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RAOUF ZAKI'S SANTA CLAUS IN BAGHDAD

SHOT IN BOSTON FOR BAGHDAD

By Denise Widman

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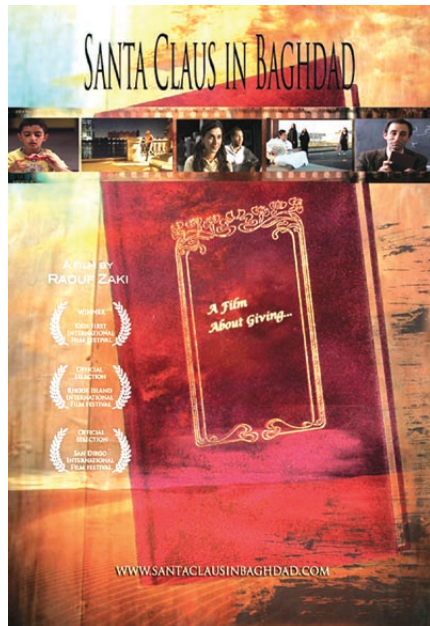
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Director Raouf Zaki

SANTA CLAUS IN BAGHDAD

By Denise Widman



SANTA CLAUS IN BAGHDAD poster.
Courtesy of RA Vision Productions.

As an American citizen who was born and raised in Egypt, the events of September 11th, 2001 deeply affected filmmaker Raouf Zaki. He recognized that the cultural divide between the Western and Arab worlds had become more divisive and felt compelled to help bridge the gap. "I wanted people to understand that we are all human beings, more similar than different, and that there are many commonalities between us and Arab societies," says Zaki. Thus, the seed for his film SANTA CLAUS IN BAGHDAD was planted. Set in Iraq, SANTA CLAUS IN BAGHDAD is a touching film about the power of giving and sacrifice, themes that are understood universally.

While raising children in the United States, Zaki became keenly aware of how fortunate many children are in this country. "I realized how blessed we are; for example, how much stuff we get for Christmas," said Zaki. In his quest to impart a message about how others -- in this case Middle-Eastern children -- live in less auspicious circumstances, Zaki decided to make giving the main premise of his film. "The Embargo of Iraq during the 1990s was not just about politics," Zaki relates. "It severely affected Iraqi families. There was no medicine, scarce food and resources, and, consequent-

ly, no toys for the children. In fact, more than 500,000 Iraqi children died from lack of medicine and goods. These are realities that Westerners may not have understood."

Seven-year-old Bilal (Dodi Eid) has never had a toy and dreams of owning a miniature red car. His uncle arrives from the United States with a suitcase. Bilal is convinced that the visitor is Santa Claus, delivering the longed for toy. Instead, his uncle brings desperately needed medicines that fill his suitcase, leaving no room for other presents. While the family is enormously grateful, Bilal feels devastated. Meanwhile, his 16-year-old sister Amal (Tamara Dhia) -- whose name means hope in Arabic -- wants to show appreciation to her teacher by buying him a book. Amal is determined to find the money for the gift even though she knows that these material items are hard to acquire. Although they have virtually nothing, each family member sacrifices to give to the people they care about.

Making SANTA CLAUS IN BAGHDAD became an epic journey for the filmmaker. On a visit to the local library after September 11th, Zaki read a short story by Newton native Elsa Marston from her collection entitled Figs and Fate: Stories about Growing up in the Arab World, the second edition of which has been re-named after the film. The tale struck Zaki so greatly that it formed the basis for his film. He then set out on a three-year voyage to bring his message of cultural understanding and giving to the screen.

First he needed to find 115 actors of Middle Eastern descent for 35 speaking parts and 100 extras. He held auditions in Boston but had difficulty finding enough actors that fit the description. "At one point, I thought of calling the FBI," he said with an ironic chuckle. He then expanded his search to the New York area where he was able to complete casting. "The actors were thrilled to have parts other than those of terrorists or religious extremists," said the filmmaker. In addition, Zaki decided that it was more important that Americans, particularly teens, understand his film than to have an authentic Arabic speaking cast; thus, the actors speak English.

Since filming in Iraq was impossible, not to mention expensive, Zaki and his crew sought to recreate various Iraqi locations in Framingham where he lived (he has since moved to Holliston) and currently runs his studio, RA Vision Productions. They found a large warehouse and built a living room, dining room, bedroom and even a famous Iraqi book market. For \$138, Zaki bought 20,000 books from Got Books Inc in Lawrence, Massachusetts to fill the book stalls. "It cost more to transport the books to the set than it did to buy them," Zaki relates. With his associate producer Dan Aronovitz, Zaki found further locations that replicated Iraqi sites, such as an abandoned train station and an old classroom at the Danforth Museum in Framingham. Next, costume designer Caroline Errington and her assistant Jessica Rodriguez coordinated costumes that characterized average Iraqi students during the 1990s. "Everyone put their hearts into making the film. The process was an amazing example of the American spirit at work. People of varying ethnicities and backgrounds came together for little money to make the film happen."

