

Ali CHERKAOUI

En exclusivité,
Ali Cherkaoui
nous parle depuis
le tournage dans le désert
tunisien du film *Nine miles
Down* d'Anthony Waller avec
Adrian Paul, Nick Nolte
et Kate Nauta... Il nous
parle également
de *Benjamin Gates 2*
qui vient de sortir
en salles et de son
travail aux côtés
des grands :
Martin
Scorsese,
M. Night
Shyamalan,
Laïla
Marrakchi
et les
autres...

Exclusively, Ali Cherkaoui is talking to us from the shoot, in the Tunisian desert of Anthony Waller's film "Nine Miles Down" with Adrian Paul, Nick Nolte and Kate Nauta ... He also talking to us about "Benjamin Gates 2" which has just been released in cinemas and the film currently in post-production, "The Happening" directed by M. Night Shyamalan

First of all, what is the work of an assistant director ?

That very term of "Assistant Director" can be misleading ... For the neophyte, this can be confusing and suggests that he is a kind of "director-to-be" or "personal assistant to the director" ... In fact, the First Assistant Director is one of the production executives serving the film as it is envisioned by the director (and not - nuance - at the personal service of the director).

His main mission is to completely relieve him from the entire organization of filming and coordination so that he can dedicate himself completely to the 'mise-en-scene' of his film. (Not to be confused with the logistics of the film: management of the sets, base camps, meals, travel, crew transport & accommodation... etc ... which are under the responsibility of locations and production departments)

It is therefore a job that starts, in general, at least on the first day of preparation of the film and ends on the last day of filming.

The first assistant-director's first mission is to generate a script breakdown and a shooting schedule .

The script breakdown is a translation of the artistic elements of the screenplay in technical resources and specific demands for each department (art department, props, costumes, camera, stunts, picture vehicles, special effects ... etc ...)

Once established, it is possible to generate all sorts of lists and documents allowing a good follow up of the film preparation : cast lists, bits list (for casting), sets list (to follow up the location scouting process), breakdowns detailing the extras for each scene, picture vehicles, special effects ... etc ... All this is then grouped in a sort of big bible called "The General Breakdown" of the film ("Script Breakdown" in English).

On another side, the shooting schedule is a kind of large projected planning of the film shoot . The first assistant director's mission is to estimate from a screenplay, the time required to shoot the film and to organize shoot days according to the main parameters: groupings of the sets & locations, cast members, day shoot , night shoot then secondary parameters that are specific to the film: as for example, certain technical requirements, special effects, stunts, etc ...

This can become a real headache when opposite parameters come into play and you have to be armed with great qualities of patience, logic and reflection to get to look at things clearly at some times and to issue a "compromise" shooting schedule .

From the very beginning of the preparation, the First Assistant oversees and supervises the research of the film sets ('locations scouting'), even if this task is more and more entrusted to professional scouts and he can be in charge, on some films, of executing or supervising the casting of small parts, silent bits ... The main casting process has been for several years now entrusted to the *Artistic Distribution Managers*, commonly named : Casting Directors.

During the shoot, it is the First Assistant Director who supervises the technical and artistic team of the film and coordinates the work of the different departments on set. He has to make sure that the right information flows and coordination is working out between departments for a successful shot or scene ...

As per his position, he is also ends up playing the role of a "tightrope walker" between the artistic demands of the director and the budget limitations of the film and must often propose practical alternatives. As an example : A dialogue scene between two characters arriving by train ... The financial consequences are not the same if the scene is happening on the station platform with an arrival, on camera, of a train and actors coming down from the same train as they are talking (here : it would be necessary to rent "a train" for the scene) or in the central hall of the station with several hundreds extras or in a simpler way : outside the station (where we could, maybe, get away with it, using a few dozen extras and a few picture vehicles) ...

The First AD, in line, with the producer and the budget limitations of the film, must also be able to propose alternatives and ask the director about his artistic priorities so that he can choose what is most important for his 'mise-en-scène'.

In short, give him all cards in hand to be able to arbitrate a choice with financial consequences ... (This money spent, there in one day, would not be more useful elsewhere ? additional filming gear or an additional day of shoot.... or more extras this on this or that day ?)

