

LAILA FARAH INTERVIEW

Laila: (00:41:55:16) Okay

Bob: (00:41:56:15) Ready? Okay, so the first thing would be could you tell us just a little bit about yourself? Tell us your name. First tell us your name and spell it.

Laila: (00:42:07:10) Okay.

Bob: (00:42:08:00) Then we'll get it right.

Laila: (00:42:09:00) Okay. (*Laughter*)

Bob: (00:42:10:20) So let's just do that.

Laila: (00:42:11:20) All right, it's Laila Farah. And that's L-A-I-L-A F-A-R-A-H.

Bob: (00:42:18:11) Okay. I've got that. And could you tell us a little bit about your background?

Laila: (00:42:25:00) Sure...Start with the gene pool, you want to start with my genetics? (*Laughter*)

Bob: (00:42:32:15) Whatever. My genetic background is...

Laila: (00:42:34:15) My genetic background is...My father is Lebanese naturalized. And my mother is Anglo-Saxon Nordic from California. So I'm really fit into that hyphenated category and I was very much raised that way. I wasn't raised...to be identified one way or the other. My parents were very good about helping me to feel very good about being both-and. And talked about it in appreciative ways. I was born in San Francisco and then moved to Lebanon and was raised there. So I didn't come back to the states until I was 21. So I lived in the war from 1975 the civil war through the Israeli invasion. Up until February 1984 I evacuated out with the Marines. And I've been based in the states since. The last three years—I didn't go back for a decade. Didn't see my folks for about seven years because of the war continuing and circumstances. And then in 1994 I started going back once a year and made a commitment to going back. And a couple years ago I started doing a working on a research project that took me to Lebanon for sort of large chunks of time and working with Palestinian women in the refugee camps in Lebanon across the country, looking at non-violent forms of resistance. So that's the research part and the new one woman show of course will come out of that. And I would have finished the book last summer, but of course the Israelis invaded and pretty much destroyed the infrastructure of the country. So I needed to stay with my family during that time and decided to take fall term to carry on being there. So that was another six months stint and then I'll go back. And now I've worked on a deal with DePaul University where I teach, where I'm going to be there six

months working on my research and then in the states I'm working at the University six months.

Bob: (00:44:57:09) So you were there during the Israeli—

Laila: (00:44:58:10) Oh yes, the second time I never thought I'd see it again, none of us did. We never thought it could...and also we never thought it could be worse than what happened in '82. This put that to shame I have to tell you.

Bob: (00:45:13:20) The weapons were worse.

Laila: (00:45:14:20) Oh, the weapons, the intent. The intent was worse. See...because it was collective punishment this time

Bob: (00:45:23:00) Here in—and the number of people we have interviewed have commented about a demonstration that took place here in Dearborn as a result or in response to that. And I don't know if you know anything about it or if you've heard people talk about it—

Laila: (00:45:40:10) No, I had heard about a little bit in the press and then—

Bob: (00:45:49:20) That was what I wanted to ask to you about that. If you knew anything about it from the press coverage because the problems seem to be that in America it's okay to demonstrate. But this was characterized as demonstration in support of terrorism. What we've been informed that it's really a demonstration in support of families who were in great danger.

Laila: (00:46:14:00) Yes, of being ripped apart, literally, both through death and through evacuation and separations. So many families were separated. I had not heard very much about it. I have a very good friend who lives in Dearborn. And actually when I first came to the states I landed in Detroit. And lived in Ann Arbor studying and so I was kind of looped into the community. This friend—we've stayed friends all that time, you know, these 22 years. And so a mutual friend of ours was calling periodically whenever they could get through. Which of course were just very difficult. And had said, "Wow there was this hue demonstration in Dearborn. And it got a lot of bad press, as usual there saying horrible things and in support of terror." And that's pretty much the gist of how I had heard about it. And I talked to some friends since then.

Bob: (00:47:29:00) How deeply engrained is your Lebanese upbringing? I thought I heard you say you lived there for 20 years.

Laila: (00:47:38:00) Yeah, not quite, but, mm-hmm.

Bob: (00:47:41:20) So how different is it from what might have been the case had you grown up here?

Laila: (00:47:29:20) Oh it would have been totally different. It would have been totally different.

Bob: (00:47:52:20) In what ways?

