PRESS KIT

JOURNEY TO MECCA

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF IBN BATTUTA

“I set out alone, having neither fellow-traveler
In whose companionship I might find cheer,
Nor Caravan whose party I might join,
But swayed by an overmastering impulse within me
And a desire long-cherished in my bosom.”

Ibn Battuta, 1355
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Ibn Battuta, the famed 14th century Moroccan traveler, set out in 1325 from his native Tangier on an epic journey to Mecca, the historical and cultural center of Islam. By the time he returned 29 years later, he had traveled the world from West Africa, Spain and India to China and the Maldives, covering some 75,000 miles and three times further than Marco Polo. At the instigation of the Sultan of Morocco, Ibn Battuta dictated his reminiscences, which became one of the world’s most famous travel books, the Rihla.

Journey to Mecca is an IMAX® dramatic and documentary feature, filmed in Saudi Arabia and Morocco in both English and Arabic, with background Berber. The film tells the amazing story of Ibn Battuta, the greatest explorer of the Old World, following his first pilgrimage between 1325 and 1326 from Tangier to Mecca. His perilous journey resonates with adventure while presenting an unforgettable picture of Islamic civilization during the 14th century, culminating with Battuta’s first Hajj. The story is book-ended by a close-up look at the contemporary Hajj, a pilgrimage to Mecca that draws three million Muslims from around the world every year who perform rituals that have taken place for over 1,400 years.

IMAX® films can take people to places they would otherwise never go, from Mt. Everest to the deep sea to outer space. The Hajj, the longest running congregation of humans annually on planet earth, is definitely a unique experience for the medium. For non-Muslims it is the closest they will ever come to witnessing this extraordinary event, and for Muslims it takes on an even deeper significance.

Journey to Mecca marks the first and only time an IMAX® camera has captured an aerial view of the Hajj from a helicopter hovering 200 feet above Mecca, and the first time an IMAX® team has been admitted into the most sacred sanctuary of Islam - the Grand Mosque in Mecca. The King Abdulaziz Public Library and The King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, on behalf of HRH King Abdullah, were responsible for granting the 85 permits required for our team of 80 people, drawn from over thirty different nations, to embark on the largest and most ambitious production ever to take place in the Gulf region, and to film the Hajj with three IMAX® cameras from December 17th to 21st, 2007.

Following the unprecedented documentary coverage of Mecca, the narrative drama was filmed in Morocco between April 8th and May 14th, 2008 by the sea at Agadir, doubling for Tangier, circa 1325, and in desert locations near the Algerian border where the production assembled the longest and one of the largest caravans ever filmed - featuring animals from camels, horses, donkeys to sheep and goats in addition to hundreds of extras in period costume. Moving to Ouarzazate, the epic picture shot on plains lying between the Atlas Mountains, on a man-made river replicating the Nile, at Bedouin encampments, on sand dunes and at an oasis, on sets in studios including a hand-carved Cairo library, and in colourful souks, completing principal photography in the biggest and most meaningful set of all, a historical recreation of Mecca in 1326 where 450 extras
performed the Hajj under the tutelage of the local Imam, and other leading experts on the Hajj. Altogether, over 4,500 extras appeared in the film.

*Journey to Mecca* stars newcomer Chems Eddine Zinoun who played Ibn Battuta, Hassam Ghancy, Nadim Sawalha and Nabil Elouahabi, directed by Bruce Neibaur and produced by Taran Davies, Dominic Cunningham-Reid and Jonathan Barker, a Cosmic Picture/SK Films Production with Jake Eberts serving as Executive Producer. The co-producers are Dounia Productions, Eagle Vision Media Group and Desert Door Productions, supervising producers are Diane Roberts and Tony Thatcher (for the Morocco shoot) with Daniel Ferguson as Line Producer. Saudi Arabia’s Silver Grey Productions and Morocco’s Irene Production were the service providers.

*Journey to Mecca* is presented by The King Abdulaziz Public Library and The King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies.

It is the duty of every Muslim to visit Mecca at least once in their lifetime, if possible. The filmmakers, for their part, feel that it is their duty to tell the story of Ibn Battuta, who is largely unknown in the West, and to explain the Hajj in order to create a bridge between the Muslim and Western worlds and develop an understanding of the Hajj and of its ultimate purpose – Peace. The production team is very pleased that the film has been endorsed by leaders from many faiths including the Dalai Lama and Lord Carey of Clifton, former Archbishop of Canterbury. (See Appendices for other endorsements)

**Synopsis** (See Appendices for alternate synopses)

*Journey to Mecca* tells the story of Ibn Battuta, (played by Chems Eddine Zinoun) a young scholar, who leaves Tangier in 1325 on an epic and perilous journey, traveling alone from his home in Morocco to reach Mecca, some 3,000 miles to the east.

Ibn Battuta is besieged by countless obstacles as he makes his way across the North African desert to Mecca. Along the route he meets an unlikely stranger, the Highwayman (played by Hassam Ghancy) who becomes his paid protector and eventual friend. During his travels he is attacked by bandits, dehydrated by thirst, rescued by Bedouins, and forced to retrace his route by a war-locked Red Sea.

Ibn Battuta finally joins the legendary Damascus Caravan with thousands of pilgrims bound for Mecca for the final leg of what would become his 5,000 mile, 18 month long journey to Mecca.

When he arrives in Mecca, he is a man transformed. We then experience the Hajj as he did over 700 years ago, and, in recognition of its timelessness, we dissolve to the Hajj as it is still performed today, by millions of pilgrims, in some of the most extraordinary and moving IMAX® footage ever presented.

Ibn Battuta would not return home for almost 30 years, reaching over 40 countries and revisiting Mecca five more times to perform the Hajj. He would travel three times farther
JOURNEY TO MECCA, ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

then Marco Polo. His legacy is one of the greatest travel journals ever recorded. A crater on the moon is named in his honour.

The Genesis

Bridging Islam and the Western world - words from the Producers.

The genesis of this film was to promote a better understanding of Islam in the West. At the same time, and as importantly, it is to present on the big screen the heart of Islamic heritage to the Muslim world. My personal view is that there is a sense that the Muslim world today is a little under-represented in the media except on political issues. What we want to do is showcase the cultural and spiritual and historical elements of the Islamic world in a non-political way. Dominic Cunningham-Reid.

Journey to Mecca is about peace because the Hajj is about peace. We want to look beyond what the Western media cover when there is a stampede at the Hajj. Think about the three-million people who come each year to participate in this extraordinary spiritual experience. At its core, the Hajj is a celebration of the Prophet Abraham. The Muslims believe that the Prophet Abraham and his son Ishmael built the Ka’bah on a site where there was originally a shrine built by the Prophet Adam. So we share in all of this – Christianity and Islam and Judaism. It is all part of the same story. Taran Davies.

“At the heart of the film is an epic adventure story about an exceptional and driven young man on his perilous year and a half long journey to perform the Hajj in Mecca in 1325, at an amazing time in Islamic history and culture. Ibn Battuta is one of the greatest travelers of all time, but largely unknown to Western audiences. In order to complement and underscore the timelessness of his spiritual quest, we have bookended the film with astounding, first-time ever IMAX® footage of the modern day Hajj, including inside the Holy Mosque and aerials. It is a compelling true story combined with the immersive and stunning IMAX® medium, and guarantees a totally unique and once in a lifetime experience for all audiences, Muslim and non-Muslim.” Jonathan Barker.

* * *

Little did Producers Dominic Cunningham-Reid and Taran Davies realize that when their paths crossed in New York that shortly thereafter, they would form a partnership to produce, with Jonathan Barker, a 45-minute film that would consume the next four years of their lives—the giant IMAX® film of Ibn Battuta’s epic journey circa 1325-1326 from Tangier to Mecca.

Cunningham-Reid previously made documentaries about conflict; Davies made documentaries focused on Islam. Together their talents combined to create a partnership resulting in the formation of Cosmic Picture in 2004, the company founded to make Journey to Mecca. Barker, the IMAX® filmmaking expert and President of SK Films, rounded out the production team in 2006.

Cunningham-Reid was fresh from working with George Butler on the “Making Of” for Butler’s Antarctic IMAX® film Shackleton’s Antarctic Adventure where he became
intrigued with the format. He wanted to do something new in the format other than nature and wild animals. He felt that IMAX® was an underutilized medium when dealing with subjects relating to people. In his and Davies’ early discussions, one of the subjects they both thought would work extremely well was the Hajj. “The reasons behind that were certainly the times we were living in, and the fact that after September 11th, there was a great hunger and real need for information about Islam in the West. To really shake up the format, we were willing to take a risk, go after something new and difficult and bring an Islamic story to the Giant Screen against all odds,” says Cunningham-Reid.

“The Hajj is a global conference that brings three million people from all over the Muslim world to one location every single year, an event uninterrupted for the last 1,400 years. Why not bring it to the giant screen and in the process find a way of telling the story of the Hajj to enlighten people about Islam and teach them about this extraordinary relatively unknown world to many people in the West,” says Davies. “The Hajj is the center of Islam, yet it is the least known element of it. It is the spiritual magnet that created the Islamic Silk Road.” His eureka moment came when the Hajj and the IMAX® format came together.

“One of our goals was to show the Hajj on the giant screen as a way to strip away barriers between cultures. And when it is there on that 25-metre high screen, it is so powerful, yet so peaceful. And that is one of the big things that struck us as non-Muslims, learning how harmonious the Hajj is. Three million people from around the world and all walks of life mixing together in peace,” says Davies.

The figure of Ibn Battuta leapt down from the centuries, as a vehicle for the story. “We wanted to package the film as an Islamic adventure and have the audience identify with the character of Ibn Battuta, who was a man with an open mind,” says Cunningham-Reid. When they learned that, at age 21, Ibn Battuta set off from his home in Tangier for Mecca, they had their perfect story arc. “We wanted the audience to step into the shoes of a young man who is setting out on this epic voyage risking his life to reach Mecca, and along the way we would learn about the Islamic World,” adds Davies.

**Heading for Saudi Arabia**

*How Hard Could It Be?*

Having taken the momentous decision to film the Hajj, Cunningham-Reid and Davies boarded a plane for Saudi Arabia. “How hard would it be to make a film in Saudi Arabia about the Hajj? That was the initial thinking. Well, we couldn’t have been more wrong,” recalls Cunningham-Reid.

“We were a foreign entity, a Western film company in Saudi Arabia, not Muslim, trying to do a giant screen film on the Hajj, the core of the Islamic faith. Of course we were met with suspicion, resistance, and inactivity to some extent.” Nothing happens overnight in Saudi Arabia, as they were about to learn.
They subsequently set off on a 2 ½ year odyssey to obtain permission to film what amounts to 10-minutes of footage at the beginning and ending of the 45-minute film, a journey Cunningham-Reid called, “A Million Cups of Tea.” In a feat of outstanding patience and perseverance, an epic courtship began, to develop the requisite friendships and contacts, to conduct business in Saudi Arabia-- not a process that goes right to the point as in the Western World, but rather conducted as a social occasion. So dedicated was he to the project, that Cunningham-Reid lived in Saudi Arabia for the entire period. “In Arab countries, you get things done by building friendships.”

Along with Casilda Uriarte, who was instrumental in the quest of building relationships, seeking permits, getting visas approved and spending time with supporters to help build confidence to come on board, Cunningham-Reid and Davies eventually secured the 85 permits needed to film in Mecca. “Even when we had the permits, most of the Saudi citizens doubted that we could get into Mecca with the IMAX® cameras and certainly nobody believed we could get close to the Grand Mosque from the air,” Cunningham-Reid recalls.

“It is almost impossible to communicate how hard it is to get something like this done in Saudi Arabia because you have to remember we’re there trying to make a film in the land that has no movie theatres and has no art galleries and has very little understanding of the movie business. On the basis of the trust that was built, we were able to move forward and get all the bits of paper that we needed. And every piece of paper was difficult to get. We invested everything in this project. It was like a 2 ½ year game of chess,” says Cunningham-Reid.

Meanwhile Cunningham-Reid and Davies set out to gain high-level endorsements for the film (See Appendices) and raise the necessary funds from a diverse group of international investors for what would become one of the most expensive and complicated productions in the history of IMAX® filmmaking.

“We set out to produce the greatest IMAX® film ever made about Islam and we needed to convince the investment community that we could pull this off, that it was actually possible to make a film about one of the most logistically complicated events on earth on one of the most challenging media formats in the world,” explains Davies.

Cunningham-Reid and Davies began by securing the support of some of the most influential people who are concerned about peace and relations between the Muslim and non-Muslim world. The team traveled by train across India to meet the Dalai Lama who agreed to lend his name to the project, as did Lord Carey of Clifton, the former Archbishop of Canterbury. They also secured the support of the Head of the Islamic Departments at George Washington University and the Head of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University.

Says Davies: “It took a few years, but fortunately over time we were blessed to find an array of investors who all made this film possible”.

SAYS DAVIES: “It took a few years, but fortunately over time we were blessed to find an array of investors who all made this film possible”. 
One of the early supporters of the film was co-producer Al-Zain Al-Sabah, Chairperson of the Kuwait-based production company, Eagle Vision Media Group. “There are film projects, and there are film revolutions. This is the latter,” says Co-producer Al Zain Al-Sabah. “Spiritually, aesthetically and professionally, this film involved me, rather than me becoming involved in this film. And it was only natural that I would attach myself to a project that spoke to me on so many different levels.”

Additional financing was provided by Dubai and Kuwait-based Desert Door Productions. Co-producer Dima Alansari says, “To me *Journey to Mecca* is one of those projects that is more than just a film. It is a lifetime project that has combined the energy of so many people who have come together to send a message of peace, to break the haunting barrier that has been built from daily watching of the news and to create a magical experience of what Islam is. I am so excited to see how Arabs from all over and the whole Muslim community will receive it. I am sure they will like it as never before has our religion been so well presented and on such a large format like IMAX®.”

“We want to bridge cultures,” says Alansari, whose company produces educational and historical films. An added appeal was that it was being shot in English and Arabic.

“Arabs want to know about their culture. A lot of Arabs don’t know about their history and they’re thirsting for the knowledge,” says Alansari, whose company was approached by Cunningham-Reid and Davies in early 2007. Their views meshed with the chairman Abdullah Al-Sabej and board member Dr. Fahad Alrashed, and Desert Door Productions became committed.

Executive Producer Jake Eberts brought the Moroccan company, Dounia Productions to the table through his long-time friend Othman Benjelloun. Their financial participation was spurred by their interest in making Ibn Battuta known to the whole world through the IMAX® film, and to give a more positive, peaceful and tolerant image of Islam. “We are confident it will be a spectacular, magnificent and unique movie that will be remembered by generations to come. We feel very proud, excited and honored to be involved in *Journey to Mecca*,” says Co-producer Dounia Benjelloun.