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The 1st AD does not work alone, of course. He is assisted in his task by one or more Second Assistant(s) and Third Assistant(s) and / or Trainees depending on the size or complexity of the film ... At times when filming takes place in several countries or includes extremely large background scenes, for example, the assistant directors team could include more than a dozen people ...

You have worked on great masterpieces of world cinema : *Kundun, Munich, Black Hawk Down, Gladiator, The Mummy, Alexander*, what did this bring you in terms of experience and personal fulfillment ?

These are very different adventures and each of them has been extremely rewarding. First for meeting with great film personalities : Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, Ridley Scott, Oliver Stone ...

Then because each one of these films has immersed me, for several months into a universe, a world that I would not have had the chance to approach otherwise.

I think I'm very lucky to make a living out of a job that allows me to live as many different lives in one same human life...

Imagine : you dive in, 5 months in the world of Tibet from the 1920s to the 1960s following the life of the Dalai Lama, then you live several weeks in the middle of the gladiator battles of Ancient Rome to find yourself one day in the middle of the civil war in Somalia in 1993 in the middle of Somali snipers on rooftops and US elite troops coming down from helicopters, fast-roping while other helicopters fly over the building rooftops at low-rise...

At times in the midst of all the workload and responsibilities, I sometimes experience great moments of magic and feel like an eternal big child.

But personal fulfillment also comes from small films, small human experiences in new countries, peoples and cultures that we discover and not necessarily necessarily on big budget machines with great directors.

A little over a year ago, I found myself, from day to day, in a small town in the center of the Ex-Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, between Kosovo to the north, Albania to the West and Bulgaria to the East. Before landing in Skopje, I have confess that I barely had time to look at where this country was on the map... And although the film was made with small resources, quite spartan accommodation and difficult working conditions, I have experienced there one of the most beautiful and rewarding experiences of my career.

I found myself in the middle of a multinational team with Belgians, French, Persian, Macedonian, Slovenian, Albanian, Bulgarian people...

This film ("I am from Titov Veles" by Teona Mitevska) remains to this day one of my most moving human experiences. It taught me the humility and respect, we should have when arriving from western or northern european countries, having to deal with local crews that could be less experienced in some positions and when we need to find solutions together to make the film successful ... Our working language was English, but the movie was shot in Macedonian, I promised myself when I arrived to learn 300 words in this language in order for me to be able to manage the set and extras without being considered as a kind of conqueror from the West ...

And in terms of relationships ?

Each film is a nest filled with new encounters that often generate future projects: a sort of infinite, interminable chain as long as we remain active in the business.

Martin Scorsese's Kundun, which was my first feature film, was rich in first contacts that allowed me to build a first network of connections.

And if I was able to work on Steven Spielberg's "Munich" almost 9 years later, it is thanks to a chain of people that I have met since 1996 and who have put me in touch with other people who eventually called me in, 9 years later for the shooting in France of "Munich".

For the movie "Nine Miles Down" that I am currently shooting in the Tunisian desert, I was put in touch with the director by the cinematographer : Roger Simonsz with whom I

have worked on "Sex and the City" in 2003. Then who I met again on "The Devil wears Prada" in 2005 or last September in Paris on M. Night Shyamalan's film.

We work with people, we lose sight of them, we meet them again one day. We exchange our tips, our contacts, our infos on the projects and one day or the other the phone rings to tell you that you are travelling to the other side of the world, less than 48 hours later.

In this business even a minor encounter is important. It has happened to me to wonder why I was on such a chaotic and difficult film, and to understand after that it was simply to meet this or that person. And even if the filming itself may have been unpleasant or brought nothing concrete to me, the encounters made during the project generates a large source of new relationships.

Which director has impressed you the most ?

Probably Martin Scorsese on "Kundun". First because I found myself in a "Golden" position at the very beginning of my career.

I had fought to try to get a job on this film, among the assistant directors team, "squatting" during several days the Ouarzazate Studios. And thank god I failed because I would have gotten a position of trainee assistant director, several dozen meters from the great master. Returning empty-handed to Casablanca, I ended up being called by the Italian producer who offered me to be in charge of the video playback system for Mr. Scorsese himself. I could not dream any better ...

