

TURNING BOSTON INTO BAGHDAD

The making of Santa Claus in Baghdad

Three years ago, a book picked me up at a local library. It was titled: "Santa Claus in Baghdad, and other stories about growing up in the Middle East," by Elsa Marston. It featured several stories about growing up in the Middle East.

These stories spanned my native Egypt, as well as Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Iraq. The entire "axis of evil" was packaged in one book plus two bonus countries. It had stories about growing up in the Arab world as a teenager, not too far from my own. When I finished reading the last short story of that book, "Santa Claus in Baghdad," I got really emotional because it was about a poor Iraqi girl and her little brother during the terrible embargo days and it was simply about giving. We all remember the lack of medicine during the embargo days where people had to sell everything to survive. The realities are even deeper than the film or the book, where some women turned into prostitutes to buy medicine, fathers had to beat up their own children so that they could be hospitalized just to be fed, and schools, well, final exams had to be conducted on convenience store receipts because no one could afford blank paper. Not too long ago, however, the saying went, books were written in Egypt, published in Lebanon and read in Iraq.

I stood up and promised myself to



turn the story into a film about a little girl, her brother and their story of decline from their social status, while hanging onto the spiritual and educational essentials, like old books, when everything else had been sold.

I always believed in the huge educational potential behind the film. There are so many common things between that Iraqi girl, her little brother, their needs, wants and dreams and American kids and teenagers. My films have been more about bridging the cultural gap. In

2006, I had made another film, titled: Just your Average Arab: a comedy about a group of Arab Americans who days after 9/11 hide in the back of a convenience store, and take lessons on how to be more "American".

Ibrahim becomes Abe, Ossama becomes O.J., their hair color becomes heavy metal, etc. Meanwhile, the FBI is listening in across the street thinking they are the next big terrorist cell. Little did I know that the film would be used for educational purposes on college campuses. Ivy League Universities and Libraries are using it today to discuss racial profiling. For more information, please visit (www.justyouraveragearab.com) and you can watch the first seven minutes on YouTube.

One of the keys in making a successful independent film is to pack a bunch of actors in a room and create a story around that. It is cheap, doable, and sounds like a familiar Egyptian movie.

But Santa was anything but cheap or doable. Santa had every rule of "DO NOT DO'S" in the independent film world. Santa had a cast of hundreds, massive sets consisting of a second-hand market plus the living room, dining room, kitchen, and bedrooms of a once wealthy family, a Middle school, an Elementary school with students of all ages in

various Iraqi school uniforms, train stations, balconies...It was impossible. Who did I think I was? The Spielberg of the Arab people, the Spike Lee of Arab Americans?!

Everyone who read the story, besides from crying at the end, said: "Don't do it."

Twenty-one speaking roles, and over a hundred extra Middle Easterners? "Where do I find them?" "Call the FBI?" "my beautiful and sarcastic wife said. She was joking or was she?"

Fast forward to the first day of auditions, which I started without a penny in my pocket to make this mini-epic, sheer excitement that turned into disappointment when I found out that 90 percent of the girls who showed up to the audition for the role of students are blonde with blue eyes despite what the ad said in bold, "Middle Eastern features, olive complexions" I had nightmares at this audition, where I would be sitting on the director's chair and my only way out when seeing a blonde on the set was to yell: "VEIL HER, VEIL HER" I had



actually ordered veils in multiple colors to be on the safe side.

But on other hand I started getting some amazing Middle Eastern actors, mostly professionals or semi, but it took about two years to assemble everyone.

Next was how we were going to get the money, ADCMA in Boston really liked the idea and set up a fundraiser to make the film. It was very successful but we raised tenth of the money needed to make the mini epic.

I marched on and applied for grants, and incidentally was told by a government grant representative to go look in Michigan where there is a lot of "you's out there in Michigan" Mind you, this was someone who works for the humanities with an 's'. Of course, rejection after rejection letter arrived, after all, what is more



important than making a film that tries to show Iraqis or Arabs as normal human beings?

An amazing American woman who believes in social change, handed me \$35,000 because she loved the film and trusted me. Great, I had the budget or so I thought. Let us make a movie.

Crew members came in from different nationalities, willing to lend a hand for almost nothing. You got to love being American when you see people from all races, Italians, Jews,

Arabs, Indians, Irish, you name it, come together in the name of making a project whom they believe will make a difference. You got to love the American spirit for that never-ending optimism, I don't think filmmakers will ever find anywhere in the world. "Let us build Iraq in Boston!! Let us do it Baby"

I had originally found the Danforth Museum in Framingham to be a perfect setting for the classes. We just needed a schoolyard to film in, that looked like a desert, bring in the mowing machines of a friend and let us cut it...and throw some sand. Arabic graffiti in the background and voila!! A school yard in Iraq. But, where we going to build all these sets? And who was going to build it?

I had hired several Production Designers over three months, and people either backed out and quit. A

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Production designer is someone who is key in making this film, since he/she oversees the look and building of the sets. I will never forget inviting one to my home and forcing him to watch Al Jazeera for 4 hours to see what a Middle Eastern home looked like, or having the perfect one suddenly fall down with a stomach virus that hospitalized her for weeks.