The production could not have accomplished anything without two prestigious organizations - The King Abdulaziz Public Library and King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies. “The subject matter of the film is very much their mandate, which is predominately the promotion of education around the Muslim world in matters of history, culture and science. “Through these ‘Blue Chip’ organizations, we were able to secure many levels of permission and they went to extraordinary lengths to support our ambitions in Mecca.

“It’s a privilege for me to thank Taran and Dominic, and also the other members of the team who have contributed to this wonderful effort. Certainly it’s been a voyage as interesting, if not as holy, as a pilgrimage to make this film. And if we remember people being designated for their efforts as being such and such of Arabia or India or any other place, definitely Dominic and Taran deserve that designation. They’re both “of Arabia”.

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“As you know, there is a verse in the Koran, which says that people coming to pilgrimage should not only devote themselves to their religious duties, but also to their inter-human relationships and a movie like this will definitely go further than any other effort to bring out the universality of faith and the universality of a belief that has transcended the time from Abraham all the way down to Muhammad.”

HRH Prince Turki Al Faisal, Chairman, The King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies

“We can truly describe this film as one facet of interaction between civilizations, in that it will allow those who are not Muslim themselves to see one aspect of the life of Muslims without an intermediary. It is hoped that this film will succeed in furthering the cause of peaceful cooperation and interaction between different peoples and nations; indeed, it represents a new form of intellectual cross-fertilization and indirect dialogue on the basis of thorough study and deep consideration.”

Faisal A. Al Muammar, General Supervisor, King Abdulaziz Public Library

The Filmmakers

In late 2005, Director Bruce Neibaur, who wrote and directed the IMAX® hit, Mysteries of Egypt, starring Omar Sharif, joined the team. “I loved the idea of shooting a dramatic narrative on the Golden Age of Islam,” says Neibaur, who also wrote the first drafts of the script based on the story concept of Cunningham-Reid and Davies. The producers’ reasons for doing the film were philosophically in line with mine. To do a film like this, you have the opportunity to introduce to audiences something that’s entertaining but also enlightening to help them understand one of the pillars of one of the great religions of the world.” Using as one of his sources, the translation of Ibn Battuta’s travels, The Rihla, written at the behest of the Sultan of Morocco more than 700 years ago, Neibaur notes, “I’ve always felt that Ibn Battuta was an interesting, complex fellow who was spiritual, but also had an adventurous spirit. So he combined those two passions into his 30-year sojourns into ancient foreign lands.”

"In the building of the script, the fictional character, the Highwayman, was developed. There were bandits and mercenaries on the road to Mecca, so the Highwayman is representative of any number of people that Battuta met along the way. We’re not trying to be 100% historically accurate to his journey, but we’re being faithful to the spirit of it,” says Neibaur.

At the same time, legendary Academy-Award-winning Jake Eberts, who was instrumental in helping to shape the project, agreed to serve as Executive Producer.

“I’m not interested in religion as religion, but I’m interested in religion as a culture,” says Eberts, whose fascination with the explorer Richard Burton, one of the first non-Muslims
who learned Arabic to sneak into Mecca, which led to his interest in the Hajj. “When Dominic and Taran came along with the idea of doing something that would finally explain not only the philosophy, but the physical challenge of the Hajj, it brought back all the ideas-- what it meant to someone in the 14th century in contrast to contemporary Mecca.

“As you get older in this business and you stand back a bit,” says the distinguished filmmaker, whose films have won 27 Academy Awards® and 65 Oscar® nominations, “you feel a compulsion to leave a mark and do something that will be important. It is not all about commerce, it is not all about making money, it is not all about movie stars, it is much more about having an impact. And so, when they had this idea that was impactful, it was important, it is something that the world has to know more about. And so I was hooked.”

“Ibn Battua is part of the fabric of Middle Eastern Culture,” says Eberts. “He traveled 75,000 miles as opposed to Marco Polo’s 25,000 miles. He was an astute observer of geography, flora, fauna, people he met, their history and culture, an extraordinary source of information. He best represents the voice of the journey to the Hajj. That voice is still being heard today.”

By October 2006, the producers needed to partner with a production company with considerable IMAX® experience due to the challenges of this film. They invited Jonathan Barker, President of Toronto-based SK Films to join the producing team.

While Cunningham-Reid was drinking endless cups of tea and Davies was raising financing, Barker brought on veteran supervising producer Di Roberts to form the production team with him. They made every effort to build the best possible team and to always strive for the highest quality knowing that this was a once in a lifetime opportunity to make a great film about something very important to the time in which we are living. Their first key hire was Daniel Ferguson as Line Producer, with broad experience in the Giant Screen industry and who speaks French, vital for the Moroccan crew.

Barker, who has specialized in producing and distributing award winning Giant Screen IMAX® films for over 15 years, says, “When Taran first pitched the project to me in 2006, I found it completely unique and totally different from any other IMAX® project I had been involved with. I also knew it would be the most challenging film to produce with difficulties at every turn. The subject matter of both Ibn Battuta’s adventure and the Hajj, is ideally suited to the medium in many ways, because it is a big subject. It involved going to Mecca and shooting contemporary footage of the longest running congregation of humans annually on planet earth – the Hajj – and I wanted to be a part of something that had that sense of spectacle and importance.” He also liked the fundamental idea behind it: to present this film as a way of building bridges and understanding for non-Muslims, and for Muslims to be able to participate in giving the gift of celebrating something so important to them.
The Screenplay

When Cunningham-Reid and Davies envisioned the concept for the film, it seemed like an obvious winner and audience pleaser. A compelling adventure story of one of the world’s greatest travelers, focusing on his first journey to Mecca – the most holy place of Islam – celebrating a great Muslim hero and introducing non-Muslims to a remarkable man whom most had not heard of before and taking them to amazing places they had never seen before in the immersive IMAX® medium.

While their original vision has been achieved, the process was anything but straightforward, over 55 drafts later and a with a team of writers, script editors and experts, and a tremendous amount of co-ordination. “Dominic and Taran’s vision and passion for the project was infectious,” says Barker, “but part of my, Diane and Daniel’s job was to temper that enthusiasm with the reality of this massive undertaking within the budget and schedule. I saw immediately that the challenges of telling this unique story using IMAX® technology would be considerable.”

When Barker asked Wendy MacKeigan to co-ordinate the scripting process and be one of the story editors, she responded “Let me get this straight: you Producers want to achieve, in a mere 45 minutes, a highly entertaining, compelling, dramatic adventure story told like a conventional feature film, using actors and on-screen dialogue - not commonplace in the traditional IMAX® format-and with character arc and transformation, a period piece set in the 14th century, traversing many remote locations and ending up in 21st century Mecca with millions experiencing the many rites of the Hajj which will need some explaining, satisfying the many experts on Ibn Battuta, and those on 14th century culture, architecture and on Islam and the Hajj then and now?” Barker smiled and nodded “Yes!”

Bruce Neibaur had produced over 10 drafts and great progress had been made, but as he started to turn his attention to his major and complex directorial duties, the Producers thought it would add valuable perspective and a more authentic voice to bring in an experienced writer steeped in Middle Eastern culture. Building bridges is very much on the agenda of author Tahir Shah, who has an Afghan father and English, partly Indian mother. “My family is from the East and the West,” says the renowned author of more than a dozen books, several documentary films and champion of what he calls “The East-West Bridge.” Says Shah, “After 9/11, I think that there’s a responsibility to show the east to the west, and the west to the east. This film became very important to me because that’s exactly what it is doing.”

Shah had always known about the story of Ibn Battuta. “It had always been a favorite, a slice of history,” notes the author whose books include In Arabian Nights, The Caliph’s House and A Year in Casablanca. Shah reinterpreted Bruce Neibaur’s original script, keeping the main story, but heightening the characters’ emotions, on the journey, in Mecca and in the scenes dealing with Islam.
As a former travel writer, Shah empathized with Ibn Battuta. “I think he’s there inside all of us as a dreamer. Look how far his dreams took him. I think the Highwayman is inside all of us as well. He’s the man who questions faith, who at the same time is a father figure to Ibn Battuta. I think he understood Ibn Battuta when Ibn Battuta couldn’t understand himself. There is sensitivity between the Highwayman and Ibn Battuta because Ibn Battuta needed the Highwayman more than the Highwayman needed him. But at the end, they were both affected by each other. That makes for a very powerful story. You have two divergent people, who, in the end, change each other.” “We built in dramatic transformation, and both Battuta and our fictional Highwayman are changed by this journey,” says Barker.

“I think that 14th century Mecca and 21st century Mecca will intercut beautifully,” says Shah. “There’s one reason why. It is not about what Mecca looks like, it is not about the faces, it is about the spirit of the people who are performing the Hajj. The Hajj is a time of being on a pilgrimage to Mecca to perform the rites, and the feelings of Muslims when they’re in Mecca. Your body is there but your mind is with God and that’s a very difficult thing to explain to Westerners.”

Concludes Shah, “I think the Eastern World and the Western World will see completely different things in the film. For the Orient it will be a celebration of faith and of an icon, an incredibly important Muslim traveler. The extent of his travels is mesmerizing. At the same time, I think the West will learn from this film, because, in a subtle way, they will receive an understanding of what Islam is about, more than they have now. I think we can all learn from each other. This film is giving a solid contribution to that end.”

Screenwriter and Director Ruba Nadda made a very important contribution as a script consultant following the drafts from Shah. Working with MacKeigan and Barker, she helped strengthen the dialogue and dramatic moments of the film and brought a lyrical quality to Battuta’s words.

Finally, screenwriter Carl Knutson rounded out the writing team. “Wendy and Jonathan brought me in briefly at the earlier draft screenplay stage to work on structure and Ibn Battuta’s character profile and beats. I came back in to the process more significantly at the rough cut picture editing stage, by which time the major story beats were already in place. My task was refining Ibn Battuta’s voice-over. One of my instructions was that Battuta’s first person voice come from his 14th century travel journal – The Rihla – whenever possible. The most challenging aspect of the writing was finding the real voice of a young 14th century man on a both a spiritual quest and a search for knowledge and adventure – while making him accessible to a modern audience.”

“Another goal for us was to do more research on the journey itself as the 14th century world that Ibn Battuta traveled through was incredibly colourful - from the magnificence of the Damascus Caravan and the rich culture of Cairo, to the deadly threats our hero faced in the desert. After many drafts, the last refinements came out of creative suggestions from all of the Producers, the Director and the writing and script editing
team. When all was said and done there were over 20 drafts written in post-production alone.”

From the pre-production through to completion of the film, the script benefitted tremendously from the input of multi-talented Line Producer and Script Editor - and former theology student - Daniel Ferguson. His creativity and experience as a writer, combined with his experience in both production and distribution of IMAX films, resulted in him making many valuable contributions to the script.

The script was a collaborative and massive team effort involving not only the writing and script editing team, and some of the world’s leading experts on Ibn Battuta including Ross Dunn, Tim Mackintosh-Smith, and Dr. A Tazi but the Producers as well. Barker and Davies in particular vetted most major drafts in detail. “When you think that this film could be playing in some theatres for over 20 years, combined with the responsibility to handle the subject with deep respect, the writing team and producers all worked very hard to try to get this just right,” says Barker.

The film credits are shown over selections from ancient manuscripts based on the travel journal of Ibn Battuta, with its beautiful calligraphy. The original version can be viewed today at the National Library in Paris.

**Casting: Searching for Ibn Battuta**

Casting Director Kate Dowd worked alongside Barker, Davies and Neibaur while they searched for actors who spoke both English and classical Arabic. “This involved auditioning just about anyone who had been in a film from this region stretching from Morocco up into Europe,” says Neibaur. Finding the right actor to play Ibn Battuta was a struggle. Many fine actors were auditioned, but for various reasons they didn’t have all the required qualities.

When Chems Eddine Zinoun walked in the door to audition for a smaller part in the film, he had no idea his life was going to change. “Chems had an immediate presence. That’s a gift. That’s something you are born with. It also comes from his upbringing and background. He was regal without being stuffy and carried himself in such an elegant and poised way,” recalls Neibaur.

After the initial audition, Zinoun was invited to come back in an hour and read for the role of Ibn Battuta. Neibaur was pretty sure they had their lead, but still, the search continued for someone more experienced and mainstream. However, after the third call back with the director and the producers, they felt that Zinoun was superb and had all the requisite qualities and the search was over. His presence in front of the camera was undeniable and he won the role in February 2008.

Playing Ibn Battuta seemed to be his destiny for, after going on the internet to do some research, Zinoun discovered that before Ibn Battuta began his travels, he had the same name as his, Shams Al-Din. “I’m half Berber and Ibn Battuta was a Berber. He’s from
my country and is a grand personage, I feel very proud,” said Zinoun, who was playing his first lead role in a film. “It is a magnificent experience. I am very lucky,” said the 27-year-old actor/dancer.

“When I’m on the set, I forget present time. I discover how people lived and traveled the desert and crossed mountains, many dying en route to go to the Hajj.” He added, with a mischievous smile, “Battuta was a bit of a Casanova. He married in many of the cities he traveled through. He was a lover of life, that’s what gave him the power to travel. We are all Ibn Battuta’s. We all can go to China and discover the unknown.”

“The entire production team was in awe of Chems’ performance as Ibn Battuta” said Jonathan Barker. “He became Ibn Battuta. He spoke with a quiet confidence. He insisted on doing all his own stunts, he knew horsemanship but learned to ride camels, swordfight and endure endless takes in costume in the hot sun always in great spirits. His great agility as a dancer was apparent as he jumped on and off horses and camels with ease. One of my favorite moments of the day was teasing him over the ongoing trials of the shoot and having a laugh in French with Chems and Hassam, our Highwayman.”

Chems also spent endless hours with acclaimed Dialect Coach Samia Adnan, a Sudanese, who worked on Rendition and Syria, and has another connection to Ibn Battuta. She translated excerpts from Ibn Battuta’s original travelogue for Wellesley College in the U.S. She worked with Chems for many months and was very impressed by his concentration, hard work and perseverance. “He was so open, fun and easy to work with, so responsive and respectful.”

“I have never seen anyone in my 30 years of directing work harder in a role,” recalls Neibaur. “And with such patience, focus, wit and gentleness. He gave his all in his performance and was an absolute pleasure to work with. You don’t often become friends with an actor but Chems became a friend.”

“The success of this film depends in no small measure on the performance of Chems as Ibn Battuta,” says Davies, “and we could not be happier with his excellent work.”

UPDATE
Shortly after completing his extraordinary work on the film, Chems Eddine Zinoun passed away on November 12th, 2008 after a tragic car accident in Casablanca. “The Producers, director Bruce Neibaur and the entire production team deeply regret the death of this wonderful actor and exceptional person,” says Cunningham-Reid. (Please see attached Press Release and his full Bio in appendices, and EKP for further information.)

