

[Finding results for](#)



[Mecca](#) [University of Toronto](#) [Hajj](#) [Biology](#) [Ibn](#) [Muslims](#)

SNAPFREYLINKS

[Blog](#) | [Press Releases](#) | [Teacher's Guides](#) | [Community](#)

BIG MOVIE ZONE

EVERY IMAX® AND GIANT SCREEN FILM AND THEATER WORLDWIDE

FEATURES & REVIEWS

Find Theaters:

Find Movie:

Find Theaters By Movie:

Enter ZIP, City, State or Country



Enter Movie Title



Enter Movie Title



[Advanced Search](#)

THEATER LISTINGS

FEATURES & REVIEWS

BROWSE MOVIES

CLIPS & TRAILERS

COMING SOON

STORE

Journey to Mecca Interview: Producer Jonathan Barker



Jonathan Barker (right) with Chems Eddine Zinoun. Photo courtesy SK Films.

Written by: BMZ Staff

Date: January 30, 2009

Producer Jonathan Barker took some time out to chat with BMZ on his latest project, JOURNEY TO MECCA which tells the tale of one of the greatest travelers in history Ibn Battuta and the Hajj.



Category: [Interviews](#)

Jonathan Barker, President and CEO of SK Films, has produced and distributed classic Giant Screen films such as *Bugs!*, *Straight Up: Helicopters in Action* and *Into the Deep*. His latest film, [Journey to Mecca: In the Footsteps of Ibn Battuta](#) follows the great traveler, Ibn Battuta, on his epic journey from Tangier to Mecca in 1325.

Big Movie Zone: First off, can you tell us a bit about your background in filmmaking, and how you got involved in the Giant Screen industry?

Jonathan Barker: I started my career as an actor, then I became a lawyer, then I became a film executive. I was both in the public sector funding films through a government funding agency in Canada, and then in the private sector in a major production and distribution company.

I got headhunted to run the film business for IMAX Corp. which I did for about 4 years in the 90's. I was asked by the IMAX founders, who still owned IMAX at the time, to run the film business for them. I started working for Bob Kerr and Graeme Ferguson, and eventually worked for Brad [Wechsler] and Rich [Gelfond] when they took over IMAX.

After a while I left, I spent 12 years running with a partner what we built into a very significant television company in Canada called Shaftsbury Films. We started SK Films as a subsidiary of Shaftsbury Films. We ended that partnership with Shaftsbury last year, and SK is now fully owned by myself and Bob Kerr, the IMAX founder.

BMZ: Were you always interested in documentaries?

JB: I've had a pretty broad interest. I began my career in features until I did IMAX. I had not actually been in documentaries prior to going to IMAX. But I was obviously very attracted to the Giant Screen, and the visual possibilities, and very quickly got my mind opened to what was able to be accomplished in this medium in terms of reaching school children in particular, and getting involved in films that have the opportunity to really impact people over a long period of time.

BMZ: What are the origins of *Journey to Mecca*, and how did it come about?

JB: [It was] very straightforward really. I have two producing partners on the film, Taran Davies and Dominic Cunningham-Reid. They are the ones who conceived the project. Originally the idea was IMAX and the Hajj. The intention all along from the very conception of the film, before I was involved, was to give Muslims an opportunity to celebrate something incredibly important to them, and give non-Muslims a window into another world that they aren't actually physically able to go to, even more than many other IMAX films. For non-Muslims, [the film] takes you to a place you literally can't go. You're forbidden.

What they chose to tell was really the broadest appreciation of the Hajj, and [they] picked a character, Ibn Battuta, who is the greatest traveler in medieval history, and one of the greatest travelers who has ever lived. He traveled three times as far as Marco Polo, and is essentially unknown in the West, although a great secular hero to Muslims.