Laila: (00:47:53:20) You know, I was raised in Lebanese culture, but I was raised as a half-American. So I went to an American school. That was my mother's counter-point. To us being raised in Lebanon, to keep the American part of us identified she thought—and it was a very good school also, very internationally based school and very strong academic curriculum. So she felt strongly that we should be in the American school. And my father agreed to that, he said that was fair, it was a fair trade since we were gonna be raised in Lebanon and we have all our Lebanese relatives and this huge clan and the village. And you know, the whole—and we lived in the city, it was an urban upbringing. But we also went to the village constantly so there was always the both-and. The traditional sort of family village and there was also this really sort of cosmopolitan, urban setting. So had I been raised in the states I would have been raised in American culture. And I think that keeping the Lebanese culture alive and identifying it—for my father to have had us embody it would have been much more challenging here in the states than it was for my mother to help me keep the American alive because I was in the American school. The opposite wouldn't have been true, right? So... And also linguistically I don't think I would have had been as strong of an Arabic speaker. You know, I'm fluent in Arabic so... plus there's the French because Lebanon is trilingual and...

Bob: (00:49:40:17) What does it mean when you say to be raised in the Lebanese culture? Specifically, what would that entail?

Laila: (00:49:48:05) Well, Lebanese culture is very old and very ancient. It's also always connected to some kid of religious structure. You're never far from that. And even if you are a unit, your family unit of immediate family doesn't practice, which mine didn't. My parents didn't even baptize my brother and I because they didn't want us to have to choose. My father was Greek Orthodox and my mother was Protestant and so they didn't want to impose one religion or another. But there is always a religious milieu. That your family belongs—your clan, you know, belongs to.

Bob: (00:50:29:20) And so yours was Lebanese Christian.

Laila: (00:50:31:20) Greek Orthodox to be specific. Yeah not general. In Lebanon it's always very particular. And also—so that's one thing. And also there's the ancientness of the culture—the customs, you know the rituals, the daily rituals, the customs of death, the customs of religious ceremonies, holidays...

Bob: (00:50:59:00) Can you describe?

Laila: (00:51:00:15) For example, as a child when I, this is uhh--- (*Phone Rings*)

Bob: (00:51:05:20) Sorry.

Laila: (00:51:06:00) That's okay.

Bob: (00:51:08:00) I turned it off between interviews to get messages. I apologize.

Laila: (00:51:12:15) That's quite alright. I don't mind at all. We'll just repeat the question and you can edit this out. (*Laughter*)

Bob: (00:51:19:00) I'm sorry.

Laila: (00:51:19:00) It's quite alright

Bob: (00:51:20:15) I was asking about...

Laila: (00:51:22:15) You were asking about... Can I be specific. To be specific about ritual I would say. For example, when I was very young, the Greek orthodox have a very beautiful set of rituals set around Easter. We call it "egg-lic-beer." Which means "the big holiday." Because for them the crucifixion is the miracle. That's the, you know, much more than the birth became commercialized because of Christmas—the meaning, the significance. So Palm Sunday is beautiful. Good Friday is beautiful. They have these big red. The children, often we would be dressed in white and we would walk with candles and palm fawns and had a huge procession to a huge bonfire and everyone participated and there were fireworks. Because it's celebrating the miracle of the resurrection. And as I said, I wasn't even raised in the Christian—my parents weren't practicing. But the rituals are so engrained into the daily life and into the culture. Also there's forty days of fasting during Lent. And so the food changes completely because there's fasting until noon. And there's no meat or animal products either so the whole cuisine changes to a vegetarian diet for the period of Lent. And then so because of that everyone's rhythms change. And if your not practicing, it's still all part of daily life, right? So that's one example.

Bob: (00:52:58:00) You mentioned deathestry?

Laila: (00:53:01:10) Yes, that's another one I remember, you know, very very well. Because my family takes these rituals—you know everybody does. Death is treated very solemnly and with great reverence and prescription. Things are done in very particular ways per sect. so in the Greek Orthodox tradition, for example, when my grandfather died I was 15. And he was a very well-loved and well-renowned person in the north of Lebanon. He was the mayor. And he—when he passed, it was a three day ritual where the women—the body comes into the family home with the women and the men are in another home across the way at the uncle. And the men receive. So you pay respect in two houses. You go pay respect to the men. First, you come to the women and pay respects to the body first. And you see the women and you pay respects. And the bodies lying in state. And then you go and pay respects to the men folk. And you of course there's thousands of little cups of coffee being served. And people are talking in hushed

tones and much is to the receiving line. And every time someone comes in, everybody stands up and you know there...And then there's the one week, and then there's the forty day mass and then there's the one year mass. And these things are—you simply say, "It's the forty." And somebody automatically know, "Oh, it's the forty day mass." And even in Muslims, so their rituals are very different but very prescribed. And everybody knows what everybody's rituals are. And it's across the board. So everyone goes in and pays respects. So when, for example, ...the premier was killed, you'll go—you'll note in all the press and the pictures, people were standing and reading the ...from the Quran. And somebody praying with a rosary next, all right. And that's the beauty and also the thing that ripped the fabric. It's part of the ripping and part of the beauty at the same time. So I was raised with all that richness. We wouldn't have had that here. Wouldn't have had that. I wouldn't have had the culinary, I think fullness. I wouldn't have understood the ritual around clan gatherings of holidays and eating and feasting and so on. Soo...

