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'Not some sappy Christmas story'

The Boston Globe

Director touts a holiday film that is set in Iraq



A scene from "Santa Claus in Baghdad," which filmmaker Raouf Zaki based on a short story by Newton native Elsa Martens. (Handout Photo / Tom Robotham)

By Joel Brown

Globe Correspondent / November 30, 2008

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Raouf Zaki has completed his cinematic labor of love, and now he wants people to see it. Families, for sure, and especially teachers. He's scheduled three local screenings of "Santa Claus in Baghdad" in the next 10 days, plus a free online screening Dec. 9 for educators nationwide.

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"A dream is to have this in every public school, every college, every library in the United States of America. This beautiful country of ours needs this," Zaki said.

The movie is "a great Christmas story, not some sappy Christmas story, but a true Christmas story about giving . . . how giving can come back to you full circle, and how the satisfaction of giving, there is no number on that," Zaki said. "The bonus, the big bonus, is it doesn't just happen in any country. It is happening in Iraq."

People who see the movie "can see Iraqis as just like you and I," Zaki, 40, said. "I was showing this to Framingham State to college students . . . and they said, all of them, 30 kids, said, 'I didn't know kids in Iraq are that poor. I was shocked to find that out.' That is the amount of disconnect we have here."

Based on a short story by Newton native **Elsa Marston**, the lump-in-the-throat film explores the holiday spirit found in an Iraqi family under the deprivations of the international embargo in the 1990s. Sixteen-year-old Amal (**Tamara Dhia**) struggles to provide a proper parting gift for a teacher who

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has awakened her love of literature. In doing so, she learns of an even greater sacrifice made to supply her little brother, Bilaal (**Dodi Eid**), with a toy for Christmas.

Zaki was moved to tears when he read Marston's story in 2005. Coincidentally, they lived on the same street in Egypt when he was a boy. The writer, who now lives in Indiana, has become one of many supporters of the film, Zaki said, and he is hoping to get a grant to distribute a DVD of "Santa Claus in Baghdad" along with a copy of Marston's book, "Figs and Fate - Stories About Growing up in the Arab World Today," to schools and libraries. (A new edition has been retitled to match the film.)

Zaki, an Egyptian-born Christian, graduated from BU's film program in 1989, and became an American citizen a decade ago. He wrote, produced, and directed the half-hour film through his RA Vision Productions in Framingham. Numerous donors, foundations, and individuals helped get the film made, although Zaki said he is still tens of thousands of dollars out of pocket.

RA's bread and butter is industrial videos, but after 9/11 Zaki began to also think about how to improve Arab-American understanding. His 2006 comedy "Just Your Average Arab" found an audience at the Boston International Comedy and Film Festival. He shot most of "Santa Claus in Baghdad" over 10 days in 2007, mainly in a 7,500-square-foot warehouse in Framingham. He also filmed some backgrounds guerrilla-style during a trip back to Egypt in January.

"I'm doing it for my country, for the next generation of kids," Zaki said. "Somebody sees this and he's the next policy maker and becomes the next president, imagine the effect on him, because he was exposed to another culture in the true light of what they are."

Teachers who want to see the free Jan. 9 online screening should go to www.santaclausinbaghdad.com/film.html where they will find an e-mail link for details.

In the Boston area, there are screenings set for: Friday at Framingham State College, College Center Forum (www.framingham.edu) and next Sunday and Monday at Amazing Things Art Center, 160 Hollis St., Framingham (www.amazingthings.org). The movie will also be shown in January at the public libraries in Norfolk and Framingham.

IS THERE INTELLIGENT LIFE IN "CONTACT"?: The Coolidge Corner's Science on Screen series looks for life on other planets Monday at 7 p.m. with a screening of the **Jodie Foster** vehicle "Contact." Based on a book by **Carl Sagan**, the **Robert Zemeckis** film casts Foster as a scientist searching for life elsewhere in the universe via radio astronomy. **Matthew McConaughey** plays her love interest - a theology student who challenges her beliefs about what the heavens may contain. Before the film, Harvard astrophysicist **Paul Horowitz** - a pioneer in the search for extraterrestrial life - will give a talk on the topic. Details: www.coolidge.org/science or 617-734-2500.

SCREENINGS OF NOTE: Thursday and Friday the Museum of Fine Arts will host programs from The Boston Turkish Festival's Documentary and Short Film Competition. Included are the documentaries "Rumi: The Dance of Love," by **Kürsat Kizbaz** and "Inspirations," by **Nurdan Arca**. For details: www.bostonturkishfestival.org or www.mfa.org/film. ■

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