The Highwayman

The other main character, the Highwayman, is a composite of a variety of people Ibn Battuta would have encountered on his travels. For literary purposes, he has been bundled into one person.
When Moroccan-born actor Hassam Ghancy first read the draft script, he felt it was just another job. But when he thought about it, he realized that the script had been written to show the world about an amazing traveler and also gave insight into what Islam is about. The Paris-based Muslim actor says, “In this story there’s a small story, which is a human story between two totally different guys who discover they have something in common. In some way Battuta and the Highwayman are the same. The Highwayman is intrigued by Battuta and what the power of faith gives him. The Highwayman’s power is his courage. When I play a character like this I have to go inside and find the tough and bad part of me and look at the world from this point of view.”

“The decision to hire Hassam was immediate and universal by the casting team. He came in and auditioned for the Highwayman in Paris. That was a no-brainer,” says Neibaur. “When you get to know Hassam, he really is that Highwayman. He’s very intelligent and has tremendous screen presence. His disarming smile and the ability to be both skeptical and sincere, and to go through a change is a great contrast both in appearance and personality to Chems. So the combination really worked.” Chems and Hassam became friends both in the film’s story and in real life.

Ibn Muzaffar

Distinguished actor Nadim Sawalha (Syriana, Captain Abu Raed-Jordan’s entry for the 2009 Oscar race) added gravitas by joining the cast to play Ibn Muzaffar, a small but pivotal role.

Sawalha has personal and professional connections with the story of Ibn Battuta, whom he knew about since childhood. When he was in his 20’s in London, he was asked by a Sudanese writer to do an hour on Ibn Battuta. More recently, he was the narrator voice of Ibn Battuta in Travels with a Tangerine, the BBC4 television production which traced Battuta’s travels all over the world.

Sawalha was happy to be in Journey to Mecca, because it threw a different light on Ibn Battuta from previous portrayals that he had seen. “I think it is a very wise idea to do this film in relation to modern Islam and the Hajj because all of that is a mystery to an international audience. I think the Muslim audiences will love it, and the Christians and other religions will be very curious about seeing it.”

Hamza

Nabil Elouahabi, fresh from HBO’s The Path to 9/11 and best-known from UK’s EastEnders, was hired to play Hamza, Battuta’s best friend.

Elouahabi explains that The Hajj is very much part of his life, even though he was born in London. He has fulfilled his duties as the eldest son by paying for both his Tangier-born parents to go the Hajj. “It is something I wanted to honor,” says the actor whose grandfather was an Imam in a village outside Tangier who performed the Hajj four times.
“Hamza is another character who highlights Ibn Battuta’s determination to travel alone, he’s obviously very brave. All of that made for a very tempting enterprise,” says the ebullient actor.

Ben Kingsley

The Producers were thrilled when Executive Producer Jake Eberts brought the acclaimed and internationally-renowned actor, Ben Kingsley on board as the film’s English language narrator. One of England's most respected stage actors, Ben Kingsley became world famous after his Oscar-winning performance as Best Actor, for his portrayal as Indian leader Gandhi in the 1982 film *Gandhi*. Since *Gandhi* he has played numerous lead and supporting roles in films, in addition to numerous stage productions in England and the U.S. Kingsley’s other Oscar nominations include for * Bugsy* (1991), *Sexy Beast* (2000) and *The House of Sand and Fog* (2003).

SAUDI ARABIA

Filming Mecca, December, 2007

The Hajj is the Pilgrimage to Mecca. The rites of the Hajj have been the same for 1,400 years. Everyone becomes equal at the Hajj. There is no difference between the rich and the poor. The pilgrim circumnavigates the Ka’bah seven times counterclockwise. The circumambulation of the Ka’bah is called the Tawaf.

The Ka’bah, a cube-shaped building located inside the mosque at Mecca, is the holiest place in Islam. The mosque was built around the original Ka’bah, which, according to the Qu’ran, was built by Abraham and his son Ishmael. Islamic traditions assert that the Ka’bah was first built by the first man, the Prophet Adam.

The Hajj is about forgiveness and mercy; renewal and rebirth. During the Hajj, people meet from around the world, which is the essence of the Ibn Battuta story, fascinated as he was by religion and cultural diversity.

“We went to great lengths to make this a Muslim production in Mecca. The beauty of the project was that we empowered a Muslim team to go into Mecca and do something that has never been done before – to bring the Hajj to the giant screen. This is an honor they will wear for generations the impact of which we are yet to see,” says Cunningham-Reid.

Supervising Producer Diane Roberts’ and Line Producer Daniel Ferguson began setting up the Saudi Arabia shoot of Mecca in October 2007 with production headquartered in Jeddah. The crewing of the film was a Herculean task because Ferguson had to find three local crews to shoot in Mecca, all had to be Muslim and all had to have knowledge of film. The production brought in eight Westerners. The total Muslim crew in Saudi
Arabia numbered 85, all of whom had to be trained in less than a month before the Hajj began on December 17th. Ferguson hired his first crew member on November 15th and the rest followed. His enthusiastic crew worked seven days a week in two shifts from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 a.m. for four sleep-deprived weeks.

“Everything was difficult. We had to obtain permits to get permits, permits for meetings; sand bags, cars, things we take for granted in the West,” says Ferguson, who, along with the other Westerners, was extremely moved the moment the Muslim crew went into Mecca. “They worked so hard to get there and suddenly the moment was there,” says Ferguson.

“It is certainly the most challenging film I’ve ever been involved in,” agrees Barker who has worked on films where IMAX® cameras were put on a space shuttle and sent up to dock with the Mir Space Station. “But this one was extraordinarily difficult and complicated because, first of all, we had to have an all-Muslim crew and to date there have been very few Muslims with experience in the IMAX® medium, so we had to train them. We were fortunate to find three really wonderful and talented Muslim Cinematographers: Ghasem Ebrahimian, Afshin Javadi and Rafey Mahmood. We flew them to Los Angeles and trained for a week. Diane Roberts and Dave Douglas ran the training programme. Douglas an award winning director who has shot over 60 IMAX® films, has trained many of the Astronauts to shoot in space and is renowned for his expertise in training for the IMAX® medium. And then we had to train a whole support crew.”

“All of the non-Muslim producers, director and support waved goodbye to the buses as they went into Mecca. It was a very strange feeling, waving goodbye to 85 people at the checkpoint where you have to show your pass to get into Mecca,” says Barker.

“When filming an IMAX® project, one can anticipate a great deal of planning and patience, due to the enormous size and complexity of the equipment. What I didn’t expect were the challenges we faced working around millions of Hajj pilgrims, in many cases, making the most important journey of their lives, the pilgrimage to Islam’s holiest site, the Ka’bah. Initially, the process seemed arduous and frustrating, until I looked beyond the chaos and discovered how the pilgrims flowed, not as many, but as one. Once my crew and I began going with “the flow,” both figuratively and literally, we managed to capture the essence and the beauty of Hajj. I went as far as doing a steadicam shot of the holy Ka’bah, while circumambulating it with tens of thousands of pilgrims, a shot never done before. The footage was mesmerizing and monumental,” said Afshin Javadi.

Rafey Mahmood stated that “The desert opened its arms and welcomed us. I felt my unit members were like fellow travellers on a cosmic journey. We had come to witness, record and share an age long spiritual practice of great inner and outer movements and we were happy to be doing it on the wondrous IMAX. The promise of sharing these great images on the biggest screen kept me inspired each day. One night waves of faithful pilgrims went around the holy Ka’bah in Tawaaf, as we tried to calculate a time lapse shot from one of the minarets. Can this event be a symbolic replica of some timeless
pulsation of our reality? But one thing I knew for certain-in crossing the Arabian Sea from Mumbai, I had covered an important part of my own journey as an Indian Muslim and as a Cinematographer. I welcome all to Journey to Mecca!”

“We made every effort to find the very best Muslim filmmakers and train them up for this honorable and important task. Many came back with shaved heads and in tears at their achievement,” says Cunningham-Reid. The Muslims who made it their own, achieved something profound and artistic. Every shot was difficult. Every shot was a triumph. It is the equivalent of training the Astronauts to shoot IMAX® in outer space. “The Saudi footage will enhance the fictional footage,” says Ferguson. “There was a force behind it. It was a shoot that was meant to happen.”

How do you direct an IMAX® film when you’re 10 miles away from the location?

“How do you direct an IMAX® film when you’re 10 miles away from the location?

“First of all we created a book called the Hajj Filming Plan with maps of all locations and camera positions to show the Saudi officials the exact locations in Mecca for permission for camera placement,” says Barker. “Each camera position was pre-established and permits issued for each setup. Getting into camera positions was an amazing challenge because the crews had to fight their way through a crowd of three million people with all their gear to a camera position and basically hope that it was available when they got there. Sometimes a camera position was unavailable because a crowd was jammed up against it or it was roped off and we couldn’t get in. In one case an elevator didn’t work to a high location. There were so many challenges.

“As he communicated off-site with the three Cinematographers, the director ticked off the daily shot list, prepared from thousands of photographs and videos gathered in advance by the Muslim documentary filmmakers (1st assistant director in Mecca) Ovidio Salzar and Omer Faruk Aksoy, who had scouted specific camera positions in Mecca.

To be as close to Mecca as possible, the production tried to work out of a temporary camp set up in a traffic island nestled in a cloverleaf where the highway curled down into the checkpoint. When caterers would not come and showers could not be set up and toilets would not flush, the site was abandoned for a more reliable sports camp where Neibaur rose at 1:00 a.m., 2:00 a.m. and 5:00 a.m to see his camera crews off each morning.

Three weeks before filming Mecca, the production lost the promised helicopter from an oil company. It was impossible to bring one in given civilian helicopters are not permitted in the country. Cunningham-Reid approached The Royal Saudi Air Force for their vital assistance at the eleventh hour and the production was fortunate that they agreed to provide their exclusive services. Although the
pilots were accustomed to documentary crews flying a single orbit or a fly by, it had to be explained that the IMAX® camera had three minutes of film and therefore they had to fly past many many times. A 38-year-old Huey Vietnam era helicopter, given to the production for a week, came flying over the mountains. The pilots were very enthusiastic and willing to learn IMAX® film flying quickly. Every time they were asked to fly a little bit closer to the grand mosque, they went a little bit closer and ended up just beyond the minarets. “They did a wonderful job and were very honoured and proud to serve in this capacity. And again we formed wonderful friendships in the process,” says Cunningham-Reid.

“It was the first time ever the Saudi Arabian authorities allowed any camera to be that close to the Ka’bah from the air. We almost touched the minarets when we shot the Tawaf (the circumambulation of the Ka’bah),” says one of the cinematographers, Ghasem Ebrahimian, who directed the pilot to fly counterclockwise to follow the Tawaf. His vision from the helicopter was to see the pilgrims flowing like a poetic river. “Seeing people from some 100 different countries all merge in one spot like a flowing river was quite an event. Some have saved their whole lives to get there,” says Ebrahimian, who mounted the IMAX® camera on the side of the craft while inside he used video assist.

“Altogether the helicopter made 20 flight paths over Mecca over five days, shooting a total of 60 minutes of film,” says Ebrahimian. “As the IMAX® film magazine lasts for a little over two minutes, we had to come back to base and reload. We would change film while the helicopter was still running and then we would take off and do more shots. If the pilots would shut the engine each time we landed, it would be counted as the end of that sortie. For every sortie, there were no more than three reloads while the engine was running.”

“That was quite an experience to see people who had clearly saved up their entire life to make that voyage. It was wonderful,” echoes the director who, outside Mecca, captured footage of pilgrims coming in from various parts of the world, arriving by plane, in addition to a shipload of pilgrims from Sudan. “Traffic in Mecca during the Hajj was so congested, it took seven to eight hours to drive what normally took 15 minutes. Ultimately, everyone just walked.”

“The more you get to know it and understand the Hajj, the more you recognize its simple beauty and its contribution to human civilization,” says Cunningham-Reid.

**MOROCCO**

Agadir, Erfoud and Ouarzazat double for The Red Sea, Damascus and Mecca
Filmed April 8-May 14, 2008

Scorpions, snakes, spiders, serpents, sandstorms and sun presented minor challenges in Morocco compared to the rigours of shooting in Saudi Arabia. Roberts and Ferguson, with their usual vigor, spearheaded the production and opened offices in February, 2008, in Ouarzazate, located on a plain adjacent to the Atlas Mountains.
“Morocco was more of a conventional feature film shoot, but it is always more challenging in IMAX® because you’ve got big heavy equipment (fully loaded, the IMAX® camera weighs 85 pounds) and 1000-foot loads which translate into three minutes of time of having the camera running before you have to stop and reload. So, in that sense, it is more challenging than shooting a conventional feature film,” says Barker, an IMAX® eminence.

“In fact, there were at least three major challenges in Morocco. The first was filming the war zone in the Red Sea, another was choreographing one of the largest camel caravans ever filmed, while the most magnificent was building a historical recreation of Mecca, circa 1325, and training 450 extras to perform the Hajj in a form acceptable to all Muslims.”

**Mecca in Morocco**

The largest and most important set in *Journey to Mecca* was the Mecca re-creation; nestled in a sandy valley hidden behind the film studios in Ouarzazate. As one arrives at the lip of the hill overlooking the site, Mecca emerges into view, preceded by the 76-foot high minaret.

It took 200 workers 10 weeks to complete this monumental task. The two-acre area resembled a major building site with trucks, bulldozers and diggers sending billowing clouds of dust as they shifted 3,000 tons of earth to level the land.

The vaulted arches descended into 161 columns marbleized by local artisans who learned the art from Italian filmmakers. Each column was topped with gold embossed capitals while the cornice edging the colonnade was brown and highlighted with gold accents. Crestallations crowned the imposing edifice.

In the center of the mosque is the Ka’bah, covered by the Kiswah – a black silk cloth decorated with calligraphy, which, in Mecca, is replaced annually. Four men took four weeks to sew together the Kiswah and 16 men hauled it up with ropes, leaving one side open to stitch. The silky black fabric was backed by Hessian to give it added strength.

“The Ka’bah has been very challenging, partly because, from what our experts tell us, there really isn’t a precise architectural recording of what the Mosque and the Ka’bah looked like in 1326,” says Barker.

Production Designer Mike Fowlie and the team of researchers worked hard to gather information coming from various sources and make decisions for the construction of the Mecca set. The 14th century was a huge challenge in the absence of specific information in a single volume, so a collective effort ensued with participants in Saudi Arabia under the guidance of the King Abdulaziz Public Library and King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic Studies as well as the notable expert Professor Nasser bin Ali Al-Harthy,
JOURNEY TO MECCA, ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Umm Al-Qura University, author of seven books on Mecca, and the esteemed Moroccan expert Dr. Tazi.

As for clothing for the Hajj, the men were draped in two pieces of unsown white cotton, one three meters long and the other two meters. The top half is Rida and the bottom half is Nida. Historically, no personal possessions were allowed so that everyone remained equal. The women wore tunics and headscarves to cover the entire body except the face and hands, according to Costume Designer Emma Bellocq.