The concept was to follow the journey of this great traveler on his first travel, which was from Tangier to Mecca in 1325 as a 20-year-old law student. When he got to Mecca, he didn't come back for 30 years and traveled the world. We've reproduced his first journey to Mecca at that time, and the film transitions to show the Hajj as it was then and as it is today through the eyes and words of our great 14th century traveler.

BMZ: How difficult was it shooting in a sacred place such as Mecca, and the Hajj in particular?

JB: I've been involved in films that have taken the IMAX camera onto space shuttles into space. I've been involved in 3D films where you go to the bottom of the ocean, and where you shoot macro photography of insects in Borneo. This is by far the hardest thing I've ever done.

BMZ: Really!

JB: Absolutely, by a mile. The hardest thing I've ever been involved in.

BMZ: Was part of it the red tape to film in Mecca?

JB: There were three big reasons. First of all, getting permission to go to Mecca to film. My producing partner, Dominic Cunningham-Reid lived in Riyadh for two and half years to get permission, which he eventually secured from the King of Saudi Arabia himself. One of [the King's] titles is Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, and literally things out of the ordinary do not happen there without the permission of the King. And you don't sort of just phone up the King.

So Dominic spent a long time gaining trust, and getting to know people in Saudi Arabia, and living there in order to ultimately get the permit. The result of that was we were able to get two kinds of access that are quite exceptional. One is access to take IMAX cameras inside of the Holy Mosque. You don't normally get inside there to film. And the second thing is we were given permission to be immediately overhead in a Saudi Air Force helicopter. So we've got both inside the Mosque and the aerial footage which are first time ever stuff.

Part two of what was extremely challenging was really the physical shooting in Mecca. As you can imagine, there are 3 million pilgrims who congregate in this location at the same time each year. We had three crews, a total of 85 people, each attached to one of the three IMAX cameras we used to cover the event. Just getting to camera locations and getting in position was phenomenally challenging because you had to work your way through 3 million people. These are 3 million people who are there doing what for many of them is the most important thing in their entire lives. So you must be utterly respectful of them because they're there for a higher purpose than making a movie. And of course the producers and director were, all of us, non-Muslim. We were not allowed there, so we had to produce and direct the film remotely because no non-Muslims are allowed inside of Mecca.

BMZ: Was the entire film crew Muslim then?

JB: The entire crew was Muslim, and before we went, we had to train the crew. We scoured the world for the three best available Muslim cinematographers. There were none that we were aware of who had shot in IMAX. We brought [the three cinematographers] to LA, and [brought in] Dave Douglas who's shot many space films and trained many of the astronauts for the space films. He has shot over 40 IMAX films, and he trained the three Muslim cinematographers in LA in advance of going to Mecca. We [also] had to train the Muslim crew which came from over 20 countries around the world. We had a week in Jeddah to try and get things ironed out.

The third kind of challenge of making the film was when we did the dramatic portion of the film, which was re-creating the journey of Ibn Battuta. We re-created 14th century Mecca in the desert of Morocco. [We wanted] the film to be respectful of and accepted by the broadest possible swath of Islamic religious, historical and cultural experts. We could not afford to get it wrong.

I had assumed naively that somewhere there would exist what Mecca looked like at any given time throughout its history, and that turned out not to be true. So we had done drawings for our art department to reflect what the Mosque should look like, and there were these pillars of a certain shape. We were building the Mosque in the desert in Morocco in a location that had the potential for great wind, so we had to build it very solidly. We had concrete foundations that the pillars were built into. When the pillars were up, we got word from another leading expert that those were totally unacceptable, and we had to literally blow up the sets and start over. We had to dynamite the set

and start over, which was extremely difficult and challenging!

BMZ: With your desire to accurately represent Islamic history and culture, what do you hope audiences, especially non-Muslims, understand about the Muslim world after watching this film?

JB: We've of course opened in a couple locations so far. It's very gratifying to see the kind of response we're getting which is exactly what we hoped for, which is really a kind of "Wow, I never knew that!" or "Wow, I'm understanding something I never had any idea about."

