

Arash T. Riahi

**presents his documentary *Exile Family Movie (2006)*,
a project developed through a SOURCES 2 Script Development Workshop.**

Nora/Sweden, 16th June 2007

ARASH: As you could see, the work on *Exile Family Movie* started very early, in 1994, with the first shots of my grandparents. At that moment, I had not planned to make a film out of it. But when I look at this footage in retrospect, there must have been something in the back of my head that maybe one day it would be good to have this footage with me in front of the camera. That must be why I asked my best friend to come film us. Otherwise I would have filmed it myself.

I was nine years old when I came to Austria. For me the journey out of Iran was more like an adventure. My parents didn't tell me in the beginning that we were fleeing Iran. They told me we were taking a trip to other places in Iran. Then once we crossed the border, they told me we were taken a world journey. And this journey is still going on.

So when we got to Austria, we had a distant relative there who helped us a little bit. This topic wasn't so interesting to me. I didn't think about being in exile because when I was a teenager, I had other things on my mind. But then I always thought about how I was nine when I left Iran, and how as a teenager, I always felt Iranian because I'd spent most of my life there. And when I turned eighteen, I felt half Iranian, half Austrian. I asked myself if I would then become more and more Austrian. This identity question started to become more and more important to me, and I felt like I had to do something about it. I started to be more interested in all this stuff, and in family things. I talked with my parents, I talked with my family in Iran on the phone. I visited my family in America. Then we had these few visits that I filmed. And when the idea came up to go to Saudi Arabia, it became more and more clear to me that this could be something interesting for a film. But I didn't apply for film fund money because I could not promise anyone that I would bring back a film. The only thing that I could promise was to my father that I would film as much as I could to bring back something of this journey to him.

Together with a friend, I bought the first Sony 3-chip camera that came out in 1998 or 1999. We couldn't afford it so we had to pay for it in instalments. So together with some very bad sound equipment – just a cheap microphone that I bought at a supermarket for interviews – we went there. I didn't know anything really about filmmaking or cameras, that's why it's so shaky and has all these zooms and so on. So for me it was also about learning filmmaking through this film.

Then when we were there, I filmed as much as I could. I filmed twenty-seven hours over ten days. I would have filmed more, but it was very difficult to find DV tapes in Saudi Arabia, in Mecca. At that time, they were not so common. So I got some in another city the last week so I could keep filming. I was so afraid that something would happen to this digital camera that I also brought along a Hi-8 camera and a Super 8 camera. I was afraid one of my bags would get lost, so I put all the cameras in separate bags. And when we got to the airport in Medina, the main bag with all the tapes and everything was not there. But fortunately I had the camera on my shoulder. Then after two days, the bag arrived.

That was the first shock. The second shock was that the family from Iran was not there when we arrived. They didn't arrive until a few days later. We were alone on the streets, and I started to film a building or something. A policeman saw me and wanted to have the tape. We tried to involve him in a conversation. I changed the tape, and gave him a wrong one. Then he asked us where we were from. When we said Vienna, he suddenly became very friendly because his brother was studying in Vienna. He said he would meet us the next day and show us around. So on his day off, he drove us outside the city to film stuff we weren't really interested in. But anyway it was a nice gesture.

I also did some interviews. When I was filming, of course the emotional journey was much more interesting to me than the making of the film. That was why I didn't look through the camera most of the time. I just held it to the side and tried to look into my family's eyes. That's why the framing is sometimes a bit off. They sometimes got angry that I was filming so much, and they wanted to give me a massage because they thought my shoulder must be sore from filming. But they got used to it. I wasn't the only one who was filming. My cousin was, too.

Then I went back to Vienna, and analyzed all the footage, transcribed it, and saw that I had something that was also interesting to people outside my family. Then I applied for SOURCES 2 with parts of a transcription. The good thing was that I already had some material that I could show to people. I made a little teaser out of the footage. The main problem was that I had the heart of the film, but I didn't have the body, so to speak. It was clear that this meeting was the journey. But I never filmed the normal things, the less interesting things because it began with all this family stuff. So I had to introduce all the people who go on the journey. I had to film them in their daily lives. I had to make them likable and clear in their characters – the people in America, the people in Austria, my parents. For you, all the people look the same. There were so many people there that I had to take out a lot of them. There are still a lot of people, and some people confuse my mother and my aunt, and so on. But in the editing, we decided that we had the characters from Europe and America, then we had the people from Iran. They are the family, like one character, except my cousin, who moves to Canada. So that was one of the dramaturgical decisions because there were so many people: to take them as one person, and each of them brings different points of view to this character.