Imams Abdullah Bellah, Monlay Abdessalam Alaoui and his assistant Omar Almoustaghfer from the Scientific and Religious Centre of Ouazazate, a representative office of the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs for the Kingdom of Morocco, organized local and regional training sessions for pilgrims for the Hajj. They were the perfect choice to train the 450 extras performing the Hajj rituals in the film and were careful to practice the Hajj rituals in the correct way.

The Greatest Camel Caravan since Lawrence of Arabia

Shimmering heat waves and swirls of desert dust unfurled from the re-creation of the historical Great Damascus Camel Caravan, which stretched for a mile along the horizon. Almost 1,000 animals and over 500 extras were choreographed into a line meandering through the dunes and across the barren wastes, evoking the era of 783 years before.

“The pilgrimage caravan is one extraordinary example of Islamic cultural heritage that has been lost to the world forever, and which we wanted to bring back to life on an unprecedented scale on the giant screen”, says Davies. “We hope that this sequence in the film, when Ibn Battuta joins the Damascus pilgrimage caravan to Mecca, will resonate deeply with the Muslim audience as many of their forefathers would have taken this or a similar journey. We also hope it will provide a perfect window into the wonders of Islamic culture and its contribution to human civilization for a non Muslim audience.

Historically, caravans could be up to 30,000 to 40,000 camels strong, with two weeks passing between the first and last leaving the gates of Damascus. The size of a small moving city, they were run like one, from the leading Emir or Caravan Captain, pilgrims, torch bearers, physicians, lawyers, soldiers, mounted Mameluks, medical assistants, traders, servants, musicians, merchants, citizens of all classes in addition to camel, goat and donkey handlers. In those days, pilgrims would travel by foot, camel or horse for up to three years to reach Mecca with no guarantees of reaching their destination or of returning home. Ibn Battuta took 18 months to get to Mecca from Tangier. Everyone traveled at great personal risk dealing with heat, exhaustion and bandits. But the faith pulled them to Mecca.

“When you’re sitting on a camel in 52 degrees centigrade and Mecca is a thousand miles away, the admiration you feel for people willing to make that journey is overwhelming. And now we’re living the jet age Hajj in which people fly,” says Cunningham-Reid.
Preparing *Journey to Mecca* caravan began six weeks prior to the shoot, with local artisans stitching camel and donkey packs, palanquins (covered litter) in addition to making all the period props such as bows and arrows, flags, goat skin water packs, saddle covers, spears, shields, tents, reed urns and grain baskets, to name but a few artifacts.

**Camel Capers**

Loading the camels on the day was “epic” according to Art Director Phil Murphy. Three hundred camels linked in groups of three and four were each brought to their knees in turn by their 80 camel wranglers to be loaded with the double packs or palanquins. Unaccustomed to such large and floppy accoutrements, the camels would shake them off. Once one camel stood up, all the others would rise and they would have to be cut loose. Eventually they got used to the unwieldy loads and stayed in line. At first Murphy was terrified and was trying to load the packs at a distance of two yards, but by day three he was taking the lead rein and bringing the camels to their knees and flinging packs over their backs. “In the end, I began to like them. They were quite obliging, despite their slobbering, kicking, screaming and bucking.” Other camels had been trained to move on “action” so one had to be careful as one assistant director discovered to his chagrin when he shouted “action” and a camel took off with the lead actor.

Along with his own aristocratic ‘white’ camels, the Animal Wrangler Joël Proust, who also worked as the Stunt Coordinator, collected the camels from as far as 200 miles away. He transported some camels by truck but often walked them 25 miles overnight to the next desert location. Six hundred sheep and goats in addition to horses and donkeys were added to the mix.

**Caravan Choreography**

Second Assistant Director Richie Goodwin applied straightforward mathematics to break down the almost 1,000 animals and over 500 extras into 12 groups of 35 people, 25 camels, three donkeys and 50 goats under the headings of Poor, Standard, Rich and Very Rich. For example in the Rich category, there was a mix of pilgrims, water carriers, camel handlers, a Qadi, his servant, an Imam, the Imam’s servant, Muezzin, Koranic camel, and musicians. A Poor group included pilgrims, merchants, water carriers, camel handlers and a blacksmith. Ibn Battuta was included in a Standard group featuring Battuta, pilgrims, merchants, water carriers, strong camel handler, goat handler, eight camel handlers and a torchbearer. The groups were numbered from 1 to 12 and sent out in number order. The yawning of the camels and braying of the donkeys added an authentic voice to the proceedings.

“The two kinds of danger for the caravan were bandits on the outside and internal strife on the inside. That’s why there were lawyers,” points out Costume Designer Emma Bellocq. To easily distinguish the different characters in the caravan, she had the professions grouped together. As an overall look for the caravan, we chose vibrant colours, separating out the classes. She imagined the caravan like a painting. In the distance, the palanquins punctuated the horizon.
JOURNEY TO MECCA, ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Damascus

Set against the abandoned French Legion Headquarters, Fort Zara, the art department brought the ruins back to life by adding roofs, and carting in every single stick of set dressing from market stalls, artificial palm trees, the caravan luggage, carpet coverings, bales of straw, green hay, Bedouin tents, carpet and interior dressing for the tents; to camp fires, flags, palm fronds, large and medium sized baskets, spices, bamboo chicken cages and chicken baskets and horse blankets. Colourful period costumes helped to recreate the hustle and bustle of the marketplace and engender the energy of the caravan gathering together.

The Red Sea

When a hotheaded Ibn Battuta, against the Highwayman’s advice, heads to the Red Sea where he thinks he’ll take a shortcut to Mecca, he comes across a scene of devastation and is forced to retrace his steps. The Mediterranean outside Agadir doubled for the Red Sea.

To create the war zone in the Red Sea, Art Director Phil Murphy rehabilitated five decommissioned fishing boats, linked by a pulley system to one-ton concrete blocks set 200 yards out on the beach at low tide. This allowed him to haul the boats out to the picture perfect spot where they would be the basis for digital alteration in postproduction. One hour later, the ships suffered serious alteration themselves in the rough Mediterranean surf which destroyed the carefully restored boats before the camera was set up. Masts and yardarms stuck in the sand disappeared four hours later at high tide. Undeterred and ever-inventive, Murphy resurrected all the elements of the wrecked boats: cargo, chests, items of clothing, masts and yardarms, and reassembled them just in time for the matte shot at 3:00 p.m. Grins Murphy, “The upside was that the wrecked boats, although in bits, were still chained and these elements were used for CGI reference points.”

The Nile

Filmmakers are nothing if inventive. Need a river? We’ll create one. Need a sailboat? We’ll build one. Need it to travel along a river? We’ll connect it to a two-way cable. To transport Ibn Battuta and The Highwayman down the Nile en route to Cairo, the ingenious art department dammed a trickle of a stream four inches deep which rose to six feet two days later, deep enough to launch the ton-and-a-half Egyptian Felucca built in studio. To draw the boat up and down the river, they sunk eight standard plastic garbage cans filled with concrete through which were threaded three-quarters of a mile of cable which was attached to the boat. Two winches pulled the boat up and down the river, five men on each winch. “Well, it won’t win America’s Cup, but it might win a few hearts”.


The Cairo Library
For the library, where Ibn Battuta, The Highwayman and Ibn Muzaffar rendezvous, an ornate Egyptian set was required. Local artisans carved the library doors, windows and adornments using soft wood brought in from the coast. (All other set wood was imported from Sweden.) All the tiles were hand painted in the period style.

The colour palette, texture and tone
When Ibn Battuta starts off in North Africa, the colours are subdued. White, beige, off white, brown, earth and desert colours predominate. The materials are linen, wool and cotton. When he arrives in Egypt, the grandeur of Ibn Mustapha’s library and the wildly busy souk in Cairo contrast with his earlier neutral environment in Tangier. There is a touch of silk and an explosion of colour. Damascus is even richer, brighter and bigger, as the energy rises. Fur, silk, brocade and taffeta make an appearance. His journey climbs to a crescendo in Mecca, which is predominately pure white sparkled with colour.

To visually create a hot, dry and dusty look and convey the desolation and the harsh environment for the travelers, Director of Photography Matthew Williams kept to desert tones, overexposing the film to desaturate the colours. “The choices that you make on the other side of the camera with production design and wardrobe have a big influence on the look of the film. We help pick those looks and colours and then try to enhance it. It is like a musical score, the ebb and flow of choice,” says Williams.

Costumes and More Costumes
Moroccan-born Costume Designer Emma Bellocq was thrilled to take on the project because Ibn Battuta is part of her cultural heritage. She had only five weeks as of Feb. 21st to prepare the 1,347 costumes for the film. “The script is fantastic. It is our story. We learned about him in school. We’re involved a little more because it is our history. It is not every day you get a project like this.”

Bellocq is very proud that all the costumes were 100% made in Morocco. The main cast’s costumes, and the rich merchants in the caravan were all hand made. For three weeks Bellocq and her wardrobe coordinator Mona Houd researched the internet for 14th century clothing. “It was very hard. There is a lot of documentation about the 18th and 19th century but not much about the 14th century. To design the clothes, we must be close to the story,” says Bellocq, whose main sources were museum sites including the Bibliothèque de Paris which enshrines Battuta’s original journals; the Damascus Museum, the National Museum of Cairo and Turkish websites on the Ottoman period. In the 14th Century, in North Africa there was a strong Arab influence in Spain, while in south Morocco, the Berbers predominated. The costumes are a mix of these two different influences.

Bellocq verified the costumes with an Ibn Battuta specialist in Tangier, Dr. Hasheb, a specialist on the era. The Ibn Battuta robes were typically Moroccan of the period. “We
asked the doctor many questions. We didn’t want to make any mistakes, especially for Mecca.”

**IMAX® isn’t for sissies**

“This film is more physical than another other picture I’ve ever worked on because of the harsh environment, climbing 2000-foot mountains carrying bulky equipment, slogging through sand and rising at 4:30 a.m. to drive 50 miles for a sunset shot, the perfect time to shoot it,” says Key Grip George “Bubba” Sheffield who hails from California with more than 40 productions to his credit. Grips are responsible for “gripping” the camera to whatever edifice or vehicle is required to get the shot.

“It seems like every rock has a sharp edge or rolls out from under your foot. Add to this poisonous snakes, six-inch wide spiders, with long gold legs and burnished yellow bodies ‘built for speed,’ a few scorpions and Praying Mantis, every time you kick a rock you look for something. It gets to the point where you don’t care and just hope not to see anything nasty,” says Sheffield. Snapping camels were additional hazards.

“We’re always moving things around, building a dolly track or setting up the crane.” For the 60-metre dolly shots, Sheffield’s crew had to level the ground which turned to dust when they laid down the tracks. They set up the 21-foot crane almost every day. “When the director wanted to sit with the cinematographer on the crane, we had to accommodate two six-foot tall men plus the IMAX® camera, a total of 500 pounds,” says Sheffield. At a two to four times ratio, this means 2000 pounds of counterweight had to placed at the opposite end of the crane. Sheffield, The tiniest movement shakes the crane Sheffield also had to fight 40 mph gusts. “With 10 men each carrying two 30-pound counterweights, it is uphill both ways,” says Sheffield.

“It was a wonderful experience to be on set with crew from around the world. We were like a mini UN with well over 20 nationalities and many different faiths represented, and the majority of the cast and crew could speak several languages. French is widely spoken in Morocco and it was essential that many of the Western crew, like Daniel Ferguson, who worked directly with the Moroccan crew, were conversant in French, which is not uncommon for Canadians of course. Many people could switch with ease between Arabic, English and French. It was great to witness and be part of this linguistical delight. Of course, humour is the universal language and being able to laugh together in different languages was essential in stressful times,” says Barker. Post-production was undertaken in Montreal, so speaking French continued throughout.

**Music**

The music for *Journey to Mecca* brought together several great talents. Composer and performer Michael Brook’s passion for world music was nurtured in his collaborations with Peter Gabriel and Reel World and he has worked with many outstanding musicians from around the world and has composed music for a wide variety of films from *Into the Wild* to the Oscar winning *An Inconvenient Truth*, as well as three previous IMAX films.
Brook's approach to the music was to evoke the feeling of both the time (the 14th century) and the different locations of the film (Morocco, Egypt, Syria) with subtle shifts in instrumentation and rhythms.

For the all-important scenes which take place in both the 14th and 21st century Mecca, Brook worked closely with noted specialist in Islamic musicology, Dr. A.J. Racy. The team was fortunate to be able to engage the great Syrian liturgical singer, Sheikh Hamza Shakour, whose powerful voice and lifelong devotion to singing the prayers of Islam brought the appropriate depth, authenticity and respect to the film's treatment of the Hajj.

Historical Advisors

The production emphasized the importance of having the support of leading world experts on Ibn Battuta, the Hajj and Mecca. Authenticity was the mantra during the shoot.

“We sought expert advice when we were writing the script and in the making of the film,” says Barker. “Because the film is set in both the 14th century and today, historical and contemporary advice was essential. We were extremely fortunate to obtain the services of the leading scholars on Ibn Battuta and the Hajj in the world to be our advisors”, says Taran Davies.

Our experts included history professor Ross Dunn, from the Center for Islamic and Arabic Studies, San Diego State University, who has written one of the definitive books about Ibn Battuta and is the director of the “World History For Us All” project; Tim Mackintosh-Smith, who has written several books on Ibn Battuta as well as presented the recent BBC4 series, Travels with a Tangerine; and Dr. Abdelhadi Tazi, who is the leading Moroccan scholar on Ibn Battuta and the Hajj. The script was vetted by all of these people from a historical point of view. Michael Wolfe, an American convert to Islam, who was the first person to bring the Hajj to an American audience for Ted Koppel’s Nightline in the 1980’s, also lent his voice as well as other experts such as Prof. Winter of Cambridge University and Shk. Hamza Yusuf.

Dr. Tazi remarks that, “If there’s an example of a personality who invites us to a dialogue between civilisations and the intermingling of religions, it’s the personality of Ibn Battuta who travelled for thirty years and came back to us with a historical harvest. And every day proves to us that the information Ibn Battuta offered to us is worth writing and worth telling our younger generations so that they’ll know that there was a person called Chems El Dine Ibn Battuta in whom are represented the best qualities of human creation and innovation.”

“I feel it is my duty to be involved in this project,” says Tazi, who is 88 and flew from Cairo to visit the set. “It is a vital project and I’m here to ensure accuracy. I’m
JOURNEY TO MECCA, ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

convinced the film is accurate, but no matter how good a project is, there will always be complaints,” he adds pragmatically.

Both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait provided experts who advised on the presentation of Islam in the film. This process was overseen by Faisal Al-Muaammar, General Supervisor of the King Abdulaziz Public Library; and HRH Prince Turki Al Faisal, Chairman of the Board of Directors, and Dr. Yahya M. Ibn Junaid, Secretary General, The King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies in Saudi Arabia.