Frankly in a post-9/11 world, there's a knee-jerk reaction of fear. And our intent with this film is to overcome the knee-jerk reaction of fear when you hear the word "Muslim" or you see pictures of three million Muslims in one location.

You actually learn in the film in a very beautifully integrated way what values are being espoused by these people. The values that are being celebrated are just impossible to see in any other way but a positive light. We're celebrating determination, charity, equality amongst people. Everybody dresses in two lengths of plain white cloth, and the whole purpose of that is we are all equal fundamentally.

On another level, you have one of the greatest travelers who has ever lived. I have hardly found a single non-Muslim, other than academics, who have ever heard of Ibn Battuta. Yet, virtually every Muslim you ask, "Have you ever heard of Ibn Battuta?" They will immediately say, "Yes." So we like the idea of opening up people's eyes to great people and great heroes who we know nothing about, and who are every bit as heroic as our heroes in the West.

BMZ: I understand the film's lead, Chems Eddine Zinoun, recently passed away in a car accident after filming took place.

JB: Yes, it was extremely sad. Chems Eddine Zinoun plays Ibn Battuta. [His passing] was two weeks to the day from when he finished his dialogue replacement and voice over work in Montreal. He flew back that night to Casablanca, which is his home, and two weeks later he passed away in a car accident. It was extremely tragic. It was very sad.

It was a very beautiful experience to have his family - his mother, his father, his brother, and his sister-in-law - join us in Abu Dhabi for the world premiere. That was a very moving experience for them to see him up on the screen in such a real way as only IMAX can do.

BMZ: We know there is another film that includes footage of the pilgrimage, and which may address Islam to some degree which is slated for release about one year from now (*Arabia 3D*). From what you know of that project, what are the key elements that distinguish your film in the marketplace?

JB: Well, from what I know about the film, it's more in the vein of a travelogue film, whereas ours has a very specific story, and a very specific message to open people's minds to another way of thinking.

BMZ: And you have some first time footage within the Hajj.

JB: I know that we had access that, so far to my knowledge, no one else has achieved. I know that, as of now, I'm told by our partners in Saudi Arabia, that no one else has been granted similar position to date.

BMZ: Where do you see the success or even survival of traditional / documentary Large Format films with proliferation of DMR films, digital 3D and IMAX digital screens?

JB: Well, here's what I actually think, and this film is a perfect example of it. I mean, it's going to take some time to judge its success. But I had a conversation with a film critic only two days ago who said to me, "Really, I've stopped reviewing IMAX films, because I find that they are aiming at the lowest common denominator, and they're not interesting anymore." And he said, "I was really impressed with your film because you haven't shied away from sophisticated ideas while still making it interesting to everybody," which was a lovely thing to hear.

I do think that a continued flow of formulaic IMAX films will doom the industry to death. It's pretty obvious that there's almost a formula for making these films. There are many beautiful images in many of the films, [but] I do think that if we continue to make formulaic films, there will not be much of a future in it.

The other side of that coin is, if we're going to survive as an industry, it's going to require everybody, not just the producers, not just the distributors, but more importantly, the theaters to really take hold of this issue, and get behind the work it takes to get an audience for things that aren't formulaic. That's where it becomes very challenging because it does require work. You have to make an extra effort to convince people.

In a Hollywood film, there's day-and-date, and it's something obvious to sell, and there's a huge campaign. Whereas we by definition have to have a much more grassroots, targeted effort to get people out to these films. It won't be money that solves it because there'll never be enough money to have Hollywood-style campaigns. It has to be at a grassroots level. In the museum theaters, there are a huge number of people who attend these institutions anyway. It's how do we find better and more effective ways of interesting them into coming into the theater. If we just continue to give the same things over and over again, they will eventually stop coming.

