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SCREENDAILY

Essy Niknejad, Laleh

25 March, 2014 | By Jakob Fudge

US-based, Iran-born Essy Niknejad tells **Jakob Fudge** how he travelled back to the country of his birth to shoot the story of Laleh Seddigh, the 2006 Iranian racing champion who prevailed in a male-dominated sport only to be subsequently banned by racing authorities.

Last year, the sub-\$10m production starring Sara Amiri and a mostly Iranian cast became the only English-speaking project to shoot in Iran. After a break, production is about to resume for the final race sequences.

Niknejad talks about getting permits from the authorities, what shocked him about Iran and how he needs a little more money to cross the finish line.

Where did you grow up?

I was born and raised in Tehran, Iran. By the age of 23 I came to the U.S to continue my education and now I am here in California. I did my Bachelors, my Masters and my PhD in television and film. I started at UC Berkley then to Cal Arts and then Michigan State.

What sparked this movie?

When I read [in *The New York Times*] that there was a young woman who became the champion of car racing in Iran, I got in touch with her and obtained the life rights to her story. It took a couple of years to write the script.

What was Laleh Seddigh like in person?

In the beginning... all the international news media were talking about this woman, so she was a very interesting character. She was such a serious and powerful woman. At the age of 26 she was willing to risk her life just to become the champion. I got so much inspiration from this woman.

How did you get the project off the ground?

The original name of this movie was *Live*, but unfortunately a couple of years ago another movie came out called *Live*, so, we couldn't use that name anymore. I found another title, *Laleh*. It took two years to write the screenplay and I started to pitch to everyone in Hollywood. Believe it or not, every single studio or production company that read the script loved it and wanted to do it. But there was one conflict: because it was based on a true story, I wanted to shoot in Tehran. It was scary for a lot of production companies to shoot in Iranian society.

So you travelled to Iran. What did you find there?

I went [to Tehran] in 2010 for the first time since the revolution after 28 years of living here in California and I was totally culture-shocked. I saw exactly what was going on and saw a society we don't know anything about. We are living in Western society and we don't know that much about those countries that we sometimes think are our enemy. Unfortunately, Western media has not portrayed the reality of Iranian society. I saw that the people are so advanced, that 75% of their society is highly educated and that maybe more than 70% of these people are under 30 years of age. It made me more excited to make this movie in English. The main Iranian language is Farsi and they are so proud of it, but because we want international distribution we shot it in English.

Were strings attached to official script approval?

I submitted the script to the Ministry Of The Arts to get the permit. It took them six months to come back to us and approve our script. We had to promise them to not show an Iranian female's hair, as the Iranian women cover their hair in real life. As we were making a movie based on a true story, it was not difficult for us at all.

Where did you shoot?

Everywhere. We had no limitation from north to south of Iran – all different states and places. The facilities they give us were sometimes good, sometimes very bad. Mainly our location was Tehran and the rest of the shoot was on the racetrack in Tehran [Azadi Sport complex], where I'm hoping to return by end of March.

Where did you get funding?

I spent two years of my life raising the money [from investors all over the world.] You know, it's a car racing movie, so it's not an inexpensive movie.

Sounds like this story works on a global scale

Absolutely. This is not an Iranian movie; it is not about making the Iranian people happy, no. This is my hope, that everyone around the world should get understanding of each other and that's one of the reasons that I'm thinking this movie should be shown around the world.

Principal photography has been delayed after about three-quarters of the movie was shot, right?

That is right. When I went to Iran they did not have the racing track set [ready] and what they did have was not good enough for the movie. So, we had to build and repair the existing studio and it took six or seven months. And at the same time we had to build 27 race cars. We also experienced bad weather and got into financial difficulties when the value of the Iranian currency dropped against the Dollar. I had to come back to LA to talk to friends and family, to anyone who could help us finish the movie. I am hoping to be able to get that little bit of money that I need and go back to Iran by spring when the weather will be gorgeous and the grass and trees will come back to life.

You told me this movie is ruffling some feathers. Is it because of the backlash against the female protagonist?

Yeah, I mean, it was very interesting. Recently [February 23] I was watching NASCAR 500 and I was watching Danica Patrick and you know how difficult it has been for her to race cars. In Iranian society, of course, [it is difficult] not just because it's a male-dominated sport but because [society] is male-dominated in general. [Laleh Seddigh] had to put her life into it to get what she wants.

The truth is a group of people were against that this woman should come to the race track because of Muslim society. But at the same time there were people who were supporting her. Same thing happened to myself: as a filmmaker a lot of people resisted me and said so many bad things about me, but at the same time there were people supporting me. Life is not easy.

The film has generated so much hype – that must be useful.

I see it as positive advertisement. If any distributor wants to work on this movie, 50% of the advertising has already been done.

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