On my first feature film, freshly out of film school, I had the chance to find myself sitting 3 meters behind Scorsese, for nearly 18 weeks. I was one of 3 or 4 rare privileged people to see him, work, hear him comment and discuss the shots with his cinematographer, his first assistant director or his script supervisor ... Such an encounter and experience marks you forever and it is very difficult to forget it, even 11 years after ...

And it was a real pleasure to see him working, talking about his shots, his intentions, his past films and the cinema in general: a real, private and privileged, cinema lesson.

You have also worked on foreign productions. Do people work the same way in Morocco ?

The working methods are generally the same. What changes are the production means ... Working on large productions teaches you how to handle larger numbers of extras, picture vehicles, a higher number of film technicians, which force you to be very organized. Because the slightest mistake can become serious or costly, as it can be quickly de-multiplied by the scale of the film . To be sincere, what sometimes lacks in Morocco is the permanent, systematic rigor. It can be necessary, sometimes, to put a lot more energy and arm oneself with tenacity to follow up with things to not leave them in a world of Approximations or Insh'Allah.

Cinema and filmmaking requires precision work and the slightest negligence can have disastrous financial consequences; carelessness and fatalism do not belong to that place.

And there is one element on which we cannot afford to lack rigor: the crew or cast safety on set: from the smallest stunt action or car driving by to the biggest film scene with explosions, weapons or helicopters flying over ...

Somehow you are the main supervisor on set ?

That's right. In order for the director to devote himself fully to his mise-en-scene, without having to worry about organizational or practical problems...

The 1st AD is therefore one of the central pieces on set. He is the one who coordinates the necessary elements required for the filming of a shot, a scene, he who supervises the crew, gives the life rhythm of the shoot. It is he who makes sure people respect the silence on set, calls out the "Roll" when everybody is ready to turn over and the safety conditions are met. It is he who manages the traffic on the set (who should intervene on this or that ? when ?) while constantly monitoring his watch in order to, day after day, shoot what has been planned on the production schedule.

One of the essential qualities required for a 1st Assistant Director is his ability to anticipate and plan ahead the requirements of the next shot, the next scene, the next day ... etc ...

Anticipate, anticipate again, always anticipate the requirements of a day or a scene long time before shooting it. To make sure that the necessary means for its realization are present and function perfectly at the key moment, while having foreseen alternative solutions if some elements go wrong (what Ralph Singleton, great American 1st AD used to commonly call, in English : "CYA" (Cover Your Ass.)

Ralph Singleton, l'un des grands 1er assistants réalisateurs américains, notamment de Sydney Pollack sur *Les Trois Jours du Condor* ou de Francis Ford Coppola sur *Conversations Secrètes* cite dans son livre *Film Scheduling*, 3 règles d'or:

1re Règle

En cas de doute, demander!
(If In Doubt, Ask!)

2e Règle

Ne jamais supposer
quoi que ce soit
(Never Assume Anything!)

3e Règle

Toujours se couvrir,
prévoir des solutions de rechange
(Always C.Y.A: Cover Your Ass)

Ralph Singleton, one of America's leading first assistant directors, who worked with Sydney Pollack on "Three Days of the Condor" or Francis Ford Coppola on "The Conversation" quotes in one of his books "*Film Scheduling*", 3 golden rules :

1st Rule:

If in Doubt Ask !

2nd Rule :

Never Assume Anything !

3rd Rule:

Always cover yourself, Plan alternative solutions
(Always C. Y. A: Cover your Ass)



handicaper une journée de tournage avec les conséquences financières qui en résultent. En tant que 1er Assistant, en prépa ou au tournage, je suis amené à traiter des centaines et centaines d'informations par jour. Puis à avoir à les redistribuer aux bonnes personnes, et suivre la bonne exécution des tâches de chaque département. Sans être un spécialiste pointu de chaque métier, il faut connaître globalement tous les métiers du cinéma pour transmettre et superviser correctement le travail des autres techniciens. Autant dire qu'il faut savoir rester calme et concentré sur les priorités,

*A gauche sur le tournage du film Marock .
Sur la page suivante, Ali Cherkaoui en compagnie de
Night Shyamalan (en casquette rouge) à Paris, au jardin
des Tuileries.*

seizeuvieme.com

Above on the shooting of the film Marock,

Below, Ali Cherkaoui in company of Night Shyamalan (wearing a red cap) in Paris, at the Tuileries Garden.