Bob: (00:55:52:00) One of the things we're about in this piece is looking at stereotypes, particularly in the media. And one of the suggestions that's been suggested to us by the people we've talked to is we need to know more about—I think the things you're just describing. Does that make sense for you for Americans, non-Arab Americans to understand that there are deep rituals and respect for them. And there are things that happen in the homes that we have no idea about, all we know is terrorists.

Laila: (00:56:33:00) I want to answer the question in a couple of different ways. First, I think it is very important to understand that because. One of the things that often gets lost is the is A) the ancientness and richness of the culture and 2) of course what's lost is how people lead their daily lives. Which is how people lead their daily lives, just differently. And so I think those things are important. To combat stereotypes. But also there is a stereotype that the Arab world is backward. And if you go—I've traveled all over the Middle East—if you go to Middle Eastern cities—Middle Eastern cities are Middle Eastern cities. They have the texture, the culture, the richness, the ancientness. I mean, Beirut is six thousand—just seven thousand years old. That's where my father is from. It's seven thousand. It's the oldest running port city in the world. So there's that, right? And all that history, and you're going shopping and buying cucumber in a market place that's seven thousand years old. So there's that and then at the same time there's high speed internet with people doing hard core art design that they're creating these most incredible 3D pieces that they're going to be using for the international Film Festival. And that's missing also. So on the one hand we have the lack of understanding of the beauty of the richness of the fabric and the texture. The scent, the smell, the coffee drinking ritual. And on the other hand we have this amazing embrasure of modernity at the same time. And so Beirut as a cosmopolitan city for example, if I use the case of what I call my city, is no less cosmopolitan in many ways than a European city. And more cosmopolitan than most American cities. Right, right, but that's not what's out there so I would say what's important to break those stereotypes is to have both-and. Not to focus, because also when you focus on the tradition there's this idea that the traditional is still backward. So it has to be hand in hand. Take for example in the UAE, hardcore high-tech city.

Bob: (00:59:12:00) They want to launch a collaboration—I've forgotten which university or college is in negotiations with—there's no shortage of anything that we would...

Laila: (00:59:24:20) Oh no. No, no, no, no, no. they have everything latest of, yeah. I have a lot of friends who work in Dubai in the media field, so cutting edge. They love going to work in Dubai because everything is so shiny and new and high-tech.

Bob: (00:59:40:15) Tell us about your one-woman show.

Laila: (00:59:43:15) Uh-huh...hmmm...I thought we'd come round to that. Ummm, it's called living called living in a Hyphenated Nation. It actually started as a very different piece. It had nothing to do with what it is today. It started as an exploration of being a hyphenated person. You know being an Arab American. What it's like to go and come. What it was like to be raised in one culture, and yet come back and forth. You know, what we call cultural schizophrenia. In my home, you know, between my father and my mother, both of them talking two different languages to me. And so it went from that to what it's like to cross borders and it had a little bit of political kind of edge. Looking at U.S. immigration policy when you have to as an Arab when you come into the country the things that happened. But it was still—it was political but it was more about my journey. And as a way to help people understand what it's like to be a hyphenated person. And also that I get to be a spokesperson for what it is to be Arab, or partly Arab. Because I look as I look, and I talk as I talk and I have the legitimacy of being an academic. So I use my training and I use those opportunities. So that's where it started and then September 11th, 2001 happened and all hell broke loose. And I was mortified with the reaction of the United States government. I was mortified. I'm appalled. And I'm a hardcore constitutionalist. And I am a hardcore civil libertarian. And I am mortified with what I have continued to see as a complete erosion of the constitution. I have seen an erosion of not only civil rights but human rights. We have dropped by the way, according to Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, from number 19 of human rights abuses to 12. And that's pretty horrific.

Bob: (01:01:46:05) So how do you--?

