

TOON TOWN

Ed Stocker REPORTING: The UAE-made animated comedy series ‘Freej’ is the hit that proved that there’s an appetite for Arab cartoons outside the Middle East and it returns to screens next year. Now that it’s making a comeback, Lammtara Studio’s Mohammed Saeed Harib is keen to show that the country’s creative scene is anything but a caricature. **PHOTOGRAPHER** *Dan Wilton*

Mohammed Saeed Harib was working in marketing and dreaming of bigger things when he got his break. Harib, who had studied arts and animation in Boston, had recently returned to the UAE with sketches of characters drawn from the culture of his homeland. But he wasn’t quite sure what to do with them. “We grew up watching Japanese and Western dubbed shows,” he says. “Nobody knew how to make an Arab animation.” That was about to change.

Harib founded Lammtara Studio in 2005. Based in a warehouse in Dubai’s Al Quoz area, a formerly industrial neighbourhood that now houses a host of creative companies, it is initially difficult to locate. There are no signs outside and a nearby business points MONOCLE in the wrong direction (at one point, we find ourselves in a yoga studio that’s full of people doing the downward dog). Once we finally make it through the internal car park and into the offices, Harib, dressed in a sparkling-white *kandura*, greets us and tells us more about his backstory.

Though his ideas were initially quite raw, they were exciting enough to grab the attention of Abdulhamid Juwa, the then-head of Dubai Media City, in whose marketing department Harib had been working. Juwa encouraged him to develop his characters into an animated series and seek funding. What followed was a challenging five-year process that tested Harib’s entrepreneurial skills and powers of persuasion. Doors were hard to open as it was an expensive idea in a country without much of an animation industry. He also didn’t have any relevant experience.

“I hadn’t directed anything,” says Harib. “I was in marketing. So people would ask me, ‘Why should we give you that kind of money? Where is your team? Do you even know how to direct? Do you have a business plan?’”

However, Harib’s perseverance paid off and he secured funding from the Dubai SME organisation and local telecoms giant Du,

which agreed to sponsor the first three seasons of his comedy show, *Freej* (meaning “Neighbourhood”). “It’s one thing to get the loan and cover your costs but it’s another thing to prove that you’re an artist and for the programme to go on to be a cultural phenomenon,” he tells MONOCLE.

Harib isn’t exaggerating when he says that *Freej*, which first aired on Dubai TV in 2006, was a phenomenon. It resonated not just with Emirati audiences and those in the region but also with people further afield. “It went to Japan, becoming the first-ever Arabic animation there,” he says, proud of exporting his work to a market whose animations he avidly consumed as a child.

Freej’s success largely comes down to the characters that Harib finessed over the show’s five-year incubation period. It focuses on the lives of four Emirati grandmothers, all of whom wear traditional burqas that accentuate their large eyes. Harib felt that such women’s stories were seldom told and, when they were, they were often misrepresented. “The grandmother was never portrayed in the right way,” he says. So he decided to celebrate them for their strength, wisdom and quirks.

The leader of the quartet is Um Saeed (“Saeed’s mother”), who is a coffee addict and likes to recite poetry to her friends. Um Saloom, meanwhile, suffers from memory loss. Then there’s Um Allawi, who is tech-savvy and speaks several languages. The final member is Um Khammas, the most rebellious of the grandmothers, who has been widowed three times.

Harib hopes that his show will one day be viewed as an Emirati answer to Disney’s Mickey Mouse cartoons but *The Simpsons* might be a better comparison, given its appeal to multiple generations, serving up adult jokes while aiming at 15-to-35-year-olds. The release of *Freej* was also a watershed moment in the UAE, where presenting women as leading characters in films or TV series was previously considered taboo. Harib says that he probably only got away

1. Mohammed Saeed Harib at Lammtara Studio
2. Some of the iconic characters from ‘Freej’




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with it because it was animated. “We used to glorify our grandfathers who go on pearl-diving trips [but] never talked about the mothers who stayed and raised these kids who are now astronauts and ministers.”

Over the course of the show’s five seasons, Harib helped to build an animation industry in the UAE from the ground up. Story writing and both pre- and post-production were done in-house, while the studio looked overseas for the large numbers of staff that it needed to provide the animation firepower (many of *Freej*’s team of about 500 were hired from Singapore).

The show has been off the air for 10 years now but the grandmothers certainly haven’t gone away. Judging by the merchandise strewn all over Lammtara Studio, they are alive and kicking. Indeed, they have gone on to feature in a safety video for Fly Dubai, one of the projects that Harib has subsequently worked on, alongside the likes of culture-focused television series *Mandoos* (“Treasure Box”) and a segment in Roger Allers’ animated film *The Prophet*.

Harib has also moved into other fields. He produced the mascots for the Dubai Expo and made a foray into live-action film-making with the 2019 comedy *Rashid & Rajab*, produced by Image Nation (see page 138). “I diversified because I wanted to learn,” he says. “From everything that you create, you can take a small bit of knowledge and mix it with something else that you’re creating.”

Despite all of the other work, Harib acknowledges that he has never quite escaped the success of *Freej*, which he jokes probably came too early in his career. As we talk, he drops a bombshell: the animation will be returning for a new season during Ramadan in 2024 on regional streaming giant Shahid, giving it a chance to resonate with a whole new generation of viewers. “I’m a bit rusty but the team has been over the moon,” he says, grinning. “They have been itching to do the show.” —  [lammtarastudio.com](https://www.lammtarastudio.com)