I have dragged friends and gone on numerous scouts checking old churches, run down houses, walked in downtown Boston like never before. And well, Boston is Boston.

At that point, three Christmases had passed, and I am getting pretty sick of hearing the question from everyone I know: "How is Santa Claus?" "How is Santa Claus?" And it was getting a little annoying around Christmas time. Until a miracle happened, and unless a miracle would have happened, this film was not happening. After all, I am a Christian who believes in miracles.

And it did happen: we found an Iraqi-American Production designer in New York who just happened to be available only three weeks before the filming start date. John El Manahi with the assistance of a student army of an Art department, more faith than lumber built Iraq in Boston.

I, on the other hand, looked for international locations, like abandoned train stations.

But the shoot was not uneventful, in fact, it was insane. El Manahi had to build a book market with 20,000



books that we found for \$135, while I was shooting in the same space at the same time the other house scenes. Daily problems ranged from small problems like a crew member getting a serious allergic reaction from a bee sting to the town deciding to shut us down because we did not have a building permit, to us melting in serious heat of 106 degrees under the film lights to not having enough food.

But the incredible performances of

Tamara Dhia, in the lead role of Amal, Bilal: the little boy, played beautifully by Dodi Eid, and the incredible John Sarrouf made us float because we were watching our story unfold before our eyes.

At the end of it, we did not really foresee a cleaning or breakdown need, I was left with two volunteers to demolish a 7,000 square feet worth of set, 20,000 books, the skeleton of a car, a piano, great stuff. Luckily, I had two volunteers. One of those volunteers, Steven Kaldeck ended up taking on the task of making all kinds of special effects in the movie and inserting Arabic street backgrounds, into our foreground shots. Oh about Arabic backgrounds, here comes Egypt...

I had shot 95% of the film here, and wanted to add a couple of extra scenes of the father breaking into an Arabic pharmacy and running as the film opens. I also needed background shots of Arabic streets and actual book markets to add to the authenticity of the set. And last but not least, we had also built a replica of a Middle Eastern balcony. From it, Amal gazes at someone across the street. Obviously, what that "someone" is her point of view which you cannot recreate in Boston, because you would get Massachusetts Ave and good old English architecture, DA!

Sadly but expectedly, I was out of money and in debt to finish this film. I had to dig into some personal savings. I could no longer shoot on expensive film.

From years of working as a cameraman, I liked where high definition cameras were coming in terms of cost and the closeness to film as well as their unobtrusiveness. I had to finish the film that way. My son David, once inspired me by telling me about the story of the "Little

train that could..." He just had to tell to to me at the right time and off I went.

Fast forward, six months later. I had a ticket to Egypt donated by Adam Travel, a rented high definition camera and pieces of a balcony that I had to bring through Egyptian customs. I needed to shoot Amal's point of view through the original rails.

"What is this?" the Egyptian customs officer asks.

"It is a balcony," I answer.

"I know it is a balcony. What are

you doing with it?"

"I have to bring it back to Egypt where it belongs, it once belonged to my great grandmother and it must return to its Egyptian roots".

"We don't make balconies out of wood in Egypt".

"Yes, we did... in the old days during the aristocratic era".

That came out of left field. Silence. Customs Officer walks over to his supervisor, and rolls his index next to his head signaling that I must be some sort of "Lunatic" I am thinking: "Man, all I am trying to do is bridge East and West, come on, help me out".

They let me go and look at me pass with a sympathetic face.

In Egypt, we ended up using doubles for the actual actors. The actual father in Boston was bald so we had to beg the Egyptian double to shave his head through the artistry of a good barber and shoot at night with a minimal crew to hide his features. The footage looked great and added authenticity to the film.

A year later, we finished editing the film with color correction, sound mixing and music. Another miracle happened when the renowned Marcel Khalife comes to Boston for a tour, looks at a rough cut of the film and donates the music of his latest CD, "Taqasim" to it. Thanks Marcel, you are a legend not just because of your music that touched generations, but also because of your generosity.

Now what? Well, the Boston Premiere of the film is Sunday November 16th at the Belmont Theatre in Belmont, MA at 5:30 pm. We will also launch an online premiere and sneak preview to educators/schools on December 9th. We are also showing it at the Amazing things Arts Center in Framingham, on December 7 and 8th at 7 pm. We need funds to distribute this film with the book, for schools across the United States and we are hoping for yet another miracle to help us do just that.

I ask you, the readers to spread the word about this film, to high schools, Middle Schools. I ask local Arab Americans to sponsor this package (the book and film) to one school in their district. In an age where the word "Arab" in an age where we are seeing it mentioned on the latest Republican campaign not so far from being called a "Nazi" The amount of misinformation and our image is now more than ever tarnished. We must invest in education and media through grassroots approaches, if we don't; the price of ignorance is right before our eyes and ears.

I am only "one" folks whose efforts can only go so far. I have shown my previous film in Colleges and was stunned at the "disconnect" that an average College Senior has towards our culture.

At the end of the day, this is a story about giving that you can give to your local school this upcoming Holiday season, and the gift - just like in the film if you watch it - will come back full circle.

For more information please visit: www.santaclausinbaghdad.com or email us at filmmaker@rcn.com

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