

*Through the efforts of the Academy's International Outreach Committee, a group of members recently traveled to Iran, where they spent several days interacting with fellow filmmakers and engaging in what some might call "personal diplomacy." This was by no means a politically oriented trip; it was purely an educational and cultural exchange. But it was educational and cultural exchange among citizens of two countries for which such dialogue is rare. And that's precisely why the committee sought to send a delegation to Iran. Following is member William Horberg's personal account of this unique journey.*

Bob Hope and Bing Crosby were not part of the group of Hollywood filmmakers that traveled to Iran recently on a mission of cultural exchange as part of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' International Outreach Committee. But the journey we went on was as colorful, adventurous, surprising, and exotic as any of their famous 1940s "Road" movies, although admittedly our purpose was a bit more serious than those long-gone ambassadors of entertainment.

As the first Western group of artists to be invited to the Islamic Republic of Iran since the revolution there exactly thirty years ago, Academy president and producer Sid Ganis, actresses Annette Bening and Alfre Woodard, writer/directors Frank Pierson and Phil Robinson, producers Tom Pollock and myself, along with nomadic documentary filmmaker James Longley, who is currently shooting in Iran, were guests of the House of Cinema (or Khaneh Cinema), and we put on a series of screenings and seminars for their members with questions and answers about the art and craft and business of filmmaking.

As Sid said, "a filmmaker is a filmmaker is a filmmaker," and the opportunity to talk with our Iranian peers about the problems of personal versus commercial storytelling, insufficient budgets, scarce financing, intransigent directors or overindulged stars, studio (read government) interference, competition for screens, and the good ol' blame

the failure of your film on the marketing department, was a surefire formula for knocking down barriers and illuminating what we had in common, person to person. Sure there are differences. Government censorship there is very real, and privately frustrating for many of the filmmakers we encountered. But guess what? It turns out that America has no sole provenance when it comes to the age-old tension between Art Versus Commerce, and when it comes to what the audience wants to see, Nobody Knows Anything there too!

Most people we met there were quite surprised that we had come, but perhaps not more surprised than Frank and Phil, who thought of this trip years ago. Their impulse to reach out and extend the Academy's mission overseas by promoting the idea of filmmakers talking to established and emerging cultures of cinema around the world was the genesis of the international outreach program. We had had a very successful trip to Vietnam as our maiden voyage in 2007, but Iran? What seemed impossible even nine months ago, as visas were scarce to nonexistent under the previous administration, was suddenly a reality, thanks to the determination and industry of our project director Ellen Harrington, and the aid of some non-governmental Iranian contacts like producer Behrooz Hashemian who helped broker and arrange our trip, as we disembarked in the middle of the night at Imam Khomeini Airport in Tehran on February 28, 2009.

Space does not permit me to detail all of the events of our ten days there, but the highlights of this whirlwind experience for me had to include Frank Pierson's presentation of "Cool Hand Luke" (what could possibly be a more apt metaphor for our two countries than Strother Martin's famous line: "What we've got here is failure to communicate."); Annette Bening and I in the central square of Isfahan translating Eminem lyrics for some curious fans of American rap who had been bedeviled for years by their inability to understand the meaning of "my dogs are barking" or "roll like a renegade"; the authentic and ebullient Alfre Woodard asking a group of acting students dressed in the traditional and mandatory headscarf or hijab: "Don't you just want to tear off that scarf sometimes and let yourself run free with your hair blowing in the breeze?";

Phil Robinson and I, with the help of our young Iranian guide and internet blogger Parastoo, filling up the six-hour car ride as we drove from Isfahan back to Tehran by trying to work out the characters and plot of an imaginary movie we could come back and shoot in Iran someday, and improvising a kind of “Brief Encounter meets The Passenger in Tehran”; our crack-of-dawn screening at a brand-new Tehran state-of-the-art multiplex of “About Elly,” a new film from Asghar Farhadi that took us by surprise and seemed to introduce the voice of a new generation in Iranian cinema; Tom Pollock who, when asked aggressively by one audience member about the public brouhaha that had been stirred up when one arts advisor to the government demanded we apologize for the film “300” and its insensitive and inaccurate portrayal of Persian history, responded “It’s a comic book, for godssake!”

If there was one overarching theme to our experience, of the country, of the culture, of the cinema of Kiarostami and poetry of Hafez, of the people, and most certainly of the way the media chose to characterize our motives, both here and there, it would be that there is the surface, and then there is the truth that lies beneath. Iran is a most complex place, and in this actual brief encounter we surely only scratched the surface. But I’ve been lucky enough to travel quite extensively, and I can easily say that I have never been anywhere in the world where the average person on the street treated me with more warmth. “Where are you from? – America – We love you, man” was the most often heard exchange on this trip for all of us.

When you’re attempting to build a bridge, it is easy to get shot at from both sides of the river, and we did anticipate the response from hardliners in both countries, which was unfortunate but not surprising given the complicated political histories between our governments dating back to the early days of the Cold War. But doesn’t most insensitivity come out of a lack of knowledge and a lack of communication? Is it possible that the more you understand a person, or a people, or a culture, the more you can agree or disagree from a place of mutual respect? How can this understanding arise except through dialogue and education? The desire to recognize and understand what we have in common as professional artists and actors and filmmakers is exactly

what brought us to Iran, and from that point of view these ten days certainly shook our world, and our journey down the road to Isfahan and home again was an unqualified success.

– *William Horberg*