

FESTIVAL COVERAGE, MOVIE INTERVIEWS

deadCENTER Interview: Negin Farsad, 'The Muslims are Coming'

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Negin Farsad is a stand-up comedian who has worked on various documentaries over her career in entertainment. Her latest documentary is *The Muslims are Coming!*, a feature about Muslim comedians traveling around the world to deliver their acts in a way to shatter the stereotypes surrounding the Muslim community. Farsad stopped by to talk with Renegade Cinema to talk about her new documentary, which is screening at the 2013 deadCENTER Film Festival.

What gave you the idea to make this movie, and the comedy that goes along with it?

Negin: My co-producer Dean Obeidallah, we always talked about doing something around this and I had already done a documentary so I sort of knew the ropes around how and what to do in comedy doc. So you know, this is my craft, like all I do really is comedy, maybe in an attempt to shield actual emotions is unclear. But so we just thought, especially after the election of Barack Obama, the kind of Islam-phobia that spiked around whether he was Muslim was going to die down, but the birthers are like really persistent and it didn't go away. There was the Park 51 controversy about that Mosque in Lower Manhattan, and there was just these ruling Mosque controversies around the country and so we thought, "all right we should do something and do it now because the situation is boiling over."

Part of the reason that it is boiling over is because people just have this really ridiculous notion about Muslims that is grounded mostly in how they are portrayed in media, which contextually has to do with stories around terrorism. You never going to hear a story that is like "this Muslim entrepreneur just opened a cupcake shop." That is not how things get reported on, but when there is an act of violence, the religion definitely gets invoked. So it is just a completely skewed perception of what a Muslim is, and frankly I know more Muslims that are more likely to open cupcake shops than are likely to do anything violent at all whatsoever. I think, for us, it was a matter of trying to bring that face of Islam to American viewers.

We didn't even want any viewers to necessarily learn anything about Islam, like what are the pillars, what the pages say, like that doesn't matter. It's just culturally, like what you know about Woody Allen is that he is a Jew. Do you know the tenants of Judaism? I mean, you just know that culturally he is a Jew, he probably still eats bacon, it is not a big deal, whatever. And that is the kind of thing that we wanted to bring into the American consciousness.

How many tour stops are involved with the Muslims Are Coming?

Negin: In the actual tour, we went to about 12 or 14 different cities, but in the movie we weren't able to show them all so we end up showing like maybe six or seven.

What sort of cities did you go to? I would assume that you would try to go to cities that were maybe not as, I don't want to insult the Midwest or anything, but cities that may not be as culturally open as say a New York.

Negin: Right, well, I mean, we didn't really think it was necessary to go to a Blue State. There tends to be some more acceptance of immigrants and more acceptance of cultural diversity in those states. We went to places like Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Georgia, like we went to Arizona because of the SB 1070 that kind of upsets a lot of the immigrants there. We went to Utah and Idaho. You know, Arizona has a lot of immigrants but there is a very strange conservative element that is trying to clamp down on the immigrant presence, so we thought that was very interesting, we wanted to see what that was all about. We went to Utah, they don't have a lot of immigrants, you know what I mean, Idaho, like I don't know, I think maybe I saw one black person when I was in Idaho, you know it is just not that kind of state.

We just thought it would be very interesting to go to kind of racially homogenized town in Idaho and perform. And, you know, the same is true in the Southern states. There is a little bit more heterogeneous in terms of the population, but historically they have more of a civil rights history there in cities like Birmingham, one of our tour stops, that is interesting. We went to Murfreesboro, TN, because there was mosque controversy. There was a small mosque, they had been there for years and years and years, they wanted to expand. It seemed like no big deal to them because they just needed more space. And it became a big, big deal, it divided the city, and so we sort of chose these places. Each had their own kind of significance.

What kind of different reactions did you get going to different places? Was it the same when it came to the people coming to the shows, the acceptance of the shows? Or did it change based on where you went based on the homogeneity of the area?

Negin: The interesting thing is, we did two things in each city, we did a show and then we tried to interact with locals like through street actions. like set up an "Ask a Muslim" booth in the town center or we did a "Bowl with a Muslim Day," all types of things in cities. I think the overarching thing that happened is that people who came to shows were generally more willing to hear us out, so they were either super into

Muslims, they were just very liberal and very open-minded, or they were on the fence but they were willing to be swayed, or they were just curious – like literally they had never met one. Like, I am a red-blooded Republican, I am just curious, so that is kind of we got. So, the audience was really friendly because they were open to the idea.

