



Producer hopes film will educate

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After its world premiere at the Emirates Palace Hotel in Abu Dhabi on January 7, the ground-breaking IMAX film "Journey to Mecca" made its North American debut at the Henry Ford IMAX in Dearborn this past Wednesday, and creator/producer Taran Davies was in town to promote it. Moroccan ambassador to the U.S., Aziz Mekouar, was in town as a special guest for the screening in a show of support for a film that Davies (pronounced like Davis) believes will show people a side of Islam that isn't portrayed enough in the mainstream media.

"People get caught up in the news cycle and all they see and hear about are things like terrorism, war, and refugees," said Davies, the British founder of the film's Cosmic Picture production company. The movie "Journey to Mecca" is a re-telling of the trip of approximately 5,000 miles from Morocco to Mecca in the 14th century by legendary traveler and scholar Ibn Battuta. It features the first-ever overhead views of the holy site. The footage of Mecca was shot in September 2007 amid a gathering of about 3 million pilgrims.

Davies was a documentary filmmaker in the early 1990s before quitting to take a job as an investment banker in New York. Davies became fascinated with Islamic culture while filming "Around the Sacred Sea," a critically acclaimed documentary on his five-month expedition riding horse back around Siberia's Lake Baikal that took him into the southern borderlands of Russia and contact with its Islamic cultures. While working for Loeb Partners in New York just a block away, he witnessed the collapsing of the World Trade Center towers and managed to escape. Soon after, he quit his job and got back into filmmaking with the determination to educate citizens of the Western world about Islam.

Davies originally shot "Afghan Stories," a 2002 documentary about everyday life in Afghanistan, to show the human side behind the conflict America began in the country. Davies believes that the beauty and grace exhibited by "Journey to Mecca" will help open some eyes, not just in the Muslim nations that are clamoring for showings but also in America.

"I am an optimist, but I do believe that there is a major information gap to fill," he said. "Most non-Muslims don't have a clue about the religion so I made this film for people to gain more understanding and respect for their Muslim brothers and sisters.

Islam is a challenging subject to tackle in today's day and age but that's why we made the movie."

Davies enlisted the help of some elite Hollywood talents for "Journey to Mecca," including fellow producer and multiple-Oscar winner Jake Eberts and narrator and fellow Oscar winner Ben Kingsley, but the motivation for the film was more to get a message across than to make money. "I couldn't picture myself doing regular motion pictures, it just isn't me," he said. "If I'm going to do it, it's got to be deep and it's got to be meaningful."

Davies plans to spend time over the next two years or so promoting the film, which he hopes will spread to more IMAX theatres. The film will premiere in places like Dearborn, Toronto, and Paris, areas where large crowds are expected. Excitement and demand for the movie is growing in the Muslim world overseas, however, and Davies expects that Muslim audiences will help provide much of the film's profit in the near future. Plans are in place to bring the film to Saudi Arabia, but the capital city of Riyadh doesn't currently have any theatres to show it in. "This is an exciting opportunity to bring the film to as many people as possible" said Davies, who believes that demand for the movie could help build more IMAX theatres. Besides the Muslim world, Davies also believes that the film should find a nice niche in America in museums like the Henry Ford. Top IMAX films can also have long shelf lives of up to 30 years according to Davies.

"The hope is that the film will expose schoolchildren to a subject they don't know much about. We can all do well by learning more about Islam. The journey portrayed in the movie is all about humility, friendship, equality, and peace." Other documentaries on the Hajj have been done in the past, but Davies feels that none of them were able to do it justice on smaller screens. Details like the diverse faces of the pilgrims can clearly be seen in the IMAX format.

"This is one of the most expensive IMAX films ever and we worked with some of the top special effects people in the business," said Davies. "It really shows the beauty of Islam and its contributions to world civilization." "Journey to Mecca" plays out like a "dramatic documentary" according to Davies as it follows Battuta's journey. The plot isn't overly complicated but Davies felt it was important to tell a personal story and to find a balance between character development and immersive quality. Because of the expensive nature of filming, most IMAX films only run a maximum length of about 45 minutes. But the 40-minute length of the movie is just enough time to showcase the breathtaking footage that Davies' crew shot while still developing the character of Battuta and shedding light on his incredible accomplishments. "Ibn Battuta, I mean here's a man who the Western world knows nothing about even though he traveled three times further than Marco Polo did," said Davies. "I hope people will be inspired by his story." Davies is overjoyed with the final results of the project and is excited to see the positive impact he believes it will have on the perceptions

of Islam in America and beyond. DVD production is planned for the future assuming the movie draws well enough at IMAX theatres. "I spent every second of every day for 4 1/2 years thinking about this movie, and I'm really hopeful that people will be moved by it, not just Muslims but non-Muslims as well."

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