

Sahim Omar Kalifa about BAGHDAD MESSI

Playing football in a minefield

Some 10 years after Sahim Omar Kalifa made a short film about a war victim with a football dream, BAGHDAD MESSI got a makeover as a feature film. Baghdad in 2009 is a hotbed of violence and terror. On the car radio we hear reports about a terrorist attack, after which the reporter says deadpan... "And now sports..." Director Sahim Omar Kalifa: "In Iraq, there were hundreds, sometimes thousands of deaths every week. Death and violence had become part of everyday life. I made a film about a child, Hamoudi, living in the most dangerous city in the world but not feeling the danger because he is possessed by his big dream of becoming a footballer."

Sahim Omar Kalifa: Iraqis always want you to make a choice: Barcelona or Real Madrid? Messi or Ronaldo? For the short film, we spent six months looking for a young lead actor and when we finally found him, he didn't want to participate. "I am not a fan of Messi. My friends will call me a traitor." In the end, he did participate, totally immersing himself in the role

and almost forgetting that he was a Ronaldo fan. He later met Lionel Messi and declared everywhere to be "so happy to shake hands with his great idol".

Can you briefly outline the situation in Iraq in 2009, the background against which your story takes place?

Kalifa: After the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iraq went through a difficult period from 2006 to 2009. Especially in Baghdad, sectarian violence was everywhere, as the city is half Sunni, half Shiite. Walls were built to separate neighbourhoods, there were checkpoints raised by militias, there were countless casualties on both sides - Sunni and Shia.

Those militias in the film behave rudely and corruptly.

Kalifa: Those checkpoints were, for Iraqis, the worst moments of their lives. There were massive militias operating, not controlled by anyone. Checkpoints were manned by one militia one day and another militia the



next. You were always asked the same questions, but you never knew what the right answer was that day. If they asked you whether you were Sunni or Shia and you gave the wrong answer, you could get killed.

Bagdad is a war zone. At the opening scene, a text appears on screen: "People no longer live here, they merely exist."

Kalifa: Baghdad is a huge city; 6 million people live there. But the city had become hell. To reconstruct that situation, we shot in different cities: in Baghdad, Mosul and Erbil. From those

images, we pieced together the Baghdad of the time.

What a tour de force!

Kalifa: Filming in the Middle East is not easy but things are also possible there that would never work elsewhere. For that chase scene, 10 streets were blocked for 3 days. In Belgium, that's unthinkable. We had no budget to keep shops closed, but a government chief can arrange a lot with one phone call. The right cars and clothes from 2009 were hard to find. We needed as many as 40 cars to correctly reconstruct a streetscape.

All military vehicles were provided to us free of charge. And when we shot in Mosul, massive numbers of police and military showed up to help and protect us.

From Baghdad, his family moves to the countryside. Life would be safer in the village.

Kalifa: The contrast between Baghdad and the villages is huge. There are no militias there, no international forces, no checkpoints,... but there are mines. During Saddam Hussein's regime, the whole country turned into a minefield. The thousands of kilometres long border with Turkey, Iran and Syria was littered with mines to cut off smugglers and refugees. In every family you'll find people who lost a leg or an arm. Hamoudi losing his leg is the symbol of Iraq's dream being amputated.

How important is football to Iraqis?

Kalifa: As a result of British colonisation, Iraq was one of the first countries in the Middle East to embrace football. Iraqis are fanatical supporters. When Barcelona plays against Real Madrid, there is fighting in the streets of Baghdad. Saddam Hussein realised very well that football offered people entertainment; the sport got a lot of attention.



And how important is it to you?

Kalifa: Back in Iraq, football meant everything to me. I played every day. In Belgium, I got my residence permit, my parents and family were here and yet I wasn't happy. I wondered why I couldn't feel joyful anymore even though everything was going so well. It was because I didn't play football anymore. The films I make are always about things close to my heart, but never about myself. I never lived in Baghdad, I never lost a leg... but I did experience that big passions in life can make you happy.

Messi knows about the existence of this film?

Kalifa: The lead actor of the short film (2012) met Messi in Qatar by the intercession of the Football federation. Moreover, he got help from a Brit-

ish-Iraqi organisation, money was collected to make a prosthesis for him.... It would be nice if we could get something going again for our lead actor Ahmed Abdullah with this film. He has so many ambitions.

You found him in his city, Ambar?

Kalifa: That was the most dangerous trip I made in Iraq; IS was very active there. His story sounds extremely sad: Ahmed had lost his leg in a rocket attack on the same day his father died in an accident. He turned out to be an impressive actor.

I have never seen so many shades of grey in one film. In the opening scene, we drive through the city under grey buildings under a grey sky, everywhere is the colour of cement in 101 different shades.

Kalifa: Baghdad is a city that has survived misery and is now full of colour. In grading, we took out a lot of colour from the image. In that blue-grey backdrop, we gave extra colour to the people, who shine with joy and love, which adds to the contrast.

Walking the streets of Baghdad, are you 100% at home or do you somehow feel like a stranger in your own country?

Kalifa: Two years ago, as an Iraqi, I went to Baghdad for the first time, against my family's advice. The city is so big, full of people from different Arab and European countries. This place is thousands of years old, one of the most beautiful cities in the world. You walk through a historic setting full of interesting spots and friendly people. I have become a huge fan of Baghdad.

BAGHDAD MESSI will even run in Iraqi cinemas.

Kalifa: The cinema infrastructure there is substandard, but through social media we will try to find our audience. Everyone in Iraq knows the short film BAGHDAD MESSI. Hopefully that has made the audience curious.

—
Gert Hermans