The production also had numerous researchers working in Paris, New York, Damascus, Yemen, San Diego, Los Angeles, Mecca and at the London School for Asian and Oriental Studies (SOAS), as well as the leading expert in Saudi Arabia, Professor Nasser bin Ali Al-Harthy, Umm Al-Qura University in Mecca, as well as Dr. Tazi and the local Imams, Dr. Nawaf Adulaziz Aljahmah, of the College of Islamic Studies, Engineering and Islamic Architecture in Kuwait, who did his PhD on Ibn Battuta, came on set to advise on the look of the different categories of people in the caravan and the Hajj rituals including prayer.

“Having over 15 experts on this film certainly helped us greatly” says Barker, “although at times they disagreed, which can be the case in many historical recreations. It meant that the producers and the team had to work even harder together to find consensus.”

“It has been an absolute pleasure and learning experience for me and the team to work so closely with these world-renowned experts and scholars” says Dominic Cunningham-Reid.
(See Appendices for full list of advisors and bio’s)

Arabic Calligraphy

Two well respected calligraphers were utilized on the film: Soraya Syed and world renowned Mohammed Zakaryia. The production team reviewed numerous fonts and Islamic characters, before settling on the 14th century Muhaqqaq font for the credits, 14th century Naskh for the maps and variations of 14th century Magribi for the main title and sub-titles.

Ibn Battuta

Shams al-Din Abu 'Abdallah Muhammad ibn 'Abdallah ibn Muhammad ibn Ibrahim ibn Muhammad ibn Ibrahim ibn Yusuf al-Lawati al-Tanji Ibn Battuta was born Feb. 27, 1304, Tangier, Morocco. Died 1368/69.

Noted Arab traveler and writer. He received a traditional juristic and literary education in Tangier. After a pilgrimage to Mecca (1325), he decided to visit as many parts of the world as possible, vowing ‘never to travel any road a second time.’
He was the greatest traveler of his age. His almost 30 year wanderings took him to Spain, Russia, Turkey, Persia, India, China and all the Arab lands. His description of the religious, political and social conditions of the lands he visited – in some cases the only record – give insight into medieval Eastern civilization. On his return, he dictated his reminiscences, which became one of the world’s most famous travel books, the Rihla.

Authorities who estimate Ibn Battuta's journeys at more than 75,000 miles say that the distance was not exceeded by anyone – including Marco Polo, Magellan or Columbus – until the age of steam.

An impact crater on the moon was named after Ibn Battuta by the International Astronomical Union in 1974, as well as a themed shopping mall in Dubai, an airport in Tangier and a ferry which crosses between Spain and Morocco, among others.

**About the Distributors**

The film is being distributed to Giant Screen theatres worldwide by **SK Films**, in association with **National Geographic (NG)**.

**SK Films** is a Giant Screen industry leader, founded by veteran executive Jonathan Barker and Robert Kerr, a co-founder and retired CEO of Imax Corp. Amongst other films, SK has been responsible for one of the most successful and award-winning Giant Screen films of recent years, *Bugs!*, for which it won the industry’s most prestigious award for distribution and marketing.

**National Geographic** is a distribution partner in *Journey to Mecca* and is the DVD distributor of the film in North America. NG has one of the largest film libraries in the Giant Screen industry and *Journey to Mecca* is a welcome addition to National Geographic’s DVD collection.

National Geographic was founded in 1888 to "increase and diffuse geographic knowledge." National Geographic works to inspire people to care about the planet. This venerable media institution reaches more than 325 million people worldwide each month through magazines, books, digital media, television, radio, music and film.
In memory of Chems Eddine Zinoun

1980-2008
CHEMS EDDINE ZINOUN played IBN BATTUTA the legendary world traveler from the 14th century undertaking his first pilgrimage to Mecca from Tangier. Journey to Mecca marked Zinoun’s first lead role in a film. The entire production team was deeply saddened by the death of Chems on November 12, 2008, shortly after the film was completed. He was 28 years old. (See attached press release in Appendices)

Zinoun was born in 1980 in Casablanca to a family of distinguished professional dancers. Both his parents and older brother all dance, as did he. At age six, he began piano lessons and attended his family’s dance school until he was 15 when he traveled to Belgium to study classical ballet at the Royal Ballet School of Flanders, where he remained for three years, earning his professional dance diploma. He next landed a two-year contract with the Royal Ballet of Flanders, touring such countries as Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Holland and the United States and dancing in such classical ballets as “Romeo and Juliet,” and “The Sleeping Beauty.”

He then moved to France to join the contemporary dance troupe at the Centre Choreographic National, the Ballet du Nord in Lisle, working with clowns, acrobats among others. During this time, he choreographed his first dance, “Enfants de Covers.”

At age 24, Zinoun returned to Morocco to choreograph a festival of traditional dance in Marrakech. He then joined his father, who was also a film director, as his assistant and had a small acting role in La Beauté et Eparpille. His first professional film role was in the Swedish production, The Knights Templar, directed by Peter Flint, a two-part series shot in Sweden, Denmark and Morocco, about Saladin, who conquered Jerusalem. The period picture was based on the book by Jean Guillou. He learned to ride a horse for his second film, the sci-fi feature The Objective, directed by Daniel Merrick (Blair Witch Project) filmed in Afghanistan and Morocco. Playing a guide to the CIA which is secretly searching for outer planetary life, Zinoun spoke English and Berber in the film. The film recently premiered and won a prize at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York City.

HASSAM GHANCY plays THE HIGHWAYMAN who initially intimidates but ultimately bonds with Battuta and helps him along his way to Mecca.

Chancy most recently completed the drama Traitor, starring Guy Pearce, Jeff Daniels and Don Cheadle, about a special operative working with a terrorist group targeted by the CIA, directed by Jeffrey Nachmanoff; he plays a member of a criminal organization in the thriller Secret Défense, directed by Phillippe Haim. He was also seen in the political thriller Rendition with Meryl Streep, Reese Witherspoon and Jake Gyllenhaal, directed by Gavin Hood; he appeared in BMK (Baader Meinhof Komplex, Der), based on the Stefan Aust’s best-selling non-fiction book about Germany’s terrorist group, The Red Army Faction, directed by Eli Edel; and in Zäina: Rider of the Atlas, an 11-year-old girl accompanies her father on a 20-day voyage to Marrakech where he disguises her as a boy to compete in the most prestigious horse race in North Africa, directed by Bourlem Guerdjou.
On stage Ghancy has performed in the works of Shakespeare, Arthur Shnitzzler, Chekov and Bernard-Marie Koltés, among others. He has been seen in “Medea,” “The Wedding,” “Midsummer Night’s Dream”, “La Ronde,” “The Cherry Orchard,” “The Council of Love,” “La Nef des Fous,” and “Richard III,” to name but a few.

Born in Casablanca, Morocco, Ghancy moved with his family to Paris at age three in the early ’70’s. During his school years, he was influenced by American and old French movies to become an actor, but it wasn’t until he was 20 years old that he began performing on stage in Paris. After being critically acclaimed in two plays, he decided to pursue acting as a career and attended Cité Théâtre in Paris for two years. He returned to the stage for the next three years and, determined to further hone his craft, continued his studies at Théâtre Ecole du Passage under Neils Arestrup and Alexandre del Perugia for an additional three years. In 2005, he began training with American Jack Waltzer in Paris.

Ghancy, who works in French, English and Arabic, lives in Paris, France.

NADIM SAWALHA plays IBN MUZAFFAR, a Cairo-based intellectual and interpreter of dreams.

Born in Madaba, a small village in the South of Jordan, Sawalha attended an English school in Amman, where his English teacher helped him to get a place at Drama School in England. After three years at the Rose Bruford College of Speech & Drama, he left with a teaching diploma, which he promptly put in an envelope, where it has remained ever since.

After graduating in 1956, Sawalha worked for ten years for the BBC Arabic Radio Service, acting, writing, directing and news reading and then returned to Jordan for two years in 1965, where he worked as a theatre director and founded the Jordan National Theatre.

On his return to London after the Six Day War in 1967, he was given his first film part in A Touch of Class, followed by other films such as The Wind and the Lion, and two James Bond films, and most recently Syriana and Nativity. Over the years he has appeared in over a hundred films and countless popular TV series.

His stage work includes appearances with the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Royal National Theatre. Sawalha has also been busy writing, producing and appearing in his own shows, the first being Waiting for Godot at the Lyric Studio, Hammersmith. He then wrote and appeared in a one-man show Ousama, A Moslem Nobleman’s View of the Crusades, directed by Corin Redgrave which was staged both in London and Amman. Corin also directed his production of ‘Prophet in Exile’, a play inspired by the life and works of Khahlil Gibran, which Sawalha is currently rewriting for an upcoming production under the title, An Arab in America. His last theatre appearance was in his own one-man show, All I Want Is A British Passport, a satire on Mohammad al Fayed’s battle with the British Establishment, which he toured for two years.
Amongst all this work, Sawalha also found time to start up and run an animation company, producing Arabic TV commercials – the making of which funded a short series, *Uncle Hoja Goes West*, the adventures of an old Bedouin on a visit to London, which was sold around the world.

In 2007 Sawalha played the title role in the film *Captain Abu Raed*, the first Jordanian feature film in fifty years, which won him the award for best actor at the Dubai International Film Festival in December of the same year. The film went on to win the audience award for best World Film at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2008, and was shown out of competition at the 2008 Cannes Festival.

Sawalha has three daughters - the eldest, Dina, is a ballet teacher, Nadia is an actress and TV presenter and producer, and Julia is an actress, best known for her part as Saffy in *Absolutely Fabulous*.

**NABIL ELOUAHABI** plays HAMZA, Ibn Battuta’s best friend who gives him a letter of introduction to Ibn Mustapha in Cairo.

Elouahabi most recently starred in *The Path To 9/11* alongside Harvey Keital in the two-part drama which chronicles the work of the commission set up to investigate the events leading up to the devastating terrorist attacks. He also just completed *The Boat People*, a psychological thriller directed by Rob Curry, and *Charlie Wilson’s War*, a drama based on Wilson’s covert dealings in Afghanistan, starring Tom Hanks, Amy Adams, Julia Roberts and Philip Seymour Hoffman, directed by Mike Nichols. He also has been seen in two Michael Winterbottom features, *Code 46*, a doomed love story with Tim Robbins and Togo Iquama; and *In This World*, about Afghan refugees who escape from Peshawar in a dangerous attempt to reach London. The picture won a 2004 Orange BAFTA for Best Film not in the English language and the Golden Bear at the 2003 Berlin Film Festival. Previously he starred in the Jack Ryan prequel *The Sum of All Fears* with Ben Affleck and Morgan Freeman. Among his other feature film credits are two films directed by Nigel Barker: *Asylum* and *Plato’s Breaking Point*; and *Simon*, directed by Martin Huberty.

Probably best known as Tariq in the UK’s *EastEnders*, Elouahabi left the long-running series in 2005 to pursue a more diversified repertoire. Also for television he has just completed the HBO series, *Generation Kill* and had roles in Paramount TV’s *Keen Eddie*, BBC’s *Only Fools and Horses*, *Attachments II* and *Casualty*, among others.

His theatre credits include “Prophet in Exile Oud,” directed by Corin Redgrave, and written by Nadim Sawalha, who also appears in *Journey to Mecca*, and in real life, is a father figure to Elouahabi. He also performed in “Crossing Jerusalem,” “Sparkleshart,” on tour of the UK with the Royal National Theatre, “Balti Kings Shahbab,” and toured with “Don’t Look at My Sister Innit.”

Born in London to parents from Tangier, Elouahabi obtained a BTEC in Performing Arts at vocational school followed by a stint in Theatre Studies and Drama at the Royal Holloway University. He resides in London.
**JOURNEY TO MECCA, MORE ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS**

**DIRECTOR/CO-SCREENWRITER BRUCE NEIBAUR** has worked as a writer-director for 30 years on a long list of giant screen motion pictures, television productions, feature films and dramatic and documentary films for special presentation.

His impressive résumé includes *Mysteries of Egypt*, the IMAX® box-office hit, starring Omar Sharif and Kate Maberly, which takes audiences on a ride down the lush Nile River and over the Valley of Kings as it reveals the latest discoveries regarding the construction of the pyramids and the baffling mysteries surrounding the history of this ancient civilization; *Hearst Castle: Building the Dream*, is an IMAX® drama chronicling the life of William Randolph Hearst and the building of the world-famous Hearst Castle in San Simeon, California, starring Ricky Mabey. *India: Kingdom of the Tiger*, follows the footsteps of hunter-naturalist Jim Corbett as he races to save a remote mountain village from the terror of a man-eating tiger and discovers on this journey his passion for tigers and the need for Tiger conservation. *Lewis and Clark: Great Journey West* dramatizes the legendary early 19th-century expedition that crossed the uncharted Northwest, starring Kelly Boulware, Alex Rice and Sonny Surowiec. More recently Neibaur began production in Cambridge, England of *Stephen Hawking’s: Beyond the Horizon*, directing Lina Patel and the world-renowned British physicist, which will take audiences on an incomparable scientific journey beyond the horizons of our Universe.

Among Neibaur’s feature films are *The Ghosts of Dickens’ Past*, which focuses on the early life of Charles Dickens and the events that inspired him to write *A Christmas Carol*, starring Christopher Heyerdahl and Jennifer Bertram. *Dickens’ Past* won the best feature film and best cinematography prizes at the Santa Clarita International Film Festival, the companion festival to the Academy Awards. Neibaur’s *Friendships Field*, a lesson in racism about a young farm girl who makes friends with a transient Mexican boy, won the Children’s Jury Award for best feature film and the Liv Ullman Peace Prize at the Chicago International Children’s Film Festival. Neibaur has explored other moral issues in *Your Wildest Dreams*, about a teen thrust into a conflict between wealth and honesty and *The ButterCream Gang*, about unconditional love for a struggling friend. Neibaur’s work has also garnered awards for Broadcast journalism and several national and international awards for his short-subject special presentation dramatic and documentary films. Born and raised in Southern Idaho, Neibaur studied briefly at Utah State University and Brigham Young University.

**EXECUTIVE PRODUCER JAKE EBERTS** was born in Montreal in 1941 and grew up in Montreal and Arvida, Quebec. He attended Bishop’s College School in Lennoxville and graduated from McGill University (Bachelor of Chemical Engineering 1962) and Harvard Business School (MBA 1966). Eberts began his business career as a start-up engineer for L’Air Liquide in Spain, Italy, Germany and France. After three years on Wall Street, in 1971 he joined Oppenheimer & Co. in London, England, where he became Managing Director in 1976.

In 1977 Eberts founded Goldcrest Films in London. From 1977 through 1983, Goldcrest financed the development and/or the production of *Watership Down, The Howling, Escape from New York, Chariots of Fire, Local Hero, Gandhi, The Killing Fields* and *The
**JOURNEY TO MECCA, MORE ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS**

*Journey to Mecca.* Together these films received 30 Oscar nominations, winning 15, including two for Best Picture (*Chariots of Fire* and *Gandhi*).

