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Imax producer goes the distance

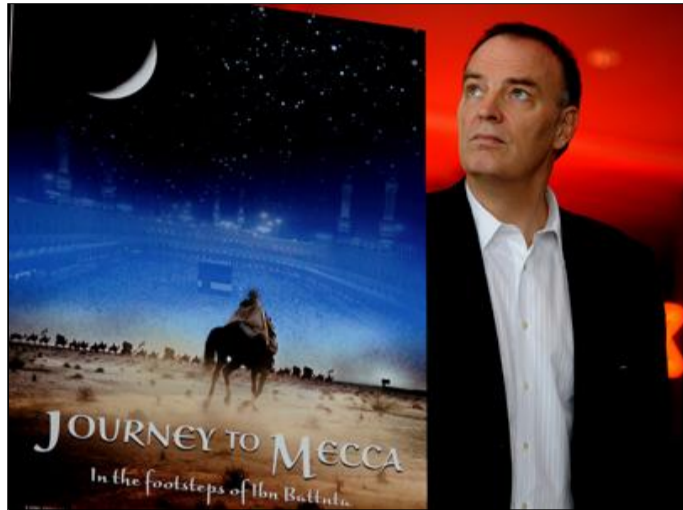
Jonathan Barker's Journey to Mecca fraught with challenges

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MARTIN KNELMAN

Veteran Toronto producer Jonathan Barker could fairly be described as the Duke of Imax, but it is hard to believe any previous experience could have prepared him for the logistical obstacles he faced on *Journey to Mecca*, which opens tomorrow at the Ontario Science Centre.

Filmed in Arabic and English, this \$13 million (U.S.), 45-minute epic tells the story of Ibn Battuta, a law student who left his home in Tangier in 1325 to make his way to Mecca, the historic centre of Islam, culminating with his first Hajj.



COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR
Toronto producer Jonathan Barker's new film is 'Journey to Mecca.' (Feb. 3, 2009)

It is the duty of every Muslim to make the pilgrimage at least once in a lifetime. Battuta wound up being on the road for 29 years and travelling three times the distance covered by Marco Polo while surviving countless hurdles.

Barker wasn't on the road for quite as long, but it took a capacity for endurance, as well as a gambler's instinct, a talent for crisis management, and nerves of steel to bring this ambitious and risky project to the world's biggest screens.

"The first challenge was securing the permit to do it," Barker explained over lunch the other day. That meant spending many months persuading the King of Saudi Arabia to give approval.

The next great challenge was assembling 85 members of the film crew from over 20 countries, as well as 4,500 extras, and helping them make their way through 3 million people to the camera locations.

Then there was the script. It took 41 drafts to get it right.

Barker and his two producing partners, Dominic Cunningham-Reid and Taran Davies, had to be stationed 10 miles away because non-Muslims are not allowed to come closer to Mecca.

"We had to do our work from a remote location by phone," Barker explains.

Imax has branded itself by taking adventure-seeking spectators to places they could never see, such as outer space, the deep sea and the top of Mount Everest.

Almost 700 years after Battuta made his journey, the Hajj ranks as history's longest-running massive annual gathering of pilgrims. Every year about 3 million Muslims make the trek to Saudi Arabia for rituals that have been performed for 1,400 years.

Journey to Mecca uses a combination of drama (shot on a set in Morocco, with actors telling Battuta's story) and documentary footage from Saudi Arabia (with breathtaking close-ups of the 2007 Hajj, including images aerial shots of the massive crowd, and the longest camel caravan you've ever seen).

Cunningham-Reid and Davies came up with the idea, then recruited Barker because of his experience and expertise with Imax. For several years in the mid-1990s, Barker had been in charge of production and distribution for Imax Corp.

Now after 12 years working largely in TV production at Shaftesbury Films (where he was a partner of founder Christina Jennings), Barker has become entrenched in the world of Imax once again through his new company, SK Productions.

"There has to be a reason for making a film in Imax," he explains. "The subject matter has to be suitable for the medium. And the experience of watching the film has to be enhanced by virtue of Imax. Not every subject lends itself to a giant canvas. The Hajj is one that definitely does."

But the world of Imax is very different from that of regular movies. Primary Imax screens tend to be in museums, which set higher ticket prices (around \$20).

Their appetite is for movies not longer than 45 minutes, so they can schedule hourly screenings. And they reach a different audience.

Given the huge Muslim population and the current interest in Islamic history, there's reason to predict *Journey to Mecca* will join the list of popular Imax classics including *The Dream Is Alive*, *Bugs* and *Into the Deep* – each of which played for years all over the world and took in hundreds of million of dollars.

Barker, though still busy making deals for Mecca venues, is already looking forward to his next Imax challenge – *Flight of the Butterfly*, about the migration of the monarch butterfly.

Journey to Mecca: In the Footsteps of Ibn Battuta screens in conjunction with the *Sultans of Science: 1000 Years of Knowledge Rediscovered* exhibit at the Ontario Science Centre (770 Don Mills Rd., 416-696-1000). ontariosciencecentre.ca