Zaki began raising money for the film by holding a fundraiser in conjunction with the Danforth Museum. At the event, he also assembled a group of Arab artists with the dual purpose of exposing Americans to Arab art and culture. "We raised \$7,500, not even a tenth of what we needed, but it was hope," relates Zaki. Finding it difficult to secure additional funding, his hope started to fade until he finally received two grants that allowed him to finish production. "That's when I thought that Santa Claus does exist!" he says.

A graduate of Boston University's film program, Zaki has more than 15 years of experience in the film and television industries as a cameraman and filmmaker. His first movie, JUST YOUR AVERAGE ARAB, a comedy about Arab Americans trying to look American after 9/11, won the Best Film award at the 2006 Boston Comedy and Film Festival.

Zaki is currently marketing SANTA CLAUS to educators who teach

students from the sixth grade through college. His film is available with a study guide developed by the head of the Middle East Policy Council in Washington, D.C. in collaboration with Sandra Hegstad, an educator, and Elsa Marston, the story's original author. "One of my biggest goals is to use the power of filmmaking to encourage honest dialogue by telling stories that portray common human themes," Zaki notes.

In addition, he is working on two new films also aimed at confronting stereotypes. One, presently in development and his first full-length feature, tells the story of a paleontologist and an Egyptian guide who get lost in a desert while searching for fossils of petrified whales. Zaki's second project, a documentary entitled DESERT STARS, is about present-day hermit monks who live in caves in the Egyptian desert and recount stories of the first Christian monks. "Who would have known that the first Christian monks came from the deserts of Egypt?" relates the filmmaker. The film chronicles their quest to use prayer to find water, food and necessities, thus, surviving in the face of immense danger.

Zaki's mission for his films is to question people's need for materialism and for viewers to reflect about what truly is important in life. To him, love, the spirit of giving, and the sacrifices people make for one another are values that transcend cultures. It is Zaki's passion to convey these messages that drives him through the complex and often challenging process of creating films.

For more information about Raouf Zaki's films visit www.santaclausinbaghdad.com and www.justyouraveragearab.com.

Denise Widman is an award winning screenwriter. She also currently serves on the board of the Boston Jewish Film Festival and is a past board member of Women in Film and Video of New England. Before turning her efforts to writing, Denise spent several years in marketing and public relations for such entertainment and media companies as The New York Times Company, Bravo, Houghton Mifflin and AT&T.

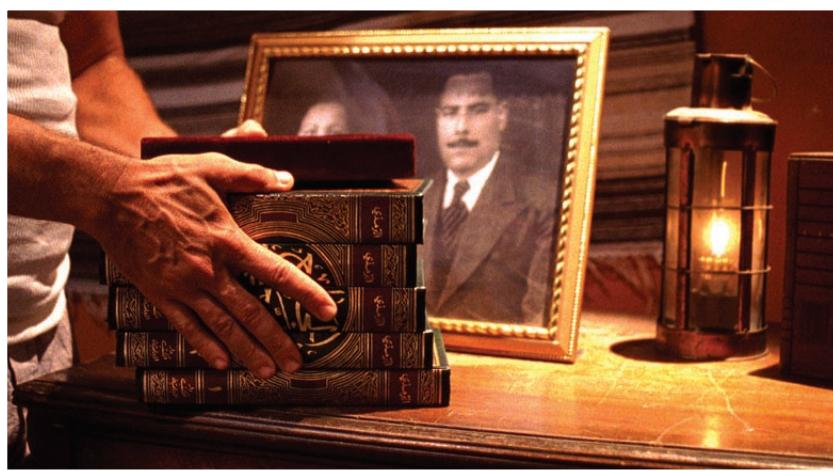
top to bottom

Iraqi Production Designer John El Manahi pauses during the construction of the book market scene. More than 10,000 books and numerous extras were brought in to create an authentic Iraqi book market in Framingham. Photo by Tom Robotham.

The parents of Amal and seven-year-old Bilal (Dodi Eid) who has never had a toy and dreams of owning a miniature red car torture themselves by selling old family books in order to buy the little red car. Although they have virtually nothing, the family sacrifices to give to the people they care about. Photo by Tom Robotham.

Raouf Zaki, trudging the sands of Egypt, his birthplace, as he works on his next film. Photo courtesy of Raouf Zaki.

Amal (Tamara Dhia) sits in class admiring the wisdom of her teacher who must leave her school to make more money. Photo by Tom Robotham.



A Film
About



top to bottom

Actors Gershon Eigner and Tamara Dhia consult with Director/Producer Raouf Zaki and Director of Photography Tom Robotham discuss the book market scene. Thousands of books and many extras were brought in for the scene that replicated a famous Baghdad market that existed for hundreds of years. The scene was shot in a Framingham warehouse.

Shot in an empty warehouse in Framingham, an authentic Iraqi book market was created using thousands of donated books and green screen technology this scene from Santa Claus in Baghdad. Photo by Tom Robotham, Raouf Zaki, and Steven Kaldeck.

Director Raouf Zaki shows the way to his Baghdad Café erected in Framingham for SANTA CLAUS IN BAGHDAD. The film is now available to purchase at www.santaclausinbaghdad.com. Photo by Tom Robotham.

Amal (Tamara Dhia), whose name means hope in Arabic, wants to show appreciation to her teacher by buying him a book in SANTA CLAUS IN BAGHDAD. Photo by Tom Robotham.

