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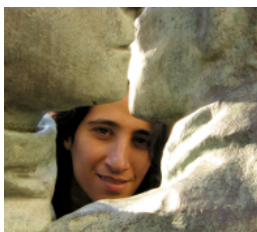
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### Dana Trometer: 'I want my films to bridge the East and West.'

Filmmaker Dana Trometer runs [Tarmak Films](#) with her husband the cinematographer Eric Trometer. The company is based in Soho and is winning lots of fans with its move into online documentaries.



**FCO:** You've been living and working in the UK for 11 years now, how has that helped you forge your filmmaking career?

**Dana Trometer:** Basically it was a massive help. I studied communication and arts at the Lebanese American University of Beirut and wrote a thesis on theatre and film but I always wanted to come to Britain and study documentary because I wanted to become a good documentary maker. My father was a British national – he had to move from Lebanon during the war in the 1970s and never came back so I really wanted to live with him. He was a very political cartoonist and worked for the Observer and a lot of British magazines so he was bridging our two cultures by using his art.

**FCO:** He must have inspired you in a big way

**DT:** I'm sure he did. He encouraged me to go into film rather than theatre, I originally applied to RADA and he was like – you'll never get a job, you'll die of hunger – I'll only pay for film studies. That's what got me into film editing and the technical side of the industry. British filmmakers such as Ken Loach inspired me too – my father used to tape all the big documentaries of the 1980s and send them to me in Lebanon. I applied through the [British Council](#) to do an MA at Canterbury then another MA in documentary research to specialise more. I remember very well something I wrote on the British Council application form for my English exam: "I want to do documentaries to bridge the West and the East" – that was thirteen years ago. And I still say that today so it's been driving me ever since.

It was because I felt like I was coming from another place where I'd lived for 24 years and couldn't forget that it existed. Instead I could bring that package – the civil war, the love, the beauty of Beirut and Lebanon to London and show the world my Lebanon and not the Lebanon that everyone was familiar with from the 1980s.

#### Useful Links

- [Tarmak Films](#)
- [Love Lanes](#)
- [Gaza/Sderot](#)
- [British Films and Filmmakers](#)

#### What others are saying

**FCO:** Do you think young Lebanese filmmakers go through the same process today?

**DT:** There are still loads of Lebanese filmmakers who want to come and study in Britain. The thing is that I was lucky with the paperwork because my father was British then I married my French husband, which actually allowed me to stay in the country because the visa issues and actually getting to stay in Britain is very hard. We've been together for eleven years and he's the love of my life! If you're a filmmaker it's impossible to get a visa – you're not a doctor or an engineer – you could apply as an artist in residence but you'd need so much money in the bank and other forms of support. So it was only by getting married that I could stay and work here. It's unfortunate because there are a lot of Lebanese who could make beautiful films if they could stay in the country and get the same training as me.

**FCO:** And back in Lebanon?

**DT:** There is a massive underground film community making films and documentaries on their own money. These people work in pubs and restaurants, save some money and then make their films. They all learn to edit and shoot so they don't have to pay for any technical help. And Lebanon isn't like England – people will do you lots of favours for free! You can get a whole film done for nothing – it's really impressive – there's a massive buzz out there.

**FCO:** How easily do these films get exposure in the UK?

**DT:** They get covered at festivals. I've been helping an NGO called Lebanon United for more than 2 years to set up the Lebanese Student Film Festival. The second festival will be on 6 December in South Kensington – they'll be showing around 15 films by Lebanese students. The quality of films that I've seen is pretty impressive.

**FCO:** It must be really important for them to have a mentor like you in the UK

**DT:** (Laughs) – Yes and I would love to do more workshops and documentaries with them. A lot of them come over and I'm the first person they call at the airport! They're like 'Hi, I'm here can I come and see you?' So it's good and I'm becoming a point of reference for Lebanese filmmakers coming here, I help them with anything: visa services, general help, how to open a bank account, how to pay the rent – I've helped so many I've lost count!

**FCO:** You said that bridging East and West was your inspiration but those type of films don't always make money – how do you balance this with other types of commissions?

