



TV PRODUCER
SOPHIA ALI
ON CHILDREN'S PROGRAMMING
THAT IS RELATABLE & FUN

The *Flying Tent*, a fun, interactive and educational video series mainly for *desi* children created by US based Pakistani film and television producer Sophia Ali is currently available on YouTube and has been and launched by International Children's Television (ICTV). The video series plans to release a new song every week available in both English and Urdu. Sophia has a Masters in Child Development from Columbia University and has worked in Asia, Europe and America for over 25 years! *Hello!* spoke to her exclusively to learn more.

Tell us more about The Flying Tent?
The Flying Tent is video series for little

kids currently available on YouTube. It is designed to help young children develop language skills by 'singing along' to some of the most loved kid's music. This series differs from other sing-alongs in that it features *desi* characters, and every song is available in English and Urdu. *The Flying Tent* video series includes number-songs, call-and-response songs and activity-songs to help kids learn counting, vocabulary, movement, and much more.

What is The Flying Tent's mission statement?

The Flying Tent is an early learning sing-along series inspired by and designed for the children of South



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Asia and beyond.

Who is your target audience and what inspired you to make a programme like this?

The Flying Tent is targeted at pre-schoolers ages 0-4. This early learning series is a precursor to *The Magic Tent*, a series we are developing for children 4-8 that features the same cast of characters. *The Magic Tent* is designed to teach critical thinking, creative problem solving and to model empathy. My dream is to create really fun educational programs that help our kids learn these important life skills.

What is the main inspiration behind the characters you have created? How did they come to you?

When I decided to create a program for *desi* kids the main dilemma was how to create characters all kids in the region could relate to? What would they look like? Who would they be? The answer we came to was to create animal characters featuring local animals; *Begum Pashmina* the parrot, *Chacha Oont*, a camel, *ZumZum* a little girl elephant, *Bandoo* and the monkeys and of course *Chota Pi* a little Jungli Jinn. Michael Frith, our creative director, designed Miss Piggy, Fozzie Bear and other famous animal puppets when he was with *Muppets*, so that became our perfect solution.

The inspiration for many of the characters came from people I knew growing up. For example, *Begum Pashmina* was modeled after my aunt and *Chacha Oont* was modeled after our bearer/nanny, who helped raise me. Incidentally, *Aunty Pashmina's* outfit was designed by HSY!

Growing up, who was your inspiration, favourite icon

and role model from the film industry?

Annie Lennox. I guess she is technically in the music business. But she was a huge inspiration growing up. She is an incredible example of grace and power. She is not only a huge talent, but also a political activist and philanthropist.

Out of all the places where you have worked (USA, Europe, Asia) which one was your favourite to work in and why?

I've had such unique experiences in each place; it's difficult to name one. The first five movies I worked on were with a production company out of Rome. It was a magical experience because everything was so new. Los Angeles was totally different. LA is an industry town; everyone is in the 'entertainment business.' It makes you feel like you are in the big league and that is very exciting. But shooting in Karachi, was really my favorite; because it was the first time I was on my own set doing something that was huge and meaningful to me. Working on *Kahani Corner* with Marina Khan and Jaleel Akhtar was a dream come true. *The Magic Tent* pilot was filmed in Delhi, and the sheer size and scope of that shoot and the challenges it presented were exhilarating and terrifying all at once – and working with Nasseruddin Shah was yet another dream come true.

Of all the type of films and television serials you could have filmed, why did you choose to produce your work for such an audience and in such a way?

After years of being in the entertainment business a close friend was diagnosed with cancer and died soon after. That period made me re-evaluate what I

was doing with my own life. I quickly realised that working on films or TV serials had become meaningless to me. I wanted to do something to contribute in a different way. It occurred to me that I could use my production skills to create programs to reach and teach these kids.

What were some of the challenges that you faced after you founded International Children's Television LLC?

Initially, I faced the same issues all entrepreneurs face in getting funded and creating and testing a product. But then we had some additional challenges when the global media landscape suddenly changed very radically to a primarily streaming model. Everyone in media had to quickly change their strategies. We are very fortunate because platforms like YouTube help us to get our programs out farther and wider than they ever could have previously.

Do you have any wise words or advice for the youth and young filmmakers of the world?

To a person starting out I would say: Say 'YES' to every job offered to you, then show up and give it your all. There is no job that is beneath you in production. Every job will teach you something you will take to the next job. This is not the kind of work you can drop in at on top. It is about process and teamwork.



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