

An Interview with Dustin Ellis

Director and Creator of the New Cartoon DVD "Babak & Friends: A First Norooz" A First Norooz"

By Mayar Zokaei

DUSTIN ELLIS, the creator of the new cartoon DVD "Babak and Friends: A First Norooz," is passionate about his work.

"I sold my house to do this project," Ellis recalled. "I thank my wife for allowing me to do so."

The former Warner Brothers Studios animator spearheaded the effort two years ago, along with animator Rodd Miller, and he is delighted to see the fruition of his and his staff's effort manifested in an unprecedented project, especially in the Persian production realm.

Recently, *JAVANAN Magazine* had a chance to talk to the man behind "Babak & Friends."

JAVANAN: Tell us about your fascination with cartoons.

ELLIS: When I was a kid, I was crazy for cartoons, and recently, I realized there is no "Norooz" cartoon. It happened that couple of years ago, I was working in the field of cartoons, and through people that I met and worked with, I shopped the idea and I convinced them to hop on board with this dream project to create an Iranian cartoon. At that time, I was working at Warner Bros. Animations, and I worked on the movie "Iron Giant." Iron Giant was actually directed by Brad Bird, who just directed "The Incredibles," and he really is a great director...I learned a lot working with him. So, I went to work for Nickelodeon for a while, and then I went back to Warner Bros. It was like going back and forward between Iran and America, going from animation studio to another! I ended up again between jobs one day, and I decided to take a lengthy leave of absent to work on this cartoon project. I really wanted to create a Norooz cartoon for kids, and my heart is on that video. One of the artists that we had, Alfred Demeno, worked on "Tiny Toons" and "Animaniacs," and Lott Miller, who is a character designer who is famous for doing "Iron Giant" among other Warner Bros. projects. The studio that did the cartoon animation for "Babak & Friends" is actually the studio that Disney uses a lot, like with "Lilo and Stitch." They are a very talented group of people and we were so lucky to have them. Our main goal is to



history.

JAVANAN: Non-Persians can also enjoy this and learn about our culture.

ELLIS: Since it's a learning cartoon, I can't see why kids outside of Persian community can not watch it. What I have been saying a lot is that the only thing Americans get from Iran on television is very bad and one-sided, and the media doesn't show the whole picture. As Iranians, we know we are loving, proud people with great history and wonderful traditions and this would show Americans this side. The DVD also comes with a booklet in Farsi and English.

JAVANAN: Does your wife, Mastaneh Moghadam, who is the co-producer of the DVD, have anything to tell us?

MOGHADAM: Thank you for the interview. In the Farsi version of "Babak & Friends," I play the character of Babak

ELLIS: I am sorry my wife is Babak!

MOGHADAM: Yes! But seriously, much better than me was the 9-year-old kid who spoke the English part of Babak, his name is Daniel Rahbar. The other kids helping us were Sahar Rahbar (Sousanne, Danny's sister) and Narges Motamedi (Saman); honestly, these kids did a wonderful job playing their parts in this cartoon. Other characters are Shohreh Aghdashloo, who plays Farah (Bobby's aunt); Catherine Bell, who plays Layla (Babak's mom in the English

in the Iranian market.
ELLIS: We got the top four Iranians everywhere, like the Beatles.

JAVANAN: Tell us a little about the logistics of getting these people together for this project.

ELLIS: The project was very detailed. Directing animation is a lot different that directing a motion picture. I wrote the screenplay as well. We did most of the pre-production work in America. I wrote the story and

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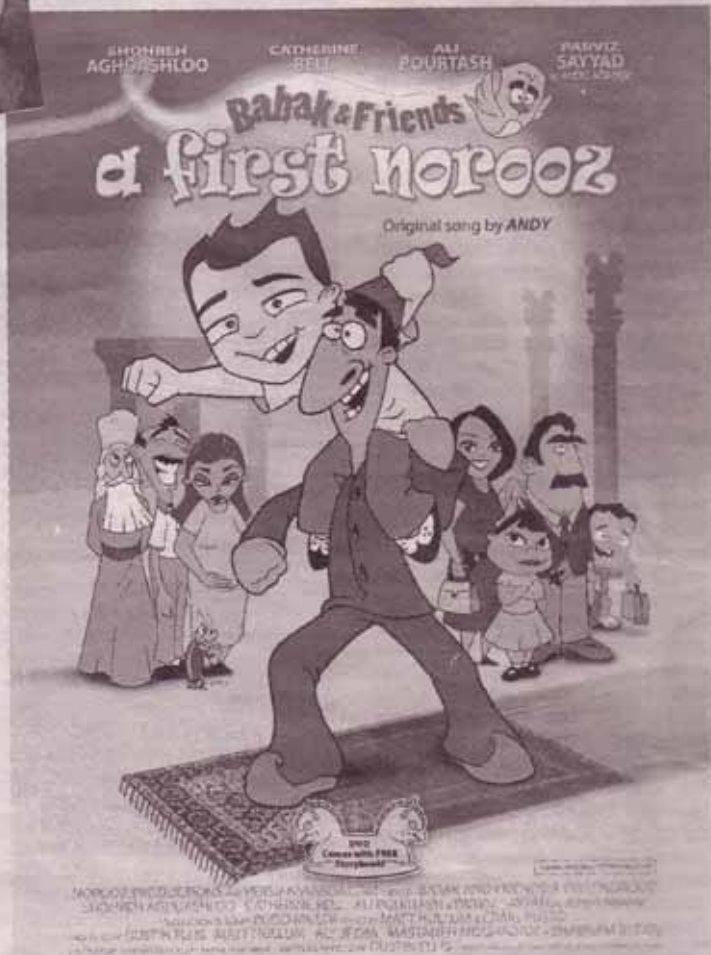
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started rolling from there. Catherine was a little tougher because we had to first find out her agent's name, then getting in contact with her agent, and telling him what my passion was. There was just a lot of talking. Ali and Parviz and the rest, they were very helpful.

JAVANAN: Is there going to be a sequel?

ELLIS: I'll tell you right now, this is a JAVANAN Magazine exclusive,



then we drew it out like a comic book. Then, we recorded the voices and I directed the actors on the voice recording. They were not there, physically, at same time. They were recorded individually and that was over a course of several days. One of the easiest things about cartoons is actually the voice recording. Shohreh was amazing and willing to work with it. She is a friend of our family and one day I approached her and talked to her about the project and the ball

but we're getting real excited about it, and hopefully with support from people like JAVANAN Magazine, we can do this. We're talking about "Babak Going to Iran."

MOGHADAM: We also heard from several schools, where parents have given the DVDs to teachers to show to classes of elementary school children. Some schools have even had assemblies.

ELLIS: We're calling that program "Ba(back) to School!"