In 1985 Eberts founded Allied Filmmakers, based in London and Paris, an independent feature film development and production company. Since then, he has served as the executive producer or producer of *The Name Of The Rose, Hope and Glory, The Adventures Of Baron Munchausen*, *Driving Miss Daisy, Dances With Wolves, Black Robe, A River Runs Through It, James And The Giant Peach, The Wind In The Willows, The Education Of Little Tree, Grey Owl, Chicken Run, The Legend Of Bagger Vance, Open Range, Prisoner Of Paradise, Sacred Planet, America’s Heart And Soul* and *Two Brothers*. Seven of these films received 35 Oscar nominations, winning 12, including two for Best Picture (*Driving Miss Daisy* and *Dances with Wolves*). Academy Award nominations from 1977 to date in all categories total 65, of which four were awarded Best Picture.

Eberts is currently producing Nabil Ayouch's *Whatever Lola Wants*, and *A Walk in the Woods*, with Robert Redford. He is also serving as executive producer of Jacques Perrin's underwater feature documentary *Oceans*, Sylvain Chomet's animated feature *The Illusionist*, and the IMAX film *Journey to Mecca*.

In 1991 Eberts published *My Indecision Is Final*, his autobiographical study of the film industry. In 1992 he became an Officer of the Order of Canada. Eberts was awarded honorary doctorates by McGill University in 1998, Bishop’s University in 1999 and Trent University in 2005. He currently serves on the Board of the Sundance Institute and the Sundance Channel, and is Chairman of National Geographic Films.

**PRODUCER JONATHAN BARKER** is the President and CEO of SK Films. He is one of Canada's most experienced film and television industry executives and a world leader in producing and distributing Giant Screen 3D and 2D films including the multi-award winning *Bugs!, Straight Up: Helicopters in Action, Into the Deep, and David Attenborough’s Survival Island*, among others. His upcoming project is a 3D IMAX® film tracking the amazing and largest insect migration of the monarch butterflies from Canada through the US to the remote volcanic forests in Mexico.

For over 12 years, as President and Co-CEO of Shaftesbury Films Inc., he was jointly responsible for the company's phenomenal growth into one of Canada's leading and most successful film and television production companies. In 1997, while at Shaftesbury and together with Imax Corporation co-founder and CEO Robert Kerr, he founded SK Films, which is now wholly owned by Kerr and Barker.

Previously, Barker was the senior executive responsible for the film production and distribution business for Imax Corporation, developing some of its most successful films including *T-Rex: Back to the Cretaceous* and *Mission to Mir*. His senior executive experience also includes his role as Senior VP, Business and Legal Affairs for the Cinexus Group (Panavision Canada, C/FP) and CEO of the Ontario Film Development Corporation (now the OMDC).
Barker began his career first as an actor, then became an entertainment lawyer earning two law degrees from McGill University and remains a member of the Bars of Ontario and California. He has served on numerous Boards and Advisory Committees and is currently a founding Director of the Giant Screen Cinema Association, a Director of Film Ontario and serves as Co-Chair of the Ontario Producers Panel of the Canadian Film and Television Producers Association. He lives in Toronto.

PRODUCER DOMINIC CUNNINGHAM-REID is Chairman of Cosmic Picture which he co-founded in 2004. Cunningham-Reid is an award-winning filmmaker who has produced and directed documentary films for National Geographic, Discovery Channel, Paramount Pictures, News Corporation, ZDF German Television, RAI Television and Oprah Winfrey, most notably documentaries such as Road Warriors of Somalia, filmed in the most dangerous enclave of Mogadishu known as "The Bermuda Triangle;" Hell in the Sky about the extraordinary locust plagues of Madagascar; Water Wars, about tribal fighting over water in East Africa; and Christmas Kindness, a touching film about Oprah Winfrey's three week tour of South Africa where she pledged a full education to 50,000 orphaned children in the Eastern Transvaal which brought in millions of dollars from the audience in support of the project. Cunningham-Reid dedicated his early career as a photojournalist for Reuters and Associated Press covering the conflict zones of Africa, the Balkans and Afghanistan, most notably the Rwandan genocide of 1994.

He recently co-produced and hosted National Geographic's acclaimed Diamonds of War, about conflict diamonds in Sierra Leone and The War Next Door, about drug production in Colombia, which won the bronze medal at the New York Festival in 2005. Cunningham-Reid transitioned into large format film making when he joined the renowned IMAX® producer, Scott Swofford and Director George Butler on Shackleton's Antarctic Adventure - a giant screen quest retracing the incredible Antarctic journey of the great British Explorer, Sir Ernest Shackleton whose ice-bound ship the Endurance led to one of the world's greatest survival stories. Born and raised in Kenya, East Africa, Cunningham-Reid was educated at Fettes College, Edinburgh and earned his Master of Arts degree at Aberdeen University, Aberdeen, Scotland and currently resides on his family farm in Kenya.

PRODUCER TARAN DAVIES is co-founder and CEO of Cosmic Picture. In addition, under the banner of his film company Wicklow Films, which he founded in 1994, Davies has produced, directed and written several critically acclaimed films for television broadcast on PBS, the Sundance Channel and theatrical release in the United States.

His first film, Around the Sacred Sea, told the story of his five-month expedition riding horseback around Siberia’s Lake Baikal. While on this journey, he developed a fascination with Russia, its southern borderlands, and the many cultures and religions of the region, especially Islam. Davies subsequently made documentaries about the history of Islam, the roots of Jihad and the life of Muslims throughout much of the Islamic world.
His next film, The Land Beyond the River, about his journey through Central Asia, was the first film to be shot in Hi 8 to be broadcast nationwide by PBS.

After witnessing the collapse of the World Trade Center, Davies decided to commit to making films that might shed light on conflict, its causes and effects in the region he knew best. His Afghan Stories, a feature documentary, premiered less than a year later at the Venice Film Festival in September 2002, which the ‘Anthology of Cult Movies’ has described as one of the best documentary films ever made. He next completed the documentary Mountain Men and Holy Wars, “an eye-opening look at the centuries-old roots of Russia’s bloody struggle with Islamic separatists in Chechnya and Dagestan,” which premiered at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. His films were featured in an Islamic film festival on the Sundance Channel in 2003, which TV Guide described as “Must See TV.”

Born in England, Davies was educated at Eton College and Harvard University. He worked for a period as an investment banker with Loeb Partners, a private equity firm in New York City, where he arranged financing for numerous venture capital deals in the communications, media and real estate industry before he segued into film. He lives in New York.

**CO-PRODUCER DIMA ALANSARI** was born in 1977, in Beirut, Lebanon. Alansari got her BA in Communication Arts double major Radio/TV/Film & Theatre, from the Lebanese American University in 1998 and has seven years of Directing, Producing and Acting experience in Kuwait TV and Theatre.

In 2004, Alansari completed a Diploma from the New York Film Academy from King’s College London and continued with a Chevening Scholarship from the British Embassy in Kuwait to obtain an MA in Feature Film from Goldsmith College, University of London.

Alansari is currently the General Manager and executive producer with Desert Door Productions where she has produced the documentary *Storm from the South*, which provides an intimate glimpse at the six critical days before the first Kuwait elections where women were allowed to participate and run for office for the first time in their history. The documentary was nominated for the “Al Muhr award for excellence in Arab Cinema”

Her international work includes an assistant director credit for two-part documentary for the Al Arabia satellite channel shot in the USA about Arab American relations post September 11 entitled *An Ocean Apart*.

She is also currently working on a 30 episode series entitled *Lawrence of Arabia* for the Arab region and is managing both Kuwait and Dubai offices.

**CO-PRODUCER DOUNIA BENJELLOUN** graduated from the American University in Washington, DC with a Bachelor of Arts in Communications in 1985. Shortly
thereafter she landed a job as the Assistant to the Location Manager in New York and Morocco for the Columbia Pictures movie *Ishhtar*, starring Warren Beatty and Dustin Hoffman. She next worked in the advertising department on the set in Morocco for the James Bond movie *The Living Daylights*.

Motivated by these two experiences, Benjelloun created her own production company in 1986 in Casablanca, Dounia Productions Ltd., which specializes in producing documentary movies.

In addition to Dounia Productions Ltd., between 1991 and 2000, Benjelloun presided and managed seven movie theatres in Casablanca, Rabat and Tangier, and distributed Columbia Pictures and United International Pictures films to all movie theatres across Morocco.

In 2007, Benjelloun founded Sand Hills Productions, with offices in New York and Los Angeles. See her website [http://sandhillsproductions.com](http://sandhillsproductions.com)

**CO-PRODUCER AL-ZAIN AL-SABAH** co-founded Kuwait-based Eagle Vision Media Group (EVMG) in 2007, a fully integrated production company, specializing in the development of quality media projects for film and television. She serves as Chairman and Managing Director of this shareholding company, which has gone on to win a number of regional and international media awards.

Born and raised in Kuwait, Al-Zain Al-Sabah started her production career after graduating from Boston University, where she earned a B.S. in journalism. She went on to work as assistant producer for ABC’s *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*. She later returned to Kuwait to continue directing and producing for the local TV station, KTV. There, she produced a number of acclaimed variety shows including *This Week with Mohammed Al-Qahtani*. She also produced and co-directed the award-winning feature documentary, *Unveiled Wounds*. In addition, she participated in the development and production of a number of other socially relevant projects, set in the Middle East.

Al-Zain continued her higher education at the University of Southern California’s School of Cinema where she earned a MFA in film/television production. After graduation, she founded a film production company, Al-Jude Productions, which serves as a haven for talented filmmakers in the region. Under Al-Jude, Al-Zain has produced and/or directed a number of short films, commercials and music videos. Al-Jude is actively working with Producer Christina Piovesan from First Generation Films to develop several marketable independent films for the company’s slate. One of those films, *Amreeka*, by writer/director Cherien Davis, is set to be released in September, 2008.

**SCREENWRITER TAHIR SHAH** is author of more than a dozen books, several documentary films and champion of what he calls “The East-West Bridge.”
JOURNEY TO MECCA, MORE ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

His books have appeared in a dozen languages and are published in more than forty editions. His latest book is In Arabian Nights, which sheds light on the way Moroccan society is shaped and passed on through oral stories. Previously he authored The Caliph’s House: A Year in Casablanca, The Middle East Bedside Book, Beyond the Devil’s Teeth, Sorcerer’s Apprentice, Trail of Feathers, In Search of King Solomon’s Mines, and House of the Tiger King.

His films have been screened on National Geographic Channel, Channel 4, Five and The History Channel, as well as in cinemas worldwide. They include The Search for King Solomon’s Mines, House of the Tiger King, Search for the Lost City of Gold and Search for the Lost Treasure of Afghanistan.

The Anglo-Afghan bestselling author was born in London, the son of the legendary Sufi writer Idries Shah, and the grandson of the savant Sirdar Iqbal Ali Shah.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Shah established a “cultural bridge” made up by those, like him, who are both from the East and the West, based on the idea that people such as he have a responsibility to “show the East to the West, and the West to the East.”

In 2005, Shah and two colleagues from Caravan Film in London were arrested in Peshawar in Pakistan and held without charge in solitary confinement in a torture prison. Released after 16 days of interrogation, Shah published an article in London’s Sunday Times and was interviewed by UK TV’s Channel 4 News about his ordeal. The Pakistan Government agreed that they had done nothing wrong.

He lives with his wife and two children in Casablanca.

SCREENWRITER CARL KNUTSON has written on two IMAX® films for SK Films: “Straight Up! – Helicopters in Action”, and “Journey To Mecca”. A former development executive with CBC TV, he is now an experienced TV writer, specializing in docu-drama series, such as: “Mayday”, “Trapped”, “Cold Blood”, and “Masterminds.”

As a writer/director, Carl has sold his last four, short films to CBC TV, and other broadcasters. His films: “Password”, “Mothers, Fathers, and Other Strangers”, and “Five Doors” all won Platinum Remi awards at WorldFest Houston.

As an experienced story editor specializing in dramatic feature films, he has specialized in working with writer/director filmmakers, including: Jim Allodi, Kris Lefcoe, Michael DeCarlo, Peter Lynch, and Henry Sarwer-Foner.

SUPERVISING PRODUCER DIANE ROBERTS is President of West Eagle Films Inc. She came to the IMAX® format in 1990 with the production of Rolling Stones at the Max. Emerging from a background of innovative commercial television and award-winning feature film production in the UK, Europe, Canada, USA and Africa, Robert’s transition to the Large-Format has brought an unbroken series of difficult Large-Format
JOURNEY TO MECCA, MORE ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

projects to successful completion. Other Large-Format film credits include the Oscar-nominated Fires of Kuwait, the Secret of Life on Earth, Survival Island, Wolves, All Access and Straight Up: Helicopters in Action.

SUPERVISING PRODUCER TONY THATCHER (Morocco) has worked as producer, production manager or assistant director on more than 50 productions. He was a producer on the feature films American Rhapsody starring Scarlett Johansson and Nastassja Kinski directed by Éva Gárdos, and Who is Cletis Tout? starring Christian Slater, Tim Allen, Richard Dreyfus and Billy Connolly. Interstate 60 His extensive list of television credits includes The Power Strikes, Wild Card, Adventure Inc., Relic Hunter, The Strange Legacy of Camera Cruz, Queen of Swords, Caitlin’s Way, The Girl Next Door and among others. He Line Produced such films and mini-series, The Summit, The Englishman’s Boy, Moonlight Becomes You, Let Me Call You Sweetheart, and Caitlin’s Way to name but a few. Thatcher is a resident of Toronto, Canada.

LINE PRODUCER DANIEL FERGUSON has served as production manager, line producer, and writer on a variety of critically acclaimed feature films, documentaries, and large format (IMAX®) film projects. Recent work includes Return to Everest 3D, Wired to Win: Surviving the Tour de France, and the series Deadly Arts for the National Geographic Channel. He has worked in over 30 countries and is passionately engaged in issues of social justice, the environment, and human rights. Daniel spent four years as a head of production for Primesco Communications, responsible for overseeing and leasing IMAX® films and developing strategic corporate sponsorship programs. He is an active board member of the Alter-Ciné Foundation, offering grants to documentary filmmakers in Africa, Asia and Latin America. He has degrees in History and Theology from McGill University, and a diploma from the Vancouver Film School.

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY MATTHEW WILLIAMS was born and raised in Los Angeles where he graduated from the Academy of Photographic Arts in North Hollywood, specializing in stills. After developing an interest in film and motion picture work, he attended UCLA’s film school to study cinematography. Williams began working exclusively as a Director of Photography in 1987 after working as an on-line editor, a cameraman for various news magazines, shows and documentaries, and a film camera assistant. He currently shoots projects ranging from feature films, TV movies and series to 70mm large format films, documentaries and commercials. In 1987, Williams was 2nd unit DOP on the feature film Promised Land, working closely with Swiss Cinematographer Ueli Steiger, who had a major influence on Williams’ visual process.