Then I was at the SOURCES 2 workshop, where we helped develop some kind of structure. I pitched it at Bardonecchia, which is an EDN [European Documentary Network] pitching workshop in the summer. I had a four-minute teaser with me, and the pitch went really well. I found a world sales agent, who made a pre-sale deal before I had the film. Then I applied for film fund money from Austria. Normally it's very difficult to get funding if you've already shot something. They don't like the fact that you've shot something because they argue that if you were able to shoot, you're kind of privileged in comparison to people who don't have a camera or something like that. They want to be involved from the beginning. But they accepted that it was not possible to be involved from the start with this film. I could not promise them that I would bring back a film. But here it was clear that it was only possible this way. So in the application, they treated the material I'd already shot like archival footage. That was how I could write it into the budget. I think we agreed that each minute of archival material would be worth 350 Euros. So I had to get receipts from some of my family members and from myself that I was selling about 50 minutes of the footage. This was the bureaucratic way of doing it.

So I pitched it, and found this sales agent, Esther van Messel from First Hand Films in Switzerland. She put it into her portfolio, and went to IDFA. We met in the summer, made the pre-sale contract in September, and she went to IDFA in November with that in her portfolio. There she was contacted by a commissioning editor from ARTE, Nathalie Verdier from ARTE France. She was planning a theme evening about family meetings, and wanted to show the Jodie Foster film and a French documentary. When she saw this, she was interested. The following March, I went to Paris to meet her boss, and to show them material. That's when they agreed.

The budget was 230,000 Euros, including the 35mm blow-up print. The first problem with the financing was that we got only 15,000 Euros from the Austrian Film Fund, even though we had applied for 40,000 Euros. They didn't give us the money for the 35mm print. They said they would give it to us when the film was finished if we got into an A-festival or we could prove that it would be released in three different theatres in Austria.

So we were short that money. Then the next problem was that my first documentary, *The Souvenirs of Mr. X*, I'd already made with ARTE Strasbourg. Ulla Schröder was the commissioning editor, and we got along really well. Meanwhile, the Austrian broadcaster had already made a new contract with ARTE Strasbourg, and had already paid into that pot. And because Austrian TV was already involved in the film, they didn't like the fact that ARTE Strasbourg also wanted to become involved because they said they would be

paying double. So I had to find another ARTE commissioning editor. The good thing was that my world sales agent found someone. But we had to pay her 25 percent of everything she brought in through sales or pre-sales. We needed 60,000 Euros from ARTE, so we needed to have 25 percent more than that to pay the sales agent.

When I was at ARTE in Paris, they first said they didn't have any money, and wanted to do a pre-sale instead of a co-production. In a pre-sale, they pay only 20 – 30,000 Euros. I said that wasn't enough, and that we'd have to talk about it. I don't know how she did it, but the sales agent managed to get 80,000 Euros from them. So that solved the problem. We had to pay her 16,000 Euros, and we got 4000 Euros more than we needed. I don't know how she did it, but it was great.

We had the financing finished in November 2004, and ARTE wanted to have this theme evening four or five months later. So we had to be very quick. They gave us the money only for the short version – 55 minutes – and not the long version. They weren't interested in the long version. They had the slot in the theme evening, and I didn't care. They helped finance the film so why not make a short version, too. But it was difficult because we had to make the short version first. The other thing that was difficult was that the ARTE commissioning editor was afraid of flying, so she wouldn't come to the editing room. So every week we had to FedEx her a new version, and everything had to be subtitled into English all the time. The discussions with her were quite good. We emailed back and forth a lot, and her suggestions were good. But sometimes it was too much for me.

The good thing was that we had this sales agent in Switzerland, who speaks French, and sometimes she mediated. So it was a good strategy to have her. She helped me a lot. Once there was a problem with the American part. We had this Bush sign, and the commissioning editor didn't want that. And I told her I wanted it. Her argument was that it would make the film be dated. And I told her that of course, in twenty years, 2004 will be dated. But I don't think George Bush and his policies and the reactions to them will be dated. For me, from a dramaturgical point of view, we have to see what changes when everyone returns from Mecca. We have to see them in their daily lives again. So she couldn't argue against that, and had to accept this in the end. It was difficult arguing, but she accepted my opinion.

So we finished the film. But the problem with ARTE is that they have to have the master tape three months before the broadcast. So their plan was to show the film 11th September 2005. It was a Sunday and a good time. We had to give them the film three months earlier. They did all the translations themselves again, which is quite good because they take it really seriously with the language. I had to give them the complete transcription, even of the parts in Farsi. The problem was that they then called me and said they had to dub some parts of the film. I couldn't do anything about it. They said because it had a primetime slot at around 10 p.m., they needed to dub some parts of it. So I said what can I do? Most of it was subtitled, but the longer interview passages, like with my father and so on, they had someone talking over him. Some people like my editor said it was very good for his mother because she hates subtitles. It became much more accessible to her. And because I wanted to change something in the minds of the viewers, I was okay with this.

