



Filmmaker Isn't Short on Drive

Like the racing femme of his pic, Essy Niknejad won't stop until he crosses the finish line

BY SHALINI DORE

When filmmaker Essy Niknejad read the story of a femme race car driver who beat the odds to win the Iranian National Championship in 2006, he figured it had drama written all over it. Dubbed "Little Schumacher," after Formula One legend Michael Schumacher, Laleh Seddigh had to fight her family and her nation's male-dominated theocracy to realize her dreams.

"We know that racing is a white boys' club, no matter what society we are talking about," Niknejad says. "Plus in Iran, which is dominated by men, it must be fascinating for a woman to get to this level."

What he didn't realize is the many obstacles — including harsh weather, hostile locals and diminishing funds — that would make the completion of his film come to resemble the longshot that was Seddigh's accomplishment. Through it all, Niknejad has remained undeterred.

Getting the rights to Seddigh's story wasn't as difficult as getting the movie made in Iran, says the filmmaker, who was born and raised in Iran and immigrated to the U.S. in 1980, at age 20. His many credits have included work as a director on local TV series "Eye on L.A.," as a co-exec producer on "The Red Shoe Diaries," and as exec producer on "ChromiumBlue.com," both also for the

smallscreen. He pitched "Laleh," then titled "Drive," in 2008, to several studios that loved the idea but not the setting.

One of the things they said, Niknejad recalls, was, "We don't know what is going on in Iranian society; (we don't know) what's going to happen." And they weren't writing him any checks.

Alternate locations were suggested: Mexico, Canada, Morocco. Niknejad scouted the locations, and they made business sense. "But when it came to the authenticity of the story," he says, "I thought, 'I'm fooling myself and fooling my audience.' It's better to try find a way (into) Iranian society and shoot the movie there."

Finally, in early 2013, Niknejad got funding from Canada's Experimental Film Center and other investors — and added some coin of his own — to start shooting the pic, which is budgeted at more than \$5 million. He held casting calls in Iran, and found newcomer Sara Amiri to play



ROAD WARRIOR

"Laleh" stars Sara Amiri, right, as Iranian race car driver Laleh Seddigh; above, Amiri at the wheel of a red BMW during the film's Iran shoot.

the lead in the English-language pic. Also in the cast are top veteran thespis Iraj Nozari, Niki Karimi and Azita Hajian. Most of his crew also came from Iran, which has a strong filmmaking community, but Niknejad says that since their experience is mostly with intimate dramas, he had to bring in some people from his co-production partner in Canada.

The shoot wasn't without its challenges, although not always ones obvious to Westerners. Niknejad says he had to jerry-rig a vehicle-mounted camera crane, race cars were pieced together, and he found an abandoned race track that his crew fixed up. Iranian authorities allowed him to shoot some scenes on highways. "What costs \$35 million in Hollywood, we did with \$5 million in Iran," he says.

Shooting started in May, was held up briefly by Iran's presidential election in August, as well as by vandals and those who disapproved of an outsider shooting a film about a woman in their country. Finally, after 145 days, the full severity of winter descended. Nearly out of funds, Niknejad returned to L.A. in December to find more backers. He intends to return this month to finish the film, "even if I have to mortgage my home," he says.

Meanwhile, with a gleam in his eye Niknejad reveals his next step: He's started writing a sequel.

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