I had a very interesting discussion the other day with one of the leading museum directors who did say to me, "I think

the time has come for us to find ways to put films into our schedule that we wouldn't have taken before, but that takes us in new directions, and are important for us to show." It was a very interesting comment, and we have to find a way to get those audiences in order to have a better future for all of us. So I thought that was very encouraging.

BMZ: Any upcoming projects you can let us know about for SK Films?

JB: Yes, we've been working on for a long time *Flight of the Butterflies*, which is another dramatic documentary. We are interweaving the documentary of the greatest insect migration on earth -- the monarch butterfly -- with the scientific detective story of a University of Toronto biology professor who spent 30 years [studying the migration]. That will be a 3D film for IMAX and other Giant Screens, which we hope to be shooting this summer. We hope to be able to announce that within the next couple of months.

We've leased *Bugs!* to close to 200 theaters, and we have been getting a lot of push from the theaters themselves, "When are you coming out with your next one like that, because it really worked for us." So we've been trying very hard to get this one green lit. And we're getting close.

BMZ: Yeah, I really enjoyed *Bugs*.

JB: Great, yeah, we're intending to out-do ourselves the next time around.

Features & Reviews Search

Feature/Review Title

Movie Title/Keyword

Author

[Advanced Search](#)

Features & Reviews by Category

- [News](#)
- [Interviews](#)
- [Reviews](#)
- [Press Releases](#)
- [BMZ Spotlights](#)
- [Columns](#)
- [Stories](#)

Latest News

- [Video: Grand Canyon Adventure's Shana and Cree Watahomigie](#)
- [Toni Myers discusses Jim Carrey's narration for Under the Sea](#)
- [Big Picture Big Sound reviews Dolphins Blu-ray](#)
- [Howard Hall on filming "Under the Sea"](#)
- [Video: Appleton IMAX to turn into church](#)

[View All >>](#)

VV

Super 8 Film to DVD
Xmas is coming, transfer your film Super8 8mm 16mm to DVD - Quality
www.TorontoHomeMovies.com

Theaters Imax
Find Local Movie Theaters Imaxes at Great Prices.
www.Pronto.com

Get Your Hajj Vaccines
Specialised consultations and vaccinations for Hajj travel.
www.medisys.ca

Learn How to Make Movies
Directing, Producing, Editing Screenwriting, Cinematography
www.pointpark.edu

Science Films from NFB.ca
Entertaining & Educational Films "Cosmic Zoom" and More for Free
NFB.ca/ScienceFilm

New Features

- [Journey to Mecca Interview: Producer Jonathan Barker](#)
- [Animalopolis Interview: Producer Paul Novros](#)
- [Mysteries of the Great Lakes Interview: Producer/Director David Lickley](#)

New Movie Reviews

- [The Dark Knight: The IMAX Experience](#) By: Ann Coates
- [The Dark Knight: The IMAX Experience](#) By: Ross Anthony
- [Kung Fu Panda: The IMAX Experience](#) By: Ross Anthony

BMZ Newsletter

Get up-to-date information on new and upcoming big movies, the latest big movie buzz, multimedia clips, and the latest Big Movie Zone features.

Check to subscribe to:

Big Movie Zone Newsletter

Email:

Category:

Articles Archive: Newest to Oldest

Select an Article

Reviews Archive: Newest to Oldest

Select a Review

<p>Jobs In Tv And Film Find more sources/options for what your looking for www.webcrawler.com</p>	<p>eDigitalQuran.com - Gifts Eid Sale! Low Prices, Buy Now Perfect Gift for Any Occasion www.eDigitalQuran.com</p>	<p>Movie Imax Find Local Movie Theaters Imaxes at Great Prices. www.Pronto.com</p>	<p>Single Muslim Browse Photo's of Muslim Singles. Join for Free. 200,000+ Members. SingleMuslim.com</p>
--	--	---	---

[Home](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Who We Are](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Copyright](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

© 2006-2009 Big Movie Zone, All Rights Reserved.