We finished the short version in June or July 2005, then my editor went on holiday for a couple of weeks, and I continued working. When he came back, we spent a month together. Then we had a rough cut of the long version, which was quite difficult because when you have the short version, and you watch it so many times, the scenes look like they work. And they do work in a way. And you have to force yourself to go back to the raw footage – even if it's very boring to do – to see what else is there that might be good. For instance, I found out that in the short version, we had to take out a lot of things, like the soap opera scene with my aunt, the relative from Sweden is out, etc. We concentrated on the meeting of the family, on the three different groups. It's less political and has more social kinds of things. Of course, we had to cut out a lot of details in scenes that make them nice. In the long version, for instance, there's the scene of my grandfather sleeping on the floor. This was not in the short version. I found out that it's very important to the rhythm to have this moment of quietness. I think the film was only half as good before we got these rhythm things working. I think details really make a film good. There are a lot of good general topics, but the way you deal with these small things makes a film something special.

We had a lot of screenings with friends, filmmakers, and with people who have nothing to do with film. One of the things that came out during the early stages of editing was that people couldn't distinguish who was who. Because there were so many stories, they couldn't get a handle on all of them. So one of the things we did was to concentrate on having these moments of silence when one story ended instead of quickly jumping to the next level of the story. Of course, the main problem with this film is that it's so personal. That was clear from the beginning. But I knew that I wanted to make a film that could only be made like this, from the inside. Otherwise it would be like lots of other documentaries about foreigners or refugees where someone comes in from the outside. The filmmaker finds the topic interesting, but in the end, the film is often superficial.

So I knew that the good and the bad thing about this film is that it's very close to me. But I wanted to have it like this. I edited with someone else, who is really different than I am, who has a really different sense of humour. It was good to have this guy, and to fight with him over every joke, every emotion, and so on. We kind of balanced each other out.

The other thing was that I had to ask everyone in the film for permission to film them. I talked to my parents when I decided to make the film, and they agreed. When I started filming at first, no one took it seriously. They thought I was some kind of amateur, and didn't realize what the film could turn into. I talked to my parents, and promised I would show it to them before I showed it to anyone else, and that they could cut out anything they wanted that they thought was too personal, too political or too dangerous. I waited quite a while before showing it to them, and they liked it. They cried and laughed, and it was very good. They didn't want me to take out anything. Only my mother wanted me to take out one little shot where her shirt was wrong or something. But we all were kind of afraid of the film and still are.

I also sent the rough cut to my relatives in America to get their okay. And some relatives from Iran were here, and they watched it for the others. We don't know what you can and can't say in Iran. You can say a lot of things in Iran. Everything that's said in the film can be said in Iran. It's one of the mechanisms of the regime in Iran to let individuals say what they want. They know that they hate them. But if two or three people are together and say the same thing, it's considered dangerous, and they put people in jail or whatever.

My strategy was to let the old people say all the political things I wanted to get across in the film. So if you remember, it's the old people who say the most dangerous things in the film. Of course, I had footage of the young people saying similar things, but old people are not considered as dangerous as young people. So that was my way of putting my opinions into the film.

QUESTION: What was your original goal in making the film? It sounds like you started off making this very internal thing, portraying your life and your family's lives. But along the way, it gets very political at times. So is the political aspect something you wanted to put into the film from the very beginning or is it something that your family members brought up themselves?

ARASH: It's all these things together from different levels. In the beginning, I wanted to learn something about my past, about my family and Iran and such. So I started to do that. On the other hand, it was clearly something political. I saw what my parents went through. My father was in prison. I remember going to visit him there. I know my father's not a bad guy. He was a real humanist, and wanted to change the world in a better way. He wanted to have democracy in Iran, and that's why he fought. Being brought up in such a family, I had to do something myself to give back something. So for me, that was the main reason for making the film. It was like a kind of contribution to my parents for everything they went through. I wanted to give something back to them, and thank them for all the possibilities they gave us kids. Of course, they had to flee because of their own lives, but on the other hand, we can now live here and fulfil our dreams, and so on. This was very important to me.

I also wanted to fight for the same goals my parents had fought for, and I realized, for instance, that my father still goes to demonstrations against the Iranian government, even if there are only twenty people

there. So I asked myself: Why don't I go there? What can I do that would be useful in this goal of changing something in people's minds? Because I'm a filmmaker, I said maybe that's my way of doing it. Of course, in the beginning, my father wasn't really happy with this because he's someone who fought for the proletariat his entire life. He didn't put himself on stage. He was always doing things in the background. But now I wanted to put him on centre stage, where he could express his opinions, and he was not very familiar with this. He never thought his life was very important compared to the lives of famous people. And I was thinking the exact opposite: It's the little people who make a difference.

So I was happy that at the end of the film, he started writing. He retired four or five years ago, but he was still teaching English to foreigners part-time. But in January he called me and said he wanted to stop. First my mother called me to say he wanted to stop. And I was worried because lots of times when old people stop working, they get depressed because they don't feel useful. Then he phoned me a week later and said he wanted to quit working. I asked him why because I always thought that for him, helping these foreigners learn English was very important. And he said something very interesting. A lot of this work is only three days a week. But because he takes it very seriously, he has to prepare one or two days, so the whole week is gone. He said some other teacher could just as easily do this work. But no one else can write about his experiences except him. That's what he was thinking, and I'm glad he did it.