Every detail is important, and should not be neglected. A simple prop : a weapon, a pen, a cup of tea, a forgotten picture vehicle, neglected could compromise or delay the completion of a shot and end up jeopardizing a day of filming with the financial

consequences that can result. As a First AD, during prep or filming, I have to process hundreds and hundreds of informations per day. Then have to redistribute them to the right people and follow up the good execution of the tasks of each department.

Without being a sharp specialist of each craft, it is necessary to globally know all the film positions in order to transmit information and supervise the work of other technicians. No need to say that you have to know how to remain calm and focused on the priorities without being dragged by the madness and the stress that the filming of a scene can generates.

Beyond this central position on set, I am also in charge of the management and the mise-en-scene of the background action. The director is focusing on the technical realization of the film and actors direction. The 1st AD sets up and directs, for him, the background artists (the extras) . The director can then freely, of course, adjust the direction of the background action, by asking the 1st AD to correct certain elements.

In English, the Extras are often rightly named : "Atmosphere" because it is often about recreating an atmosphere, an ambiance by establishing the life of a given place or a historical moment, in the background of the main storyline .

The background action must, with exceptions, serve the story and be felt subtly without visually taking over the main narrative. But on some films or with certain directors, the background action is not a detail, it must be directed finely and very precisely (as with M. Night Shyamalan, during the filming of "The Happening" in Paris)

You have also developed, on location in Morocco, during the filming of *The Mummy* a computer system to better manage the extras logistics on this film.

"*The Mummy*" was my first real film as 2nd Assistant-Director ... And Ahmed Hatimi, (my mentor in this business and certainly the greatest 1st assistant director in Morocco, to whom I owe a lot) had developed an excellent working method with color codes and Excel tables . To avoid errors and problems, which would not fail to have consequences on the shoot, he wanted to manage and supervise the entire chain of process of the background actors : from the casting process to the payment of extras, going through the logistics and their direction on set. He found himself overloaded with a mass of work on his shoulders and I confess that I was and I remain very admiring of his ability to brilliantly supervise all this on work days often starting at 2.00 am to end at 10.00 or 11.00 pm the same day !!!

By joining his team, I simply tried to integrate his methodology into a single database program. I spent dozens of sleepless nights in my hotel room, programming on my computer until i conceived a computer database solution to manage the background masses. From one film to the other, within our team, I was able to improve the system, thanks to the technical resources that were made available to me by the productions, by adding a barcode system to it.

Gradually, the system became able to handle peaks of up to 3,000 extras per day of filming. It allowed to, very quickly, check in each extra, manage their wardrobe, weapons

and props distribution and to pay them. In preparation, during the costume fitting, we would issue each person a contract, a plastic badge bearing his name, his character and a barcode linking him to the database. This badge was also color coded, to quickly sort out people based on how close they would be to camera (foreground / background), the areas of the set or their pick up zone.

This IT solution also allowed American producers to have a very precise instant management of the extras budget (a Hot Extras' Budget) and to have flexibility and reactivity in the dispatch of extras numbers on the sets. Because of my activity outside Morocco, I have not had the opportunity to use it since 2003 but Ahmed Hatimi and his team continue to use it and improve it film after film.

This method has become well known and recognized since then and many American producers arrive in Morocco and ask for it after having heard about it in Hollywood by the previous teams who had shot there.

What has changed with the use of computers ?

Not so long ago, before the arrival of laptops, the assistant directors, worked almost exclusively by hand, pencil, paper and colored markers and board systems and cardboard strips to establish and manage the shooting schedule of a movie. All the documents had to be sent to the production secretary, who was left with a considerable amount of work. And imagine for each change, the time required to change things, the risk of error, data input ... etc. Today, there are scheduling and breakdown software, powerful database systems, storyboard software that can pre-visualize a shot or camera movements, virtual production office solutions on the Internet to effectively share information needed for preparation, calendars, documents ... A real revolution in 10/15 years ...

Everything has changed and continues to change, and to stay in the business, we must gradually incorporate the new possibilities offered by IT solutions. I am, personally, very keen on new technologies and try to test and integrate the new tools, as we go, in the practice of my job. I love finding solutions to facilitate the lives and work of assistant directors and technical crews in general .