Williams met director Elliot Caplan and Dance Choreographer Merce Cunningham in 1989 at the Sundance Institute, where he began a film collaboration that continues today. Starting with Changing Steps, a dance performance narrated by Robert Redford, and more recently, the documentary Children of the Holocaust. In 1993, he served as Director of Photography at the Sundance Institute’s Director’s Lab while continuing to shoot commercials, features and two TV series: Hollywood Detective for A&E Entertainment and the TV series Encyclopedia Brown: Boy Detective for HBO.
**JOURNEY TO MECCA, MORE ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS**


Williams has also shot innumerable television commercials and in 1999, he completed all three seasons (68 episodes) as Director of Photography on the CBS Network show *Promised Land*, a dramatic TV series which was a spin-off of the top rated *Touched by an Angel*, for which he photographed three episodes. More recently he completed the Japanese-American WWII film, *American Pastime* (2007).

He was one of seven cinematographers chosen to shoot *Bud Greenspan’s Stories of Olympic Glory*, the Official Film of the 2002 Winter Olympics shot in 24p HD. Also in 24p HD, he shot short award-winning film *Hiding in the Walls* (2003).

**PRODUCTION DESIGNER MIKE FOWLIE** has an impressive roster of more than 60 films, many of which are classics in the annals of filmmaking.

*Journey to Mecca* marks Fowlie’s 14th film in Morocco where he previously worked on such productions as *The Hills Have Eyes II, The Ten Commandments, The Walk, In the Beginning, The Seventh Scroll, The Legionnaire, Kundun* and *Shaka the Citadel*.

He has been in the entertainment industry since 1961, beginning his career on *Lawrence of Arabia*. After serving in the military between 1962 to 1967, he returned to work mainly as property master on such prominent feature films shot in Europe including *Moll Flanders, The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles, Marriage of Figaro, and Barry Lyndon*. Additional credits include *Oliver Twist, Charge of the Light Brigade, Oliver Cromwell, 101 Dalmatians, Touch of Class, Braveheart, Saving Private Ryan, Pandemonium* and *Tomb Raider 2*.

He traveled to South Africa in 1974 to work on *Shout at the Devil*, and stayed for 18 years to work on such productions as *Red Scorpion, Jungle Paradise, Shaka Zulu*, and *Runaway Melody*. He spent three years in Australia where he worked on *Sky Pirate, Hostage, Bush Christmas* and *The Wild Duck*.

Most recently, Fowlie was the production designer on *Jump!*, a psychological drama about the 1928 unjust murder trial of the noted photographer, Philippe Halsman, starring Ben Silverstone, Patrick Swayze and Martine McCutcheon, directed by Joshua Sinclair. He also designed the thriller *Burnout, starring Julie Stern, Patti Smart and James Manners*, centered on an investigation of radioactive bodies, directed by James Allen.
Journey to Mecca, More About the Filmmakers

Fowlie art directed Master of Dragonard Hill, an adventure drama starring Oliver Reed, Eartha Kitt and Herbert Lom, directed by Gérard Kikoine with whom Fowlie also worked on the dramatic period picture, Dragonard, with the same cast.

Born in London to a “showbiz” family, Fowlie learnt his profession at a young age from his father, brother and uncle, all of whom were all property masters. His mother was a hair stylist. Fowlie became the youngest property master ever at age 30 when he followed in his father’s footsteps on Stanley Kubrick’s Barry Lyndon.

Fowlie maintains residences in Aylesbury near Oxford in the UK and Ouarzazate in Morocco, commuting between the two. He is fluent in Arabic and Berber.

Art Director Philip Murphy worked as Art Director on Jump!, centered on the 1928 unjust murder trial of the world-renowned photographer, Philippe Halsam, starring Ben Silverstone, Patrick Swayze and Martin McCutcheon, directed by Joshua Sinclair. Journey to Mecca marks his second film crediting him as Art Director and is his seventh film shot in Morocco.

Previously in Morocco Murphy worked on the television productions The 10 Commandments, The Seventh Scroll and Shaka Zulu: The Citadel in addition to the feature films Legionnaire with Jean-Claude Van Damme, and The Hills Have Eyes II directed by Martin Weisz and Prisoners of the Sun starring John Rhys-Davies. The fact that he speaks Arabic makes him a “must-have” Morocco crew member.

Most recently he completed the novel-based drama, City of Ember, starring Bill Murray and Tom Robbins directed by Gil Kenan and produced by Tom Hanks. Among his earlier credits are Moll Flanders, Saving Private Ryan, Reign of Fire, King Arthur, Life is a Buffet, Reign of Fire, Ella Enchanted, and Veronica Guerin.

Born in Ireland, Murphy earned a degree in Forestry at Brunnel University and encountered his first film while working as an Estate Manager in Ireland when an Italian film used the estate as a location. But it wasn’t until he was hired to supply 10 tractors to Mel Gibson’s Braveheart, that he began his career in film as a driver for the props department in 1994. To learn his craft, he studied at the Betty Ann Norton Theatre School in Dublin, and since then has worked on at least 30 productions. He lives in Ireland.

Journey to Mecca marks Editor Jean-Marie Drot’s second IMAX® film for Director Bruce Neibaur for whom he edited India: Kingdom of the Tiger. He has edited seven fiction films, three feature-length television features, 28 TV series, and more than 100 documentaries.

Since then he has earned six Gemini nominations for best editing in both documentary and dramatic categories for such films as *Who Shot My Brother?*, *Images of a Dictatorship*, *Lance et Compte Speciaux* and *La Misere des Riches*. He won two best editing Geminis for the series *Lance et Compte II* and *III* as well as first prize at The Festival of the Arab World for *Yasser Arafat*.

Among his other editing credits are the prize-winning films *The Ghosts of Dicken’s Past*, the children’s film *Kayla* which screened at the Berlin Kinderfilmfest and Cannes, *Nadia’s Journey*, *Moshe Safdie, the Power of Architecture*, *René Lévesque, Héros Malgré Lui*, the Emmy-award winning *Cirque du Soleil: The Fire Within*, *Anne Hébert (1916-2000)*, *The Best Bad Thing* and *Bonjour Timothy*.

*Journey to Mecca* marks **COSTUME DESIGNER EMMA BELLOCQ**’s third film with Hassam Ghancy and second with Chems Eddine Zinoun.

One of Morocco’s top costume designers, Bellocq most recently completed *The Anniversary*, a comedy starring Lambert Wilson, Michèle Laroque and Jean-Hugues Anglade directed by Diane Kurys about a reality TV producer who creates conflict over his brother’s treacherous autobiography; *Zaina: Rider of the Atlas*, an adventurous period picture about an 11-year-old girl who accompanies her father on a 20-day journey to Marrakech where she disguises herself as a boy to compete in the most prestigious horse race in North Africa, starring Aziza Nadim, Sami Bouajila and Hassam Ghancy directed by Bourlem Guerdjou; *Marock*, a romantic drama starring Morjana Alaoui and Matthieu Boujenah directed by Laila Marrakchi; *Raja*, a cross cultural drama about a middle-aged Frenchman directed by Jacques Doillon; *A Thousand Months*, a drama directed by Faouzi Bensaidi which won the 2003 Cannes Film Festival’s Award of Youth and Le Premier Regard in addition to being shown around film festivals around the world; and the short dramas *Mono mambo* and *Deux Cents Dirhams*, both directed by Laila Marrakchi; *Casa*, directed by Ali Benkirane and *Amal*, which earned her a costume designer nomination from Festival des Lutens.

In addition, she was assistant costume designer on the thriller *Secret Défense* with Hassam Ghancy alongside Gérard Lanvin and Vahine Giocante directed by Philippe Haim. Her costumes were seen in the second *Asterix & Obelix: Mission Cleopatra* directed by Alain Chabat (the first was shot in France); and the third *Asterix at the Olympic Games*, with Gérard Dépardieu and Clovis Cornillac directed by Frédéric Forestier and Thomas Langmann. She worked as the costume supervisor on *The Knights Templar*, in addition to designing the costumes for the key Arabian parts and extras directed by Peter Flinth (in which Chems Eddine Zinoun had a small part); and was costumer on the César-nominated war epic, *Intimate Enemies* starring Benoît Magimel and Albert Dupontel, directed by Florent Emilio Siri. Among her other credits are the Moroccan filmed productions of *Le Grand Voyage*, *The Rashevski Tango*, and *Dead Weight*. 
Bellocq was born and raised in Morocco by her mother and grandmother, both of whom were gifted seamstresses, making clothes for family and friends. From this background, she fell naturally into the world of costume in film.

**AFSHIN JAVDI DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY - MECCA** was born in Mashhad, Iran and grew up in Tehran. In 1983, Afshin moved to Washington DC to pursue a career in television and filmmaking. He enrolled at Montgomery College and Maryland University majoring in Television/Film Studies. In 1987, Afshin began working full time as a DP/cameraman on documentaries, live TV and magazine format shows.

In 1990, Afshin joined the small rank of steadicam operators and trained with steadicam inventor Garrett Brown. He has been honing his skills as a DP and camera operator from that point on. Afshin has worked on numerous commercials, documentaries and feature films. In late 90’s while still shooting documentaries and features, Afshin began the prolific phase of his career filming a plethora of promo spots for PBS primetime, PBS kids and The National Geographic Channel. In 2001 Mahmoud Kalari, the award winning Cinematographer/Director chose Afshin to be his director of photography to film “Dance with Dreams” in Mar Del Plata, Argentina.

Afshin Javadi moved to Los Angeles in 2005 and has been keeping up with the fast-paced technological changes of his field, being one of the first DP’s to understand the merits of digital cinematography, utilizing High Definition cameras from their early conceptions, and now the Red cameras. Afshin still continues to shoot certain projects on film. He recently filmed “The Greatest Journey” in 70 mm IMAX® on location in Saudi Arabia.

**GHASEM EBRAHIMIAN DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY - MECCA** is an award winning filmmaker who came to the US in 1974 to study cinema. He graduated from SUNY PURCHASE in 1979. His thesis film, “WILLIE” earned him a student Academy Award and was shown in festivals around the world and on Public Television’s Independent Focus. He formed EBRAFILMS with Coleen Higgins in 1980 and the company produced over forty documentaries for Italian and French televisions among other commercial productions.

His feature film THE SUITORS was an official selection for Cannes Film Festival and nominated for Camera d’OR. THE SUITORS was theatrically released in the US and was shown on Germany’s WDR and UK’s Channel 4- In 1997 he began his collaboration with Shirin Neshat on a number of filmed video Installations- Their first collaboration, “Turbulent”, won the first international prize at 1999 Venice Biennale. The following installations: Rapture- Soliloquy- Possessed- Fervor- Pulse and Mahdokht have been shown in Museums and galleries around the world.

EBRAHIMIAN also wrote and directed the film portion of “Logic of The Birds”, a multi disciplinary theatrical piece, based on 13th Century Iranian poet Farid-udin Attar. “Logic of The Birds” was premiered in New York at Lincoln Center and presented by ARTANGEL at the Union Chapel in London. He's worked on a number
of documentaries for the South Bank Show, the longest running arts program in the UK, including “Cinema of fire” which focuses on the works of Iranian Cinema auteurs.

His short film “The Sacred, The Absurd” was premiered at Victoria and Albert Museum in London and was nominated for best short film at Tribeca Film Festival (2005) in New York. Recently he finished a screenplay entitled “Shakespeare In Tehran” based on a true story. He was director of photography for the Mecca shoot in *Journey to Mecca*, filmed on IMAX® during the annual Hajj in Saudi Arabia and Writer/Director for “All Roads to Mecca” which deconstructs and chronicles the making of the IMAX® film, *Journey to Mecca*. 
Consultants and Advisors

Conservator, Abdellah Guenoun Library, Tangier
College of Islamic Studies, College of Engineering and Islamic Architecture, Umm Al-Qura University, Mecca

Dr. ABDESSAMAD AL HASHEB
PROF. NASSER BIN ALI AL-HARTHY

Assistant Professor, Public Authority for Applied Education & Training, Kuwait
Architect, Founder & Director General, the Amar Center for Architectural Heritage, Jeddah
Instructor, Alkauthar Institute

Dr. NAWAF AL-JAHMA
Dr. SAMI ANGAWI
WALEED BASYOUNI

Chair of Islamic Art & Archaeology, SOAS, University of London
Professor of Islamic & Asian Art, Boston College
Professor Emeritus of History, San Diego State University
Astronomy Advisor, Royal Astronomical Society of Canada
Chairman Islamic Information Service, Los Angeles

PROF. DORIS BEHRENS-ABOUSEIF
PROF. JONATHAN M. BLOOM
Dr. ROSS E. DUNN
ANDREW FAZEKAS, M.Sc.
Dr. NAZIR KHAJA
TIM MACKINTOSH-SMITH
PROF. BERNARD O'KANE

Professor of Islamic Art & Architecture, The American University, Cairo
Professor of Middle Eastern & Islamic Studies, New York University
Professor, Ethnomusicology, University of California
Senior Fellow in Arabic, SOAS, University of London
Diplomat, Writer & Historian, Morocco
Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge
Executive Producer, Unity Productions Foundation
Author & Islamic Scholar Journalist & Film Director

PROF. F. E. PETERS
Dr. A. J. RACY
MUAADH SALIH
Dr. ABDELHADI TAZI
T. J. WINTER
MICHAEL WOLFE
HAMZA YUSUF
NADIA ZOUAOUI
Journey to Mecca is the extraordinary story of one of the greatest travelers in history, Ibn Battuta, and his epic journey in 1325 to perform the Hajj, one of the most spectacular gatherings of human beings on earth. We witness the Hajj, as it was experienced in the 14th century and by millions today.

Journey to Mecca tells the story of Ibn Battuta, (played by Chems Eddine Zinoun) a young scholar, who leaves Tangier in 1325 on an epic and perilous journey, travelling alone from his home in Morocco to reach Mecca, some 3,000 miles to the east.

Ibn Battuta is besieged by countless obstacles as he makes his way across the North African desert to Mecca. Along the route he meets an unlikely stranger, the Highwayman (played by Hassam Ghancy) who becomes his paid protector and eventual friend. During his travels he is attacked by bandits, dehydrated by thirst, rescued by Bedouins, and forced to retrace his route by a war-locked Red Sea.

Ibn Battuta finally joins the legendary Damascus Caravan with thousands of pilgrims bound for Mecca for the final leg of what would become his 5,000 mile, 18 month long journey to Mecca.

When he arrives in Mecca, he is a man transformed. We then experience the Hajj as he did over 700 years ago, and, in recognition of its timelessness, we dissolve to the Hajj as it is still performed today, by millions of pilgrims, in some of the most extraordinary and moving IMAX® footage ever presented.

Ibn Battuta would not return home for almost 30 years, reaching over 40 countries and revisiting Mecca five more times to perform the Hajj. He would travel three times farther then Marco Polo. His legacy is one of the greatest travel journals ever recorded. A crater on the moon is named in his honour.