And the publisher who saw the film contacted me. She thought it would be good to make a book out of it, and wanted to know what I thought. I'd already had the idea of making a book where all five of us write a version of what we can remember or what we think about it all. My mother is also writing now, so maybe someday we'll have a book.

QUESTION: Where are your parents now?

ARASH: They are in Vienna.

QUESTION: In my view, your film is very focused on the women in your family. They play a very strong part in the storytelling. They are the ones who have most of the political opinions. I wasn't sure if you were aware of this or if you were looking for that?

ARASH: Yes. I had about 180 hours of footage, and spent lots and lots of time thinking about what I was going to use of it. One thing that was very important during the beginning of my work with David [Wingate] was the question of my own role in the film. When you make a very personal film, how much do we see you or hear you? How much is the film focused on you? And for me, it was very important that you don't leave this film and think, okay, this is some egocentric guy who put himself on centre stage. Of course, I knew I was making this film and that this is me. On the other hand, I knew I had to start this film, and you have to see me in the film. For instance, in earlier versions of the film, I was not in the picture during the phone call with my father. Then I had to do it again with me in the picture with him. I wanted to start the journey of the film, then pass the baton to my sister, because she's the kind of person who's very good at conveying the identification of the European people. I see myself as a European, too, and also went there with all the prejudices we have and that we get through the media, etc. My sister also looks very European, especially because of her hair colour.

There's another fact that in Iranian culture, women are really strong. We don't see it because they have two different lives. From the outside, we see only these women with veils and think they're marionettes of the system, etc. But in real life, everything takes place inside the houses. And it's not like in Saudi Arabia, where women are not allowed to drive a car, and they're really outsiders. In Iran, women are very strong. They fight for their rights, and are the ones who can change the society because they have been pushed so much, and have so few rights that they think they have nothing to lose. Things can only get better. For instance, I heard that in Iran, couples always have to have their papers with them when walking around so they can prove if they're married or relatives and so on. I heard that when the police check their papers, the men often try to get away quickly, while the women argue with the policemen, and say, "Leave us alone, etc." They get really angry. That's why I wanted to have them play a large role in the film. You see

how they are, and that they're really strong, and say what they want. But I think women are strong everywhere.

QUESTION: I discovered something in your film about how beautiful of a relationship men and women can have, even when male laws make women wear veils. People from the West can be jealous of this because it's very sincere. I don't know if this is unique for your family, but you get the feeling that no laws can break these ties.

ARASH: Yes, I've heard this from several viewers that they were surprised by the relationships. Of course, my father and my mother, but also the other ones. You don't see it too much, but you sense it. I don't know why. Of course, there are bad versions of this also. But in a way, they still have this kind of old school way of getting engaged, where the man goes to the girl's home, and talks to the parents. The girl is also there. It's very strange. Our relatives explained this to us. Of course, we were interested in how this works. It's not like this just for poorly-educated families. For example, my cousins are all doctors, and they go to their mothers and say: "Okay, Mom, it's time. I need a woman." [laughter] And the mother says: "Okay, what do you want?" [laughter] For example, my cousin – you saw her on TV in the beginning; she's the one who says, "We miss you a lot," and so on – is a doctor. She's a specialist. And she told her mother, "I don't want a practical doctor. I want a specialist because I know the problems I would have with someone who is less-educated than me."

Even though the society is very traditional, the power lies with the women. You go to the girl's house, and talk to the parents for an hour in a separate room. Then you can go to another room with the girl and talk to her for an hour. One of my cousins told me how he did it. He said he tried to not look at the girl's face during that hour because he didn't want to fall in love with her surface. He wanted to hear her opinions and this and that. It's really interesting. You cannot say it's only bad because it works.

Then you go home, and you say to each other, "We will contact you." If the girl likes you a little bit or if she sees that there are chances, the parents contact you and say, "Okay, let's meet again." And if they don't call, you can forget it. And there are professional guys who search for women and good families. They're very well-paid, and go out and look for good families. In Europe, such agents have a really bad reputation, but in Iran, it's the exact opposite. But in the end, the women decide if they want the man or not.

QUESTION: How's your cousin who moved to Canada? You could tell she was grieving so much for her husband. Has she gotten over that?

ARASH: Not really. It's very difficult with her because she was in her early-thirties when he died. She was very beautiful. She had her business. She was the first female representative for Canon, so she was sent all over Europe, and didn't have any real problems. A lot of men wanted to marry her. She told me they were all nice guys, but she didn't want a man who was inferior to her. She didn't want a man who looks up to her. She wanted a man who was at her level or superior, because she was so strong on her own.