You also live in close proximity of the director and the producers ?

Yes, but the level of intimacy depends on the films and the simplicity of the directors ... On big Hollywood productions, there can be a real distance, generated by the star-system that can reduce the relationship to a simple and minimal work relationship. It also depends on the amount of films made with the same director, because the relationships develop, deep bonds weave from movie to movie . On smaller films, human-sized, certainly . We share the life of a director, we accompany him from week to week for his film to come to life from a hundred pages of a screenplay, we share his doubts, his difficulties, the great crises but also the great moments of happiness when a scene written in a paragraph, magically takes place before our eyes.



You are shooting in the Tunisian desert, how is your work going ?

It's a difficult shoot. First because I was called on a Friday evening to offer me to leave the next Monday morning for the Tunisian desert. The American-Hungarian 1st AD who supervised the first 3 weeks on Stage in Budapest, stepped down and was not able to cover the shoot here. I had to take over, with very little information and almost no preparation. So it was hard, very hard, at first. Because as a 1st AD, you are supposed to know all the elements of the film better than anyone else. Here, I inherited a shooting schedule and a preparation that I have not accomplished by myself. It was an "equilibrant" position but also a kind of challenge to keep the film on tracks. The machine was restarted and I was able to collect the informations in order to manage the set. And even if I discover things and have surprises, again, every day, thank God, so far so good. We are still on tracks and on schedule.

One of the biggest and most spectacular day of this film was shot a few days ago using 4 cameras and with two helicopters (a Military Huey helicopter, that was made available to us by the Tunisian army and a French Civilian Eurocopter "Ecureuil" Helicopter). It is in scenes like this one, that the "central coordination" position of the First AD can play its full role. We had agreed on a very precise code and timing in 10-second increments and based on the position of the helicopters, orbiting around the derrick, in the sky.

The cameras would turn over when the Military Helicopter was at 6 o'clock, the Fire and the Column of black smoke at 9 o'clock and finally the large chain of explosions at 12 o'clock. Armed with tricolor flags (yellow, blue, red) and my walkie-talkie and in less than 60 seconds, I had to coordinate the information with both helicopters, call out the "Roll", make sure that the 4 cameras (one in each helicopter and two on the ground) are

turning over before giving the two visual cues to the special effects supervisor to first start the fire then the gigantic chain of explosions.

No need to say that the adrenaline rush was at its highest, because we could go for only One Take (the explosion destroying completely our main film set)

Fortunately enough, everything was set like clockwork, the desired effect wanted by the director was achieved and nobody was hurt. In such scenes, the safety of the technical and artistic team is a top priority. If a special effect or a stunt contains the slightest safety risk, then we must review the procedure and consider alternative visual or technical solutions. Because there is not one single film in the world, that deserves that a crew member or an actor gets hurt or risk losing his life. The heads of departments involved (Special Effects, Stunt Coordinator, Helicopter Pilots ...) must take all the necessary measures and safety distances and the 1st AD is there to have a cold blooded general supervision and is not to start filming a shot that could compromise the safety of the people on set.



*Scenes from the film "Nine Miles Down", in the middle of the Tunisian desert.
Exclusively for 16/9ème. We recognize Adrian Paul and Kate Nauta.*

It's an international production shot in Tunisia, if the film was to be shot in Morocco, could it have been done under the same conditions or using the same work methods ?

Certainly, the same work methods. However, the conditions would be different from one department to another because I think I can now say that our skills are different and complementary.

Morocco has attracted some of the biggest American productions in recent years and without generalizing, I can say that this has allowed the Moroccans to train production, location and assistant directors teams, that are very well adapted to medium and large American films .

But the production and the location work cannot be easily imported and exported. They are local trades and field work as they are connected to the relationship with local authorities, local population as much as the experience or the practical knowledge of this jobs. Training in these trades must be done on the ground, in the midst of projects arriving in our countries. On the other hand, I was very proud to have discovered, a highly qualified Tunisian art department team, under the direction of a great art director: Khaled Joulak and his crew ... They accomplished a real exploit by building a scientific research complex and a Derrick (oil well) in less than 3 weeks. Khaled has also had the opportunity of working in Morocco on many films. I was also very pleasantly surprised by the quality in many technical department : Camera, Sound, Electricians, Grips and the Special Effects Supervisor (for all the atmospheric and pyrotechnic effects) even if to be honest, I had important reservations about the safety awareness on set.