**DT:** I try not to resort to clichés. My bread and butter is editing. I realised that you needed good technical skills to get regular work. If you have a good reputation the clients will keep coming back. You can't make money if all you want to do is direct. You can't come out of film school, go to a commissioning editor and say 'I'm a director.' You have to work for free, mostly without getting paid and build a whole credit list before you can start to make a living – it takes years. However you can find ways to make money and survive in the business if you're good at it. My strength is that I speak 3 languages fluently and unfortunately the Middle East is always at the top of current affairs so I'm often one of

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the first editors that people call. I've worked on many films that were Arabic, French and English, I can edit and transcribe at the same time so that's how I survived.

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**FCO:** So do you think the rise in user generated content is helping filmmakers?

**DT:** It's very important. In the [company](#) I run with my husband we tried for ten years to break into a market that was full of crocodiles – the only way that we managed was by doing our own films, making music videos, three minute shorts and throwing them into festivals and saying 'hello we exist!' So being alive on the web actually helped us. The first film I made for the web was in 2001 when I used to compress films for the internet over a dial-up modem – can you imagine that?! So it's mad how you can now distribute yourself. We have a web documentary at the moment that had no interest from commissioning editors so we launched it on the net. Now almost 10,000 people have watched that film. I don't care if 10,000 people watch on the TV or online, it's great!

**FCO:** Are you doing more programming for the web these days?

**DT:** Yeah. It's good because you can control your own means of production and if you put out a bad film, no-one will really give you any trouble. If you make a good film it can lead to big TV commissions and slots at festivals. There are a lot of filmmakers at the moment only releasing their films online and this is something that I love because it means there's no more 'I know you so I can get you into the company,' type of attitude. And let's face it there's a recession on and a lot of commissioners aren't putting the money into big productions. Instead of half a million pounds for a film, we'd now get fifty thousand for the same type of documentary. How are you going to travel, film, interview and do professional post-production for that? Some of the best companies out there are going bust because it's becoming too expensive. So the tip is: get the right equipment, go out there, do something and set up on your own.

**FCO:** Does filmmaking quality suffer as a result though?

**DT:** Well it democratises the medium. You'll definitely get the black, white, grainy, bleached, blue and red but as I said each film will be out there and the good films will be found. I still fight for decent quality production online – just because it's on the web doesn't mean it has to be poor quality. Web is all we concentrate on now – all our clients want web production.

**FCO:** Do you think then that people are still learning exactly what makes good web video content?

**DT:** Yes, it's a new way of filming, a new way of lighting, so many compressors to learn, the speed of the film, the close-ups are different and the film becomes grainy at different lights. You have to move the camera in a different way. You can't have fast cuts and you can't have fast speeds as you do on television. There is a new cinema language that is forming – that's what I like to say. We used to film for the cinema and now we have to film for the web.

**FCO:** The web makes it easier to bring east and west together. YouTube globally is one of the most used websites

across the world and certainly across the Middle East its reach is massive – it allows people to connect...

**DT:** Yes people can watch anything they like now and leave responses and answers. In the Lebanon War in 2006 and in Gaza last January, people were fighting online – on YouTube and Facebook. But the thing is that the enemies were talking to each other - it's a miracle! We saw the Jewish guy talking to the Palestinian guy without the media telling them what to say. They were saying exactly what they wanted to each other and that was a power that nobody thought of. There is an online documentary called [Gaza/Sderot](#) which was filmed over 40 days with seven people on each side of the divide and followed their stories in three minute films. Every day 2 new stories were uploaded and they were filming during the outbreak of violence in 2008/09. Those 80 films are now a valuable archive of the ticking time bomb waiting to go off. You watch it now and think – “no wonder there was a war.”

**FCO:** Do you still meet web sceptics?

**DT:** There are a lot of people who think that content for the web is inherently bad. But it's been happening now for 8 or so years and there have recently been a few big films released only online such as [Helvetica](#). When that happens, people start believing in it. The sceptics are coming round. It's better now because people realise that there is a recession on, there's less money, lots of filmmakers graduating and releasing on the web is their only option to get out and make films. Our current web project, [Love Lanes](#) received thousands of views in the first few days and we didn't advertise it anywhere – it was only mentioned in a few blogs. Good filmmaking can win round the sceptics and increasingly for us the web allows us to pilot our ideas, which commissioners can see and come back to us with bigger money projects.

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