The other thing was something about honour and the children. The children wanted her to have someone. She didn't have any financial problems in Iran, and provided everything for her children. But now the problem in Canada is that life is so much more expensive. And somehow she's killing herself, although no one expects her to provide the same level of luxury for her children. She bought a big house, but her daughter is now twenty, and doesn't want to live with her. And it's useless. But she wants to do that. The only good thing is that her sister and her husband and child moved to Canada, and she's no longer alone there.

She's trying to set up a business to help other people who want to immigrate so they don't get taken advantage of by any of the really bad people out there who prey on immigrants. But all in all, she's fine. I just don't like how she's killing herself to try to maintain her old standards. As you might know Canada is very similar to America – money rules. It's not like in Europe. There you have separate ethnic districts like Chinatown and Iranian neighborhoods. And they're all there, and most of them are rich people because

they're old monarchists. And, of course, she wants to live in that district, and not be alone. That's the main reason. But for her children, it's great. They're doing very well. It's all for them.

I made this film because I knew, also for my parents, that they did so much for us. They knew this, of course. It's the same with her. The ones who profit from these refugee things are the children. The parents spend their whole lives dreaming about going back. My mother was my age when we fled to Austria. I can't imagine having to stop everything and go start a new life somewhere else with only 500 Euros.

QUESTION: I saw the film on ARTE, and am extremely grateful that you made a long version because I like the film very much. This longer version is so much more impressive to me as a filmmaker because I agree that the details really make the film. I want to really thank you and your editor for doing this because just the scene of the grandfather sleeping really adds another dimension to the film. Or the view out the window at this huge place and all these white people wandering around like marionettes, and how some black people move around in some strange kind of choreography over this place. Or in the beginning how someone says go in front of me because it's dangerous to film here from the hotel room. And then we see this again and again. This was so impressive because it showed more of the country, and it was poetic and really moving. Also other details like your father cooking the rice and opening this sour cherry thing – this was so wonderful because I was really sure that all the red stuff would land on his sweater. [laughter] If I had done it, it would have been everywhere. So I was waiting for this, and laughing inside because I expected this. All these details were so moving, but they're forbidden on television these days: all these people sleeping, not speaking, crying, sitting somewhere and doing nothing. This was really wonderful.

I have one practical question. You said you were in this hotel for ten days with all these people. It was very loud. How did you do it? How did you deal with all these loud people when the other people in the hotel shouldn't know you were making this film about this Mecca pilgrimage?

ARASH: Iranians are a different kind of Muslims than Saudi Arabians. They are Shi'a and Sunni. So Iranians don't like Arabs. That's why when they go to Saudi Arabia for this pilgrimage, the tour people who organize it don't trust the Arabs. They rent the whole hotel. They bring everyone from Iran. They bring their own cook and everything. So there were only Iranians in the whole hotel, and it was loud anyway. And the rooms are not like single rooms, but like apartments. So there were two or three rooms together with a kitchen and everything. I think it was really safe there because no one thought that anyone who is not a believer would want to go there. So if my father would have come, no secret police would have ever thought of this possibility that non-believers would go there.

There were some strange stories happening with that. We didn't want to show that we were not part of that. We tried to be like the Saudis. In the beginning, my brother and I bought these white things that they're all wearing. And it was very practical because the weather was very hot there. The problem was that we didn't know the Iranians had rented the whole hotel. My sister got onto the elevator with my cousin from Sweden and my brother, and the guys from the reception wanted to call the police because they thought my brother and them were Afghans, and that they were going to make trouble with my sister, so we had to take it off again, and wear the normal stuff. [laughter]

QUESTION: I have a technical, or more of a practical question. First of all, I was very impressed by the film. As a filmmaker watching it, you always wonder how they did it. I was thinking of the soap opera scenes you have coming back. The last one was fantastic, with your grandmother sitting there. Could you explain how you arranged that?

ARASH: Yes. I knew that my aunt had been watching this series for eighteen years. She told me several stories about it, and that it comes every morning at 11 o'clock. No one calls her at this time because they all know she needs this hour. Her husband hates it. And when she's not at home for some reason, he has to record it for her. So I knew she would watch it. And then she managed to get a green card for my grandmother, and she was there, and I knew she would watch it anyway *with* her. So I just asked them to watch it together, and for my aunt to explain it to my grandmother. It was very simple. And I asked my grandmother to ask her stuff that interested her.

QUESTION: My next question then is did you stage a lot? I was thinking of the phone call.

ARASH: The phone call is the main thing that is staged. It was not in the first version of the rough cut because I said it in the narration. Then in the test screenings we found out that this is a very weak point because it's such an important change in the story that it needs its own scene. It's not enough just to say it. So I asked my mother how it was, and she said, "No problem. I can do it again for you. I can do it ten times." [laughter] So somehow it came from her enthusiasm. We did it just one time, and she told my grandmother. Of course, from a documentary ethical point of view, I wondered whether or not we could do this. But anyway, I wanted to talk about this question of what you can and can't do in documentaries, the various schools like cinema vérité, direct cinema, etc. Of course, I never would have been able to make this film if I had stuck to those rules. I said to myself: Can I do it or not? And I said, yes, I can do it because it's clear that it's a staged thing, and I don't tell her what to do. Of course, it's a different kind of reality, but the phone call was close to this. It was not that I staged something and told her what to do because I needed it in the film. It was more like re-staging reality, and not inventing things.