This remarkable and dramatic story begins in modern day Mecca just days before the Hajj is to begin. A seemingly endless stream of white-clad pilgrims arrives in great waves. We get the first glimpse of this incredible gathering never seen before on the Giant Screen, the circling of the masses in this holy and splendid place.

The voice of the narrator (Ben Kingsley) tells us that every year millions of Muslims come to Mecca in Saudi Arabia, the historical home and the holiest place of Islam, to perform the Hajj. It is the greatest recurring assembly of human beings on the planet. We are led back in time to the heart of the film’s story and introduced to one of the most extraordinary travelers and pilgrims of all time, Abu Abdullah Ibnou Battuta (Ibn
Battuta), as we follow him on his first astounding journey to Mecca in search of adventure, knowledge and wisdom.

In 1325, restless and stubborn, this young law student bids a tearful goodbye to his family in Tangier, Morocco and sets out, alone and against much advice to the contrary, for Mecca. He is an exceptional young man about to experience the relentless challenges of a perilous journey where many must turn back and even more perish. Our story follows in his footsteps as he travels across the North African desert, visits the splendid city of Cairo, is thwarted by war at the Red Sea, turns back and heads north to join the legendary Damascus Caravan with thousands of pilgrims, camels, water carriers, beekeepers, bankers, soldiers and musicians, for the final leg of what would become his 5,000 mile, 18 month long journey to Mecca.

We experience the stark beauty of the landscape, the cultural richness of the Islamic golden age, and the constant life-threatening menaces Ibn Battuta faces as he is tested to his limit with attacks by robbers, thirst, starvation, fever and blinding Samoom sandstorms. The dangers are very real, and at the same time there is the kindness and goodness of strangers who help him, but it is ultimately the most unlikely stranger of all who saves him. When Ibn Battuta finally arrives in Mecca, he is a man greatly changed and ready for the final transformation that his first Hajj will bring. We then experience the Hajj as he did over 700 years ago, and, in recognition of its timelessness, we dissolve to the Hajj as it is still performed today, by millions of pilgrims, in some of the most extraordinary and moving IMAX® footage ever presented.

Ibn Battuta would not return home for almost 30 years, reaching over 40 countries and revisiting Mecca five more times to perform the Hajj. He would travel three times farther then Marco Polo. His legacy is one of the greatest travel journal ever recorded. A crater on the moon is named in his honour.
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

November 12, 2008. It is with deep sadness that Cosmic Picture and SK Films announce the tragic death of Chems Eddine Zinoun, the marvelous lead actor in the upcoming film *JOURNEY TO MECCA: In the Footsteps of Ibn Battuta*. Mr. Zinoun died in a car accident yesterday in Casablanca, Morocco, where he lived.

Mr. Zinoun comes from an illustrious artistic family in Morocco and was well known as a dancer and dance teacher. He had recently shifted his career to acting, and after a number of smaller roles, he was cast earlier this year in the lead role of Ibn Battuta in *JOURNEY TO MECCA*. The film was shot in Saudi Arabia and Morocco and its world premiere is set to occur in Abu Dhabi in December 12th of this year.

“Chems is a light whose tragic and untimely death cannot be extinguished. His gentle and kind spirit will live on in all of us, and we pray that his heartfelt and powerful portrayal of Ibn Battuta in the film will touch audiences around the world as deeply as he inspired those who were fortunate enough to work with him. We mourn the loss of an exceptional man, an extraordinary actor and a wonderful friend,” said Cosmic Picture Producers, Taran Davies and Dominic Cunningham-Reid.

“Chems became a friend, before he ever became Ibn Battuta in our wonderful film. I knew he was our Ibn Battuta from the moment he first walked into the Casablanca production offices to audition for a different and smaller role, but he became my friend before he won the lead part,” says Director Bruce Neibaur. “During the days he spent tackling the audition material, he shared a great deal about his life with me. He was a young man acquainted with some hardship and the knowledge and metal of what it takes to create and to strive for perfection. I've never encountered anyone in my 30 plus years of directing dramatic material, who had more challenges to fulfill a role and who worked harder to meet those challenges. If the film is a success, it will be because Chems was our Ibn Battuta.”

To play Ibn Battuta was a huge break for Mr. Zinoun. Battuta is one of the great secular Islamic heroes and one of the most extraordinary travelers in history. In 1325, he left his home in Tangier, Morocco, alone, to make the perilous journey to Mecca to perform the Hajj. He did not return home for almost 30 years, visiting over 40 countries and traveling three times further than Marco Polo. The journal of his travels – *The Rihla* – is one of the greatest travel documents ever recorded and is still used today as a vital source of cultural, architectural, social, political and geographic history of many countries.
The producers set out to make a truly important film for both the Muslim and non-Muslim world, honouring the great Ibn Battuta as well as celebrating the Hajj, which Ibn Battuta returned to Mecca at least five times in his years of travel to perform.

“We are heartbroken about the loss of Chems. He was a very special and loving man who won everyone’s respect and hearts,” says Producer and SK Films CEO Jonathan Barker. “We were blessed to be given Chems as our lead actor. He inhabited and devoured the role of Ibn Battuta and delivered a powerful performance. He rose to the many challenges in the most remarkable, passionate and disciplined way. As a proud Moroccan, he considered playing the role of one of the greatest Moroccan heroes a genuine privilege. I had a wonderful dinner with him recently sharing many laughs and warm stories, including how proud he was of his father and family. I asked him how he felt about being in a film that would be actively shown for many decades around the world. He said he felt grateful and honoured to be in this film - especially if it meant more understanding of the richness of his culture and more respect between the West and the East, and between Muslims and non-Muslims.”

Line producer Daniel Ferguson spent considerable time with Chems and formed a close bond with him. “Chems reached deep within himself to find the essence of Ibn Battuta. He had poise and presence beyond his years. He spoke with his eyes as much as with his voice. His appetite and good nature were contagious and through his enormous passion and his constant humor, he touched everyone on the set. On the last day of shooting, we filmed a scene in which Ibn Battuta has his head shaved to celebrate a new beginning. At the moment we wrapped, so many of us watched the role disappear and a dear friend emerge. When my daughter Irma was born last week, Chems left me the most wonderful message, welcoming her into the world. Though she will never meet him, I will make sure she grows up to know the man behind the 14th century Tangerine costume -- the man whose grace, wit and perseverance inspired more people more than he will ever know.”

Hassam Ghancy who played the Highwayman in the film and a fellow Moroccan, developed a close friendship with Chems. “I am without words to express the deepness of my sorrow. We become like brothers in the film’s story and stayed like brothers when the film ended. Far above the desert sands, I salute his great spirit and will miss Le Danseur Berbère greatly.”

The entire cast, crew, and production team send their condolences to his family in this time of loss and grieving.

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C’est avec une immense tristesse que Cosmic Picture et SK Films vous font part de la mort tragique de Chems Eddine Zinoun, le formidable acteur principal du film IMAX® JOURNEY TO MECCA: In the Footsteps of Ibn Battuta, dont la sortie est attendue prochainement. M. Zinoun a perdu la vie dans un accident de voiture, hier, à Casablanca au Maroc, la ville où il résidait.

Issu d’une illustre famille d’artistes du Maroc, M. Zinoun était bien connu comme danseur et professeur de danse. Il avait récemment amorcé une nouvelle carrière comme acteur, et après quelques rôles plus modestes, il fut choisi il y a quelques mois pour interpréter Ibn Battuta, le personnage principal du film IMAX® JOURNEY TO MECCA. Ce film fut tourné en Arabie Saoudite et au Maroc, et son lancement en première mondiale est prévu pour le 12 décembre prochain.

« Chems est une lumière que la mort tragique et prématurée ne pourra éteindre. Sa douce et délicate présence continuera de vivre en nous tous. Nous souhaitons que son interprétation d’Ibn Battuta - si puissante et authentique - sache rejoindre les spectateurs à travers le monde, un peu comme Chems a su inspirer ceux qui ont eu la chance de travailler avec lui. Nous pleurons la perte d’un homme exceptionnel. C’était un acteur extraordinaire et un ami fantastique », se rappellent Taran Davies et Dominic Cunningham-Reid, producteurs chez Cosmic Picture.

« Chems est devenu un ami avant même d’être Ibn Battuta pour le beau film que nous avons fait ensemble. J’ai su qu’il serait notre Ibn Battuta dès le moment où il est entré dans nos bureaux de production à Casablanca. Il venait passer une audition pour un autre rôle, moins important, mais il est devenu mon ami avant de remporter le rôle principal », se souvient le réalisateur du film Bruce Neibaur. « Pendant les jours qu’il a passé à s’approprier le matériel de l’audition, Chems a partagé de grands pans de sa vie avec moi. C’était un jeune homme qui avait eu à relever de nombreux défis, et cela lui a donné tout le cran qu’il fallait pour créer et viser la perfection. En trente ans de carrière comme directeur d’acteurs, je n’ai jamais vu personne qui ait été confronté à autant d’épreuves pour jouer un rôle, et qui ait travaillé aussi fort pour les surmonter. Si le film remporte du succès, ce sera parce que Chems était notre Ibn Battuta »

Jouer Ibn Battuta représentait une belle avancée dans la carrière de M. Zinoun. Battuta est l’un des grands héros laïcs du monde musulman, et l’un des voyageurs les plus extraordinaires de l’histoire. En 1325, il quitta Tangiers, au Maroc, pour entreprendre le
dangereux périple vers La Mecque afin de faire le Hajj. Il ne revint pas chez lui pendant près de trente ans, et voyagea sur une distance trois fois plus grande que celle parcourue par Marco Polo. Son récit de voyage — le Rihla — est l’une des plus grandes archives de voyage qui soit arrivée jusqu’à nous, et on le considère toujours comme un essentiel de l’histoire culturelle, architecturale, sociale, politique et géographique de bien des pays.

Les producteurs mettent tout en œuvre pour faire un film qui laissera sa marque tant dans le monde musulman qu’ailleurs, en honorant le grand Ibn Battuta et la célébration du Hajj, pour lequel il retourna à La Mecque à plus de cinq reprises pendant ses voyages.

« Nous avons le cœur brisé par la mort de Chems. C’était un homme généreux, qui a su toucher le cœur de tout le monde », témoigne le producteur et PDG de SK Films Jonathan Barker. « Nous étions profondément chanceux d’avoir Chems comme acteur principal. Il s’est approprié entièrement le rôle d’Ibn Battuta, et nous a donné une interprétation puissante. Il a fait face aux nombreux défis auxquels il était confronté de manière remarquable, avec rigueur et passion. En Marocain fier, il considérait que de jouer le rôle de l’un des plus grands héros de son pays était un authentique bonheur. Récemment, j’ai eu un repas mémorable avec lui, où l’on a partagé des rires et toutes sortes d’histoires. Je lui ai demandé comment il se sentait face à la perspective de prendre part à un film qui serait fréquemment présenté à travers le monde pendant plusieurs décennies. Il m’a répondu qu’il était reconnaissant et que c’était un honneur pour lui d’être dans ce film, particulièrement s’il pouvait amener une plus grande compréhension de la richesse de sa culture et un plus grand respect entre l’Occident et l’Orient, entre les musulmans et les non-musulmans. »

Hassan Ghancy, qui a été son compagnon de route et qui est lui aussi Marocain, a eu l’occasion de développer une grande complicité avec Chems. « Je suis sans mot pour exprimer tout le chagrin que j’éprouve. Dans l’histoire du film, nous étions comme des frères. Nous sommes restés comme des frères, même après le tournage. Bien au-delà des sables du désert, je rends hommage à sa mémoire. Le Danseur berbère va me manquer terriblement… »

Toute la distribution, ainsi que les membres de l’équipe de tournage et de production transmettent leurs plus sincères condoléances à la famille de Chems. À notre façon, nous partageons leur perte et leur tristesse.
As a Christian, I am delighted to commend this beautiful film to all those seeking to understand Islam and its contribution to the human family. I am quite sure that the ‘Journey to Mecca’ will not only help create a better understanding of Islam in the West but also strengthen Muslim communities around the world in their faith and its values of tolerance and harmony.

Lord Carey of Clifton
Former Archbishop of Canterbury
Co-Chairman, Council of 100 leaders, World Economic Forum Initiative for Dialogue, Action and Understanding between the Western and Islamic World.

I am pleased to give my support and blessings for the ‘Journey to Mecca’...I understand this film is a bold and important new effort to promote peace and harmony between people of different religious traditions which is one of my lifelong commitments. I believe that in order to have harmony between different religious traditions we must have mutual respect and it is therefore important that the correct information of other traditions is shared by other believers. It is my hope this film will make a contribution towards this effort.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama

‘Journey to Mecca’ offers an understanding and experience of Islam that comes at a critical time in the history of the encounter of Islam and Christianity, the Muslim World and the West. We are challenged today to distinguish sharply between the religion of Islam and the acts of terrorists. Moreover, in a matter of decades, Muslims have become our neighbors as Islam has gone from being invisible to the second and third largest religion in Europe and America respectively. Journey to Mecca will prove an important component in the promotion of religious pluralism at a time when mutual understanding and respect have never been more important.

Professor John L. Esposito,
Professor of Religion and International Affairs and of Islamic Studies at Georgetown University,
Founding Director of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding and the Editor-in-Chief of The Oxford Encyclopedia of Modern Islam and The Oxford History of Islam.

Having served as the University Professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University for the past 22 years and written approximately 50 books about Islam, I have throughout my career sought to teach and seek knowledge about religion and philosophy. It is one of my sincere hopes that your IMAX documentary film project on the Hajj will help to promote a better understanding of the Islamic world in these times of uncertainty. I offer my support to ‘Journey to Mecca’, which I believe will be a great help to bridge the divide between Islam and the West.

Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr,
As the Imam of Masjid al-Farah in New York City and founder of the Cordoba Initiative, a multi-faith organization whose objective is to heal the relationship between the Western and Islamic worlds, I very much support the efforts of ‘Journey to Mecca’. By crafting a documentary that narrates the once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage every Muslim must undergo, the Producers have crafted a film that furthers inter-religious understanding, underlines the spiritual journey by improving the nature of the discourse about Islam.

Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf,
Founder, The Cordoba Initiative

I am the Executive Director of the American Society for Muslim Advancement, which is a non profit organization dedicated to building bridges between the American public and American Muslims through activities in culture, arts, academia and current affairs.

Having worked as an expert and narrator for National Geographic’s “Inside Mecca” and other media outlets on a number of films about Islam, I believe that ‘Journey to Mecca’ could really help to bring about a positive change of perception of people in the West towards Islam and Muslim sentiments towards people in the West.

Daisy Khan,
Executive Director of American Society for Muslim Advancement
Worldwide Giant Screen Distributor of Journey to Mecca

For further information on press kit, EPK, educational materials, leasing and viewing.

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