

# ON FOREIGN SOIL: SHOOTING *Cairo Time*

By Tammy Stone

The scene: Cairo, Egypt. The Nile River, lifeblood of an ancient civilization, is nocturnally ablaze with thousands of modern-day city lights. Through the camera lens, however, the water does not appear in all its spectacular glory as backdrop to events unfolding in the foreground. A very lonely woman stands on her balcony talking to her estranged husband on a cell phone, not knowing when she might see him again. The solution – get down there, about one kilometre from the Nile itself, along the densely coagulating streets and cheat some reflections off the river to make it look like it is being lit up by the city.

The result of director of photography Luc Montpellier's idea – the execution of which was no small task in a chaotic city of 20 million people – is just one striking scene of many in *Cairo Time*, Ruba Nadda's second feature film. With great sensitivity and

meticulous attention to detail, the film chronicles the journey of Juliette (Patricia Clarkson) as she travels to Cairo to be with her husband (Tom McCamus), who, as it turns out, cannot be around to spend time with her. He is trapped in Gaza and doesn't know when the Israelis will lift their blockade. He solicits his friend and colleague Tareq (Alexander Siddig) to make Juliette feel at home, and a romance slowly, achingly unfolds amid an environment that is, at turns, inviting and menacing.

Over his 15-odd years shooting films, Luc Montpellier csc has built an impressive résumé, bringing his keen and artistic eye to diverse projects ranging from Guy Maddin's supercharged visual feast *The Saddest Music in the World* (2003) and Sarah Polley's elegant, somber look at love, *Away from Her* (2006) to Clement Virgo's kinetic and atmospheric *Poor Boy's Game* (2007). In 2005,

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Montpellier teamed up with Nadda on her first feature, *Sabah*, which only cemented a creative collaboration that began years earlier on several of Nadda's short film projects.

"I met Luc accidentally and I just stuck to him like glue. His eye is spectacular. He is always surprising me. Luc always does this to me – he one-ups my ideas and I love that. I love that he can jump into my brain and come out doing somersaults. We have total shorthand, and I love that as a director he always has my back and more importantly, the back of the story I'm always desperately trying to tell. He will not walk away from a scene until he's got my shot, no matter what the cost."

A rough shoot by anyone's standards – many red tape issues needed to be negotiated as Nadda and her Canadian crew charted territory entirely unfamiliar to most of them – *Cairo Time* is inspired by some real-life experiences Nadda has had visiting Cairo, first with her family as a child, and then later with her sister. "The idea came to me visually at first," she says. "I think it stemmed from my first visit to Cairo with my family and watching my mother (who is Palestinian, a blonde with green eyes) land in the airport and having men constantly approach her. I pocketed that image until I thought about it again a few years ago and the story came to me – always visually, at first, of this blonde woman being stuck alone in Cairo."

Montpellier recalls that his first ideas about the film were primarily visual too. Never having been to Cairo before, he and Nada secured funding for a 10-day trip to the bustling city prior to the shoot. While there, Montpellier says he took over 2,000 photographs that informed the look of the film.


"I wanted to try to hone in on details that would really inspire me," says Montpellier. "Ruba and I would try to set up shots, just the two of us, through a still camera (a Canon 5D), and a lot of those shots ended up in the film; a lot of frames were very much discovered through this kind of visual essay of stills. One thing with still photography is there's a great benefit in capturing the completely singular detail. The still photographer has only himself or herself to create the energy behind a photograph, and I think a lot of the frames in *Cairo Time* needed to have that kind of energy and sensibility."

Indeed, *Cairo Time* plays out like a poetic series of keenly directed moments, with a myriad of complex emotions simmering under the surface of very finely wrought, nuanced and subtle gestures; a sideways glance, the brush of a hand and a piece of clothing gently flowing under the yellow-hot sun are all uniquely visual cues into a world of unspoken feelings and veiled passion. "We spent endless afternoons discussing how to show Cairo in an un-travelogue sort of manner," says Nadda. "I wanted the film to feel and look stunning in the classic sense – like a throwback to an old-fashioned movie [critics have noted that *Cairo Time* is evocative of *Brief Encounter*, David Lean's gentle 1944 love story] or hearkening back to the restraints and tensions of something like a Jane Austen novel, but at the same time I wanted to contemporize the movie and get the feel of this majestic city right. Without Luc's help, his commitment and his backing of



Patricia Clarkson

Photo credit: Colin Hagan



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our visual plan of the movie, there is no way we could have pulled off the lyrical, languid beauty that so many people are talking about now.”

Montpellier points out that Super 35 mm (widescreen) was the appropriate format to use in the shoot for a number of reasons, from the regal crispness of its look to the fact that the local crew he worked with (in addition to his own team, including camera operator Andris Matiss) was very well versed in the use of this format. The challenges, however, were plenty. “Whenever you make a film, it’s sometimes very much like going to war,” he muses. “You have a very finite amount of time to tell your story and hopefully you made sure by sitting down with the director and designer and key team what is exactly necessary. I think that’s how the best films are made; you shoot the film in your head before you actually go out into production.”

Still, they couldn’t prepare for the sheer chaos and uncontrolled nature of the streets of Cairo, and the bureaucracy of trying to shoot in all their desired locations, often with local equipment. “We don’t usually [have access to] North American equipment in Egypt,” he says, pointing to a lot of creative engineering and rigging his crew devised to get their desired street shots. “I really had to let go of what I knew to enable things to happen in a very organic and fluid way. Having too many expectations of how things are done would have really stopped us in our tracks, so the attitude was, let’s just throw everything into the mix, but still have a precise idea of what we want to do.”

“Digital technology was used in a pre-visualizing kind of way,” he says. “There was a big leap of faith. I did all of those tests [with stills] and being able to process these raw files and give myself



Photo credit: Colin Hogan

at least a frame of reference for what we wanted to achieve was the second best thing.” He adds that digital technology was also used to make DIs (digital intermediates; he worked with trusted long-time colleague Mark Kueper, a DI colorist at Technicolor Creative Services in Toronto) that could then be sent back to Egypt, so the images could be assessed and refined, a necessary effort given his determination to render a very specific Cairo on screen as naturally as possible.

“Lately, I’m very much into what I call poetic realism, and that is how natural lighting can have a very structured feel to it but done in a very naturalistic kind of way; light happening naturally on a set and motivated from a source but choreographed within a frame in a creative way to create an overall atmosphere and effect. That’s how I saw *Cairo Time* – the world needed to feel like a character in

the film, so sets needed to light themselves as a motivation.”

In the end, Montpellier cites his deference to Nadda and their extraordinary working relationship as his guiding principles when approaching this shoot. “Because this is such a personal story [of hers],” he says, “I needed to immerse myself in what Ruba was trying to say because I think that’s necessary for every cinematographer, to feel a responsibility to the material.

“I think of myself as a method cinematographer, in a sense. I try to find the voice photographically in every film as opposed to me imposing something I prefer over something else. I think there’s no way to disconnect myself from trends that I might use but I really don’t think that’s my service as a cinematographer. For me, it’s to enrich the script and enrich the photography and the story visually.”