counsel people who are doing work on, umm, for example, I don't know, ethnic groups of the United States in New Jersey. Oh, have they thought about including an Arab American perspective in there? So it's also about appearing in, you know, ---you're doing a film on umm, HIV/AIDS, is there an Arab in that film? You're doing a film on tennis, and uhh, tennis in different communities, is there an Arab in the film? I don't know, but that's another—

Audience: (00:00:15:00) How come you don't have another film to go under that Arab American Studies section in the catalog?

Mandell: (00:00:24:00) Because there are so few films on Arab Americans that have been created that are about communities, and most documentary filmmakers there uh, let's say for many documentary filmmakers are not actively involved in distributing their own films, so they'll give their films to a distributor. Now if I was going to just give my film to somebody I would look around and go, "Oh, here's a catalog with a lot of films like mine, however I define my film." And then I want it to be there because people will know that catalog and they'll buy the film from that distributor. So if you saw a catalog and there was a title that said "Arab American Studies" and there was one film, you're going to think, "Who's going to even--." But I find it doesn't really work that way because I've been able by having my film and my films in this collection--. Okay a university professor teaching Urban Studies has never, never taught about Arab Americans. Goes to the Urban Studies thing and boom there's *Tales From Arab Detroit*. Okay, one of their students happens to be Arab American, that person says go look at this catalog. So actually um I do very well and another interesting thing there was going to be a mailing to Jewish studies groups, umm, from the catalog and we have quite a lot of Jewish studies related titles. So at one of our meetings I said, "I want to put a brochure for my film into the Jewish Studies when they're doing a mailing—when they're doing a small mailing." And people said, "Well, why are you doing that, there's nothing about Jewish Studies in here?" and I said, "Because I want this to be mailed to the professors who are teaching Jewish studies. They're going to open it up, they're going to see, they're going to scatter all these brochures and suddenly they're going to see *Tales From Arab Detroit* and then they might ask themselves what do they know about this and is this related to what they're teaching or something like that." So there's a lot of um, opportunities to look at the kind of places that have tended to exclude you. And instead of, umm, continuing to feel victimized from of the exclusion, to like turn it around and just keep trying to be there. We have to realize all of these things are that are worth fighting for take a very long time so that's what we have each other for. (*Laughter*) Any other questions? Thank-you. (*Clapping*)

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