There was really nothing else that was made again. For example, I looked at what my father does, and asked him if I could come over one day and film him doing this. Or like the school with the children. I asked my mom if I could come and film this. I had some ideas about how I wanted to do that with the children.

QUESTION: Did you direct your father when he was opening the cherry jar?

ARASH: The day I wanted to film with him, I came into the flat and saw that he was cooking. I could see that he was struggling to open the jar, so I told him to please wait until I had the camera ready. And this is how it turned out.

QUESTION: Is that your sister laughing in the background?

ARASH: No, that's me! It really took him ten minutes to open the jar. [laughter]

QUESTION: Another question. You've explained some differences between the short and long versions, but what are the general differences between the two? Does the TV version go more quickly or do you have more characters in the longer version who aren't in the short one?

ARASH: In the short version, there are no soap opera scenes. The characters from Sweden are not in it. Outside there is this dialogue where the woman tells about the day she heard on the radio that her husband was killed. These things are not in it. A lot of the discussions between my sister and the older women in Saudi Arabia – this political stuff – is not in it. We had to concentrate on something, and it was clear that we would concentrate on the family meeting, and not on some sentences or some political stuff. Of course it was clear that it was important to have these political discussions, but we had to leave out something. Those are the main things. Then after Saudi Arabia, it's immediately Austria, then the American part with Bush, Canada. And there is no more of the family visiting Vienna. And it's quicker, with fewer details.

QUESTION: What are the two lengths?

ARASH: 55 and 94 minutes.

QUESTION: Did you make some of the trips longer, and give them more space?

ARASH: Yes. First I put in the scenes that were not in it. And I thought, okay, it's good, and so on. But then the rhythm didn't work: the short parts didn't fit together with the rest. I edited by myself for about six months – not every day, but several hours. Then I watched it until I found the rhythm that was useful for me.

QUESTION: One last question. Do you think the cinema version needs to breathe more and have more silence than the TV version?

ARASH: I would prefer to have more breathing room in the TV version, too, but it's very difficult to have this. Or at least it was very difficult with this huge amount of material. I had to at least tell this part of the story, and I had so many things that I had to do.

I wanted to say something about some of the decisions you make as a documentary filmmaker on things like style, aesthetics, and what is allowed and what is not allowed. For me, especially for this film, I asked myself: What is this film about? This film is about life. And life doesn't have a style. It's chaotic. It's funny, and it's sad. And it's all mixed up into one. You never know what's going to happen next. That's what I considered the best form for this film. It's kind of rough and wild and no rules. And we'll see what happens. I can have an off-text and formal interviews. I can just watch people, and use this not as a bad thing, but as a good thing, as dramaturgical devices for telling the story. That was my main basis of filmmaking.

Also in other films I make, I don't try to think of a school of filmmaking like Wiseman or other people I admire and like. I think each topic has its own style, and I don't want to be a director who has his own style, and everyone knows what my next film will look like. I think that's boring. If you look at some directors who have a very specific style, like Peter Greenaway, in the beginning it's great. Then they transform it into a high level of perfectionism, and then it gets boring. No one is talking about Peter Greenaway anymore. He's still making films, and he's a great guy – he's a genius – but I want to discover new ways and not bore myself with my next films. That's why I use everything that works for me for that particular film.

With documentaries, some people say you're not allowed to use music because it changes the reality, etc. But we all know that the moment you set up the camera – even if you don't say anything and don't play music, and don't leave the room – you're still only showing one part of reality, and not *the* reality. It's like my grandmother says when I asked her if she thought that praying her whole life had helped, and she says it's because of her prayers that I was safe and my father got out of prison. For me, it's another reason, but for her, it's her reality. And I have to accept that. And for me, this film is also about democracy, and how these three different groups of people meet, and they don't hit each other or kill each other. We listen to each other and don't accept what the others say, but there are some common points like the scene where my sister is sitting next to the relative from Iran, and she says she doesn't like how women are not seen as equally valuable as men. That's something they have in common, although she's a Muslim and wants to be a Muslim.

I realized that it's much more useful to concentrate on what is common when meeting with people who are different than you. The common things are human things. It's much better to concentrate on that because then you'll find a lot of things that you have in common rather than on concentrating on things like political stuff, which you don't have in common. Of course, there still must be a level of this. If my relative in America had been a militant Bush fan, I would not have liked that. Or if my family from Iran were militant suicide bombers, I wouldn't like them, too, but they are not.