Laila: (01:01:47:00) So I take—

(*Tape End*)

(*New Tape*)

Laila: (00:37:12:20) I'm finishing talking about the show. So, I grapple w/ several things at one time. One thing is that the piece turned into a virulent anti-war piece when I knew and I smelled it. I smelled it, and I knew it was coming before we went into Afghanistan I knew that we would go to war w/in a year. It was very clear the way they were talking. Two, the year September 11th, 2001, was the abuses were happening so strongly, they rammed that Patriot Act through Congress in a month and a half. When

does something like that legislation ever go through quickly. It was so knee jerk. The lashing out of Arabs and Muslims. I think that year I did 21 gigs. It just ground me down to a pulp. And so, of course the show had to change. It had to take out the monologues and take them and put in Arab American poetry, and every time they were coming out w/ new horror Patriot Act 1, Patriot Act 2, Homeland Security 1, Homeland Security 2. It was unfolding. Then Israel re-occupied the West Bank and went into Jenine and there were massacres. And then we invaded Iraq. And then, something was happening Raza, and more stuff was happening here. And we see these renderings and deportations. All of this was unfolding. So every six months I had to update the show b/c of these ridiculous atrocities. And what I call tactics of state terror were happening on the ground. Then 2006, Israel invades Lebanon. And I refuse to call it a war. This wasn't a war between Hezbollah and Israel. You can't have an entire air force, the fourth strongest in the world, and a county w/out air planes – it's not a war. This is a country that is brutally punishing a country for one group's act, which by the way they didn't resolve. So it had to be update again. So I now I had to include the latest madness, plus everything that was going on in Raza. And update all the deaths. Now, it's 1,800,000 displaced Iraqis. The United States has accepted 403 refugees—403.

Bob: (00:40:07:00) So, how do you address this in your show. Is it...These are monologues?

Laila: (00:47:16:20) I use monologues. I use Arab American poets. I use political analysis. I use facts and figures from Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. I use news clippings.

Bob: (00:40:27:20) Can you give us an example?

Laila: (00:40:29:00) As a news clipping, I take one story, that was reported by Robert Fisk of the Independent, and then the same story as reported by CNN and I do it back to back. I open the poem by Laila Halibi who is an Arab American poet called Browner Shades of White that identifies me to the audience as a person not a minority on a checklist who is sort of exonerfied and replaces me as a hyphenated person. Then I have a monologue.

Bob: (00:41:14:00) Can I interrupt you for a minute? So you juxtapose those two. The CNN Report and the Fisk report--

Laila: (00:41:25:10) And the Fisk report. That's one little section as I'm talking about what's going on in Iraq.

Bob: (00:41:31:15) Is there any way that you could...

Laila: (00:41:34:06) (*Coughing*) I don't have the text of that exactly because it's very specific, but I could.

Bob: (00:41:45:00) No, no, that's okay.

Laila: (00:41:52;20) Let me open the piece. “Under race, ethnic origin, I check white. I’m not a minority on their check list so they erase me w/ a red end of a number two pencil. I check white b/c there is no square to check that my father does not have camels in his backyard or 8 wives that he keeps in his tents or in his harem palace or his islands that he has w/ his oil money. My father is a farmer. My mother a teacher. I check white b/c there’s not square for exotic.” So that’s like a piece of it. So, I use the poetry, and I weave in autobiographical narratives that are based on events in my life. So one being interrogated and being cavity searched in Zurich based on nationalist and coming from Lebanon. One is being forced to watch torture in Lebanon, and juxtaposing torture. One is a narrative of my mother coming apart of the seams during an Israeli bombing raid, and having to take her to a shelter. One is a narrative which I just had to cut out called Jahairzod need no visa. Because I needed to work in the letters I emailed during the summer about the latest invasion. So it morphs. As I say to the audience, I would love for a day and as a performer, it ironic for me to say, I would love there to be a day when I don’t have to do the show anymore where it could be a historic, ironic piece. But I think we’re a long way from there. So that’s my activism. I use my art as my activism.

Bob: (00:44:04:10) Could you do a little bit of the one about your mother, the only reason is that it fits so beautifully with the concern that people have expresses about their families in faraway places.

