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Story of hope in Baghdad The Boston Globe

It took 'small miracles' for Holliston filmmaker to bring tale to big screen



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 Denise Taylor Globe Correspondent / November 13, 2008

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It took just one tear-filled moment for Holliston filmmaker Raouf Zaki to decide to adapt "Santa Claus in Baghdad" as a movie. It was 2005 and he'd been up late reading Newton native Elsa Marston's "Figs and Fate: Stories about Growing up in the Arab World." With each tale he could smell the smells and see the sights of his youth spent in Egypt. But it was the final story, a tale about two oddly linked acts of generosity set in Iraq, that tossed him into what he calls "a haze of emotion."

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"I closed the book, I stood up, and I cried. Then I decided I had to try and make it into a beautiful film because it was such a beautiful story," said Zaki, who runs his own film

company, RA Vision, in Framingham. "It's about hope, and who doesn't need hope?"

And so began a three-year quest fraught with hurdles. Zaki scratched together funds. He transformed New England locales into the streets of Baghdad. He set out on a guerrilla-style filming mission in Egypt that landed him (briefly) under arrest. And now, at last, his stirring short film about finding humanity in the darkest of times makes its area premiere, at 5:30 p.m. Sunday in Belmont, with additional screenings next month in Framingham and Wayland.

In it we meet 16-year-old Amal, an Iraqi schoolgirl whose family has lost almost everything. Filled with ardor for the knowledge her departing literature teacher has given her, Amal makes a generous sacrifice to acquire a parting gift for

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him. Meanwhile, her little brother Bilal becomes convinced that an uncle visiting from America is really Santa Claus. It turns out his wish for a toy is heard by someone quite different.

"This story had every no-no there is in independent film," said Zaki, 39.

"Usually, you really try to limit yourself to as few locations as possible, as few actors as possible, and it all has to be local and doable. But this took place in Baghdad, it had 35 Middle Eastern actors in it, it had tons of extras, it had a book market, it had a used market, it had a teacher, schools, uniforms. I knew it would take a miracle to make this happen."

And it did. Or rather, as Zaki puts it, "it took a lot of small miracles, the kind that give you that spiritual fuel to keep going."

Grants came in. Fund-raisers inspired donations. Local colleges sent what Zaki calls an "army of students" to build sets and help out. When the production designer fell ill, an Iraqi-born designer from New York just happened to be free to re-create the city scenes he knew well. Lebanese composer Marcel Khalife saw a clip of the film and offered his music for its score.

And just when Zaki thought he'd never find a school that looked authentic enough, a classroom at Framingham's Danforth Museum of Art solved the problem.

"Their desks are all covered with paint because they teach art so they looked dingy enough," laughed Zaki. "It was a great help, because we were trying to keep it documentary-like. I wanted to be true to how things really are."

Most impressive though, Zaki managed to turn a 7,500-square-foot Framingham warehouse into Baghdad's bustling outdoor book market. Twenty thousand books were trucked in. Countless crew hours were spent re-creating every last detail, from the narrow passageways to the Arabic signage. Street scenes shot in Egypt were then digitally composed into the background. In a way, it serves as a memorial.

"That market was in Baghdad for hundreds of years, but it was destroyed last year," said Zaki. "That's something we don't tend to know about Iraqi people. They love to read. There's an ancient Arabic saying that goes, 'Books are written in Egypt, printed in Lebanon (because of all the trees), and read in Iraq.' That's still true today. But the market is gone."

Meanwhile, an odd coincidence was discovered. Zaki found that Marston had lived across the street from him in Egypt in the 1980s. They never met, but are sure they crossed paths. "Things like that make you feel like you're doing the right thing," said Zaki.

But it's not chance that Zaki was drawn to Marston's story. It fits right into the niche that Zaki is creating for himself as a filmmaker. He is determined to break stereotypes about Arabs through cinema. His 2006 comedy "Not Your Average Arab" is popular on college campuses as a teaching tool for discussions about racial profiling.

"The amount of disconnect between college students and my culture is incredible and when they see the film they realize that," said Zaki. "Recently at a screening one student said to me, 'I was 14 when 9/11 happened and I've had a black-and-white image of Arabs because of that, so thank you.' "

Zaki is marketing "Santa Claus in Baghdad" bundled with the book to schools and colleges. A national free online premiere for interested educators takes place on Dec. 9, and he encourages area teachers to attend the upcoming local screenings.

"I want to bridge the cultural divide. It's important for students here to see that

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teenagers in other places are not so different from them," said Zaki. "It not only provides awareness, but it opens the door for conversation and enlightenment when they're adults."

"Santa Claus in Baghdad" has its official Greater Boston premiere Sunday, 5:30 p.m. at Studio Cinema Belmont, 376 Trapelo Road, Belmont. Tickets \$7, includes popcorn. 617-484-1706, www.studiocinema.com. Additional screenings include Dec. 5, 2:30 p.m., at Framingham State College, College Center Forum, 100 State St., Framingham. Free. www.framingham.edu; Dec. 7 and 8, 7 p.m., at Amazing Things Art Center, 160 Hollis St., Framingham. Tickets \$6. 508-405-2787, www.amazingthings.org; Dec 11, 7:30 p.m., at Wayland Public Library, 5 Concord Road, Wayland. Free. 508-358-2311, www.waylandlibrary.org. View the trailer or the free National Online Premiere for Educators on Dec. 9 at www.santaclausinbaghdad.com.

WOMEN TAKE STAGE: We might not have a woman in the White House, but three theater openings this weekend are putting plenty of women on stage.

In Maynard at 8 p.m. tomorrow, Acme Theater opens its production of Pulitzer-nominated playwright Lee Blessing's "Independence," a darkly humorous study of a family divided as three daughters confront how to care for their unstable mother.

In Boylston at 8 tonight, Calliope Productions holds the regional premiere of the musical "HATS!" Inspired by the over-50, adventure-seeking ladies of the international Red Hat Society, this one's all about getting older - and better.

And at 8 tonight in Hopkinton, Enter Stage Left Theater brings back a classic. Their production of "Steel Magnolias" features women from Hopkinton, Holliston, Milford, and Plainville playing friends who share the triumphs and tragedies of their lives as they gather at a Louisiana beauty shop.

"Our Main Street studio will have everyone feeling they are right in the salon with these very funny ladies," said director Dawn Anderson.

"Independence" runs tomorrow through Dec. 6 at Acme Theater, 61 Summer St., Maynard. Tickets: \$16; \$14 seniors, students. 978-823-0003, www.acmetheater.com. "Steel Magnolias" runs tonight through Nov. 22 at 30 Main St., Hopkinton. Tickets: \$15; \$12 for students, seniors. 508-435-2114, www.enterstagelefttheater.com. "HATS!" tonight through Dec. 7 at Calliope Productions Theatre, 150 Main St., Boylston. Tickets: \$18; \$15 seniors, students; \$12 for Red Hat Society members. 508-869-6887, www.calliopeproductions.org.

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