QUESTION: You used music with the scene of your dad opening the cherry jar. It's an everyday scene, and the music is very, very special, kind of epic. And it works very well because I think this film could be very dramatic. Exile can be dramatic and can be a tragedy for a family. Even when someone is crying in your film, it's not bitter. It's like a comedy. This is also the point-of-view that makes the film like this. So when you say that a documentary is life, it's also your point-of-view because your point-of-view is about life before, and about not being upset about living in exile. I'm happy to see this in this film, even though it's about exile.

ARASH: Yes, that's the main thing I said to myself. I didn't want to make a film about poor refugees. I wanted to have it the way I think is right. You have to laugh about the sad facts or otherwise you'll get depressed. I know a lot of refugees who are very sad. They didn't make it outside because of this fact.

They can't start again. They can't forgive. It's very difficult. And for our family, this humour thing was a way of survival.

QUESTION: It's not only your point-of-view, it's your family's point-of-view.

ARASH: I can tell you a funny thing that I wanted to put into the film, but it didn't work out. When all of us still lived together in one flat and my mom would see that we were not in a good mood when we got up, she would start laughing very loudly in a really fake way for about ten minutes. And it was so funny that we all had to laugh. [laughter] So she forced us to get into a better mood.

QUESTION: Was she also in prison?

ARASH: She was in prison for a short time. They wanted to torture my father and torture her next to him so he'd hear her voice and maybe he'd then start talking and saying the names of his friends, etc. So they tried to use her for that, but my father resisted.

QUESTION: Amazingly, I've got three questions for you. First of all, about the music. I didn't hear much music. Maybe I was so into the actual human soundtrack that I had the feeling you didn't use a lot of music. Perhaps you could tell me whether you did or didn't. Another question I have is that it seems that Iran is next for Bush. As you know, in the Western press, they are portraying Ahmadinezhad as very provocative, like wanting another war. So I wanted to know what you and your family think is going to happen. And I forgot my other question.

ARASH: The music thing: for that scene especially, I had another kind of music in my mind. I wanted to have the "Internationale." And in the short version, I have it. But it was a really big fight for it. I put it in and loved it, and I knew that my father loves it, and it's the only scene where my father claps when he hears it. I knew they sing it at demonstrations, and that he has a connection to it. But when we did test screenings, people felt like it was something I was imposing upon him. It didn't come out that it is his fight. That was the last decision before making the final cut: do we leave it in or not? And because fifty percent of the people liked it and fifty percent of the people really hated it, my editors and I decided not to use it. I didn't want the film to be reduced to this. It's about a lot of other things. This is really not important. It's a little joke. I like it.

Then I talked to the composer to make this thing. Still it was important because for me, this was the moment that my father wins his battle against his class. From a capitalistic point-of-view, you could say that my father is a loser. He left everything, and is now at home cooking for his wife. But for me, he's a winner. So even though he could not come to Saudi Arabia with us, I wanted him to win his battle. That's why I wanted to have this music. All in all, compared to radical documentaries, I have a lot of music. For them, it's impossible to make a film like that. But I tried to use it in a gentle way and not in a manipulative way. For me, music is important. I listen to a lot of music, and really love it. For me, it's a part of life, and not something I imposed upon the film. That's why I have music in a lot of my films. Maybe one day I'll make a film without music, but not now.

I had a composer who was born in Austria, but his parents are Kurdish. He makes electronic music with Oriental influences, and I knew he would be the right one because he also lives between these two cultures. I didn't want the music to be too Western, and also not too Iranian or too traditional. So we worked on that together.

So about Bush: he doesn't have much time left, two years or so, I think. Yes, the people say before he leaves he'll strike once because he knows it won't happen after he goes. Ahmadinezhad is a crazy guy who provokes, and sometimes I don't think it's so bad. Of course, everyone was disappointed when he came into power. The guy for the past eight years before him was seen by the West as a liberal guy compared to the hardcore people. But in the end, he didn't change anything. He helped the system survive because he gave the people a little bit of freedom. For instance, the women could put their scarves not here, but here [demonstrates position of scarves], and show three more centimetres of their

faces. For someone who has less freedom, it's great. And they didn't close all the private parties, and things like that.

In his first speech to the hardliners, he said, "I'm your survivor." He helped keep things in balance. That's why I think it might be better to have someone like Ahmadinezhad because the people are getting angrier and angrier, and the situation will eventually explode in Iran, and wake up the people. But it could also end in a real catastrophe because when he came to power, he said he's there to provide the coming of the twelfth or thirteenth Imam. And the people have been waiting all this time for the thirteenth Imam. It's the Imam of time, or something like that, and you'll think it's great when he comes. But if you read the documents, the thirteenth Imam comes when there's no chance that the people can change the world, when the world's a complete mess – hell on earth. So if he wants to provide the place for that, it's really scary. That's why I don't know what to do.