Laila: (00:44:22:00) I’ll set this monologue – I dive across the stage floor. And I’m in a protective position. We’re in the entry way of our apartment b/c it had three stories. The elevator shaft, the apartment above us, tanks, and then our entry way. It was the most protective we could be w/out going down to the shelter. This route didn’t matter b/c there were implosion problems nothing would save you. That’s why I didn’t go into a bomb shelter. So, in this performance, this monologue, which is divided into three sections. The current incarnation is to perform them back to back w/ letters from this last invasion. So, if I was to perform this physically, I’d dive across the stage, and this is really big and loud, and I’m sort of in-scene and I’m focusing on my mother who is in an entryway w/ me. So, I think for purposes of this, I will bring it way down. “So we run into the entry way, and I grab my mother’s hand, and she’s sitting there, and I can see the whites in her eyes, and I see the panic start to rise in her as the bombs are coming in flying low, and hard, deafening, the building shaking. I hear the neighbor screaming to her children, “Fly, fly down the stairs, boys, run down the stairs screaming, and she’s running down behind them telling them to fly. The whites of mom’s eyes get bigger as she clutches the bag to her chest, the bag that holds our passports, our jewelry, our papers, clutching it tighter to her chest. I know what she wants. She wants me to take her down flights of stairs and go into the shelter with her because she’s petrified. But she knows I won’t go in. I never do. So she looks at me pleadingly and I tell her to hold on, not to panic. Then they come in again, lower and harder, dropping volley after volley and it’s so loud that the windows are shaking, the foundations are shaking, now I can see that she is chewing the inside of her lip. Do you know what it’s like, to watch your mother come apart at the seams? I take her hands and lead her down the seven flights, and deposit her safely and ignore her pleas, and walk up the seven flights to the balcony

where I can watch the bombing, smoking my Marlboro Reds, feeling 19 years old and invincible.”

Bob: (00:47:53:15) That’s very powerful. I was going to ask you, why don’t you want to go into the shelter but you answered it, you certainly did answer it.

Laila: (00:48:04:20) So that’s the piece.

Bob: (00:48:06:00) I wish we had seen it last night.

Laila: (00:48:06:20) Yeah. Well, you’ll look at the tape.

Bob: (00:48:12:00) I really have only one other thing to ask you, and this about the coverage. You live in Chicago, so there must be a tremendous diversity in Chicago. How is the coverage of Arab American or Arab culture in that media environment?

Laila: (00:48:37:00) Post 9/11, I was pretty disappointed w/ the Chicago Tribune. As things calmed down, that first year was so reactionary. And as things calmed down, the local press, the television press was very disappointing. You know, it’s that ABC, NBC, CBS – they’re all Fox – they’re all affiliates and so they were following the status quo. Later, w/ more and more Arabs and Arab Americans and Muslim Americans from various communities. We have a huge Southeast Asian population in Chicago, Muslim, and there was much community action. First, there’s a very hardy anti-war coalition, and they were working w/. And they started a speaker’s bureau where people would come in. The Arab community has their own speaker’s bureau through what they call the Arab American Action Network, the Triple A-N. They were working in conjunction with Jewish organizations like Not In My Name. They were working with Palestinians. They were working with just the Quakers. They were working with so many different people. And so there was this large sort of activist ground swell of sort of counter narrative that was getting out there. The local press started to cover more and more and more and more of that in that sort of human interest, whatever, banter. But it didn’t matter why; the point was that counter narratives were getting out there. And the local NPR was very good. The local PBS the station they did coverage as well. So there were quite a few efforts that were being made on a local level. And that started to allow a corrective to this sort of mainstream national media hype that was being put out there. And then the Mayor Daily, who I’m not necessarily the biggest fan of, but he did make quite a big effort to say, “These are members of our community.” Because there was violence against Muslims. You know the Arab Action Network’s office was firebombed. It was destroyed. So he came out very strongly and said, “We will not—this will not happen in this city. We will not have members of our community who are Arab or Muslim to be punished in this way.” So that was also important that city official were getting in on this conversation. And then he appointed a whole committee. So it was good it was better than I think uhh many cities, I will say.

Bob: (00:51:40:00) How’s your university?

Laila: (00:51:42:00) Wonderful. DePaul, I was very proud of DePaul University. And I was very happy to be a faculty member there. They did teach-ins. You know they're very—it's saint Vincent so they're very connected to pacifism and there was a huge anti war movement on campus—students, faculty, staff all together and then built a big coalition—they were part of the city-wide coalition. And we're very, very supportive and have been doing lots and lots of events, funding lots of speakers, filmmakers, artists, you name it to come in and not only speak to our population but to sponsor them. You know, because it's free and open to the public. So it's been a very good place to be during this very difficult time. And I already got tenure so I'm not brown-nosing.
(*Laughter*)

Bob: (00:52:41:00) So I think that's it, that's wonderful. Thank you so much.

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