They were packed houses, I mean we were really surprised with how supportive these communities were to us coming there, and so that was one sort of thing – we weren't preaching to the choir with the audiences entirely, but a subset of the audience was definitely the choir. And the other subset of the audience was on the fence, you know, and that felt good and, you know, we are doing something. The places where we kind of got people off guard was when we were doing street actions where we were in the middle of your town square and you were on your way to work and we were like, "hey, want to ask a Muslim a question?". Those places are where you really got some interesting interactions, because people were just like "why can't you just be regular Americans, why do you have to even talk about where you are from or wherever?", and that is where we got some interesting questions and interesting interactions. But, even still, I got the sense from people that were willing to stop and talk, that if they are willing to stop and talk, they are extending an olive branch and we were out there handing out pastries, and you know we were trying to make it fun.

The ideas that you don't know, that you never met a Muslim, like Muslims are fun. They are fun, they are stupid, they are ridiculous – you know what I mean? They like to hand out pastries indiscriminately, and that was different. I think people were surprised by that.

How many people were on this tour doing the acts?

Negin: We mixed it. I mean, there are seven comedians total, but we mixed it up. Dean and I were in every city, of course, but the other comedians were kind of in different cities based on availability. It is kind of hard to tell, the way the film is cut together you kind of can't tell who is with us at all times, but there are seven of us who by-and-large donated their time, just out there doing this as like social justice. Like, one comedian asked that we just donate some money to a relief organization, you know what I mean, that is the kind of thing that was happening. This was not about show business, you know what I mean?

Did you pretty much just perform the same kind of stand up that you would perform at a club at home?

Negin: Yeah, for me I think I talked a little bit more about identity, because we wanted to build that bridge and give people a glimpse, and when I am in New York, I will just do stuff about dating and stuff about my vagina, whatever and that ends up being, I am not limiting myself. But, when we were doing this particular tour, I wanted them to know more about my family. I wanted them to know more about what I thought about international diplomacy, and so I think all the comedians kind of geared their material a little bit towards making it like "here are some things you can know about me and my background that might make you feel better about Muslims."

What kind of reaction have you gotten on the festival tour going around with the movie?

Negin: We premiered at the Austin Film Festival and our strategy – the movie opens in September nationally – our strategy was to just do that and not travel with it until it opens nationally, and put all of our energies into the opening. But deadCENTER was an exception, because I love deadCENTER and I love the people who run it. It has been really fantastic to see reactions in a place like Austin, where it is pretty liberal, and place like Oklahoma City, which has its liberal pockets but it isn't as liberal, so it has been really fascinating to see their reaction. I think, by-and-large, people have been so – you make a movie and you don't know, it is not in your control, you don't know how the audience is going to receive something, it is

not your decision. It is really remarkable when you find out what that looks like, and in this case, they laugh a lot and then they cry. It is mostly a comedy, like you are mostly going to laugh, but there is a couple of tears as well and I was pretty shocked and happily surprised.

When you were making the documentary, I mean obviously you have the stand up acts, you have the people in the streets acts, but what was your plan when you started out – as the narrative strand – the beginning, middle, and end.

Negin: That is the challenge with documentaries, you can't really plan that. A magical thing has to happen, and that is the fear the entire time you are shooting and pouring all of your money and other people's money, and you know debt, racking up all this debt. That's the big question – is the magical thing going to happen that makes this movie memorable? And, luckily with this film, like the stop before the last stop, there was a kind of dramatic thing that happens, I don't want to spoil it for anyone, you know that kind of gave the movie its little bit of the climactic oomph.

We wanted to go to different cities, we knew we wanted to do a different street action in every city, and use that as a spring-board to talk about an issue in every city. And so we knew structurally kind of what we were going for, we knew we wanted Jon Stewart to comment on these particular issues and Rachel Maddow and David Cross. We didn't know how that was going to piece together. It is always like are we going to get that dramatic thing that makes people say, ah yeah, that was a movie.

And it wasn't until the almost very end of the tour that magical moment hit?

Negin: It wasn't. Yeah, so that is scary. I am going to tell you it is scary, but it hit and it was so unexpected and so interesting for us.