The other fact is that people voted for this guy. He came into power because of different methods of spying and so forth. Fifty percent of Iranians didn't vote. Of the fifty percent who did vote, twenty percent voted for the one guy, twenty percent voted for him, and so on. Then he was the second best. And they said the people who voted for him were from really poor villages, who didn't have anything. And they promised these people some money and food if they voted. And if someone went to vote, he had to bring ten people with him, otherwise he wouldn't get anything for his vote. So that's why he was second-best. And in the second round, the rule was that everyone who came had to bring twenty people. So all in all, they say only eight-and-a-half percent were real people who voted for him.

Because he's kind of strange and stupid, even for the radicals, they don't back him up, and he's losing his power within Iran. For example, his candidate for the mayor of Tehran was far away from winning, and another guy from the opposition won. And in another election, his candidate was in twentieth place. Then three hours before the election ended, he was suddenly in fifth place. But he didn't win. So it's very difficult to judge what will happen with this guy. I think it's more likely that Israel will do something if they continue with this atomic bomb thing because America cannot afford to do something like in Iraq. But Israel also did it with Iran in the 80s or so, I think.

QUESTION: And my last thing was: How did SOURCES 2 contribute to your project? How did it help you bring your project forward?

ARASH: I was also at SOURCES 2 with my first documentary, and worked with David [Wingate]. It was good, and I knew what to expect, so I tried it again. For me, it's very useful to meet other people. It doesn't matter if they know more or less about filmmaking. It's like having another small audience. In the group, we had to read each other's treatments. That's one thing – to get people to read the stuff. What I like about David is that he helps you to make your own film, and he doesn't want to make his film. That's something that some dramaturges don't do. They want to convince you of something else, and change the film completely. And I knew that he isn't like that. It's also like that with SOURCES 2. They don't want to push you into slots. They don't want to make you unique for the mainstream. They just want to help your project.

QUESTION: Which specific ways did it help you?

ARASH: Specific ways of having, in the end, nearly the right documents to apply for funding. Having a kind of dramatic structure that at least worked on paper, even though a lot of these things didn't work when we went to edit them. In the early stages, we invited David to the editing room, where he spent three or four days with us. We made some plans, and edited this way after he left. But fifty percent of it didn't work. But theoretical stuff in filmmaking is very important because you have to sell your project first in order to get the money to make it. There's no other way unless you become so famous that they trust you, and you can give them two pages, and they know they'll get something. But as long as we're not like that, we need these papers. This is the main thing you learn in SOURCES 2 – to write these documents, to work on the dramatic structure in order to be able to convince people before they even know you. About a

third of the people in the workshop with me were beginners, who were preparing their first films. The only thing they had was the paper, not what they'd done before.

QUESTION: Did you have some kind of epiphany, something you'd never thought of before because it's your family that you didn't know? Did something very special click that might not have happened on your own?

ARASH: No, but this is also not possible in a one-week workshop, where the people get to know your family so well that they can tell you something about your family that is like a miracle. I don't believe in such miracles. I believe that filmmaking is a very slow process with a lot of steps. You have to trust your ideas, unless everyone tries to convince you that they're very bad. If one person says they're bad, don't believe him. If a second person says this, don't believe him. But if more people say this, then there must be some truth to it. It's not only the idea. The problem with filmmaking is that we all have a lot of ideas, but it takes years to make a film out of them.

So what I learned at SOURCES 2 was to be more critical with my own stuff. I also learned what I wanted to do, and to stick to some of my ideas, but not to all of them because it doesn't help you. The people who are there are there to help you make a better film. They don't want to torture you.

I also went to several other workshops, but the most important thing is that you still make your own film, and don't believe everything everyone else is telling you. For me, it's like when I show something to someone, and David or someone else says something, I try to absorb it all. Then I think, okay, this is interesting. I never thought of that, etc. It's more about the questions that David and other people asked: What is your role in the film? Will we see you? Will you be funny? What is funny? What are the cultural differences in humour or so? Stuff like this. More questions than answers. But these questions create in your head or in my head a situation in which I opened my head, and opened up different ways the film can go so that I find in these different ways a way that I like. So when someone says to me, you should turn right at this crossing and another person says to turn left, the best thing for me is to take this in and find my own way down the middle, and not to hear too much on specific ideas. You have to have the entire film in your mind, and not only one idea.

QUESTION: And trust your instincts?

ARASH: Yes, that's the main thing. For example, with the feature film that I just finished now, I felt very unprepared when we started shooting, even though I wrote the script five, six, seven years ago. I wanted to read eighteen books, but could only read half of one. But that one was very important because it was about working with actors, and I'm happy that I read this. But I couldn't read the other seventeen-and-a-half. And I wanted to see so many films to prepare myself, but I couldn't do it. Then after a few days of shooting, I realized I had to trust my inner feelings because I didn't have anything else. Of course, I've seen a lot of films, and this and that, but I have to trust myself. That's the only thing I have.

END