Do you think that between Morocco and Tunisia, there is a collaboration that could be beneficial for both countries ?

Yes completely. There is a real work to be done at the level of training and exchanges of skills.

Why not with other Maghreb countries ?

Exchanges are happening naturally, already, individually between films.

Our Gaffer (Skander Dhaoui) has also worked several times in Morocco. At the end of the shoot, I met a Tunisian 1st AD (Elyes Zrelli) who worked on Ahmed Boulane's film in Morocco and worked on an Iraqi film in Egypt. On the other hand the craftsmen and members of Moroccan "costume" teams from Ouarzazate work regularly in Tunisia. Collaboration exists in fact, but on a punctual, individual basis.

I think that it would be beneficial for both countries, and for the Maghreb in general, to promote exchanges of knowledge and skills in a more organized way.

If highly qualified Heads of Departments exist in Tunisia or Morocco why not exchange our teams in complementarity. But we still must overcome the little nationalisms that are remaining . I still have in mind, the bitter memory, two years ago, while I was about to start the preparation of a French film in Algeria, to have received a real Veto from the local Algerian production , who refused that a Moroccan 1st AD supervises an Algerian crew. It has hurt me, because I was, on the contrary, happy to discover and work hand in hand with an Algerian crew on location.

And in Morocco, are we well organized?

Yes, and in any case, we have the capacity to be well organized. The size of the films that have been shot here, has made it possible to train qualified people, whether it is in the production, direction, locations, art department, costumes...

And a good organization does not always require considerable financial resources: we can be organized with small means.

But I know, through what i hear from some Moroccan filmmakers, that a lot of films are made in a big mess where the director finds himself poorly supported, or has to sort out by himself management problems, catering or transportation issues between two shots. What seems inconceivable to me: we can make films with little resources while remaining organized.

You have worked a lot in Morocco but you live in France, why this choice?

I can not really talk about it as a conscious choice. I arrived in France without knowing that I will stay there that long. I have learned the basics of this job, took my first steps. The richness of the Parisian cultural and cinematographic life has brought me a lot, and I have been attached to it, even though I am a Casablanca citizen deep in my soul.

Year after year, I found myself spending almost half of my life in Paris, without consciously making this choice. Paris simply, and little by little, became for me a kind of professional center of gravity, even if I have to admit that I do not exclude to return to Morocco. In any case, I know that I like to live between two countries and two cultures, I draw a personal fulfillment and a hindsight that i am deeply attached to.

Do we have the cinema in Morocco that we deserve?

Cinema, like any art, is a reflection of society and what seems important to me is that Moroccan cinema represents Moroccan society in all its components and without any taboo or self-censorship from the directors . The time of cinematographic amnesia of the 70s and 80s is over, and films must speak sincerely to Moroccans, without hypocrisy, tell their stories in a real language while being open to the world and try to be universal beyond our borders. I was really shocked that some directors and "so-called Moroccans intellectuals", have had, during the release of the film 'Marock', violent and very hard words and a position encouraging censorship and the denying "the moroccan citizenship" of its director.

Why is it only in the Arab world where we find "intellectuals" or "frustrated artists" ready to campaign against their own freedom to create or to freely represent the society . It's a paradox that I still can not explain to myself. Unless it's based on low level jealousies and rivalries (somehow it would reassure me to think it's just that.)

Anyway, I am rather optimistic for the Moroccan cinema because it is more and more dynamic and creative. I am proud to see films at the level of "*Marock*" by Laïla Marrakchi or Faouzi Bensaidi's *What a Wonderful World* for example, and even though this last film may not have met its audience in Morocco, it is a big step forward for Moroccan cinema. And there is room for all genres, all type of cinema in Morocco. The most important thing is not to forget what must unite all creators: their freedom to represent the society.

What is there to do or do again in Morocco?

I would really like that we seriously take care of the trainings in all the technical trades of cinema . Filling the gaps of underrepresented positions in Morocco (Cinematographers, Sound Mixers, Script Supervisors, Special Effects ... etc ..), convey the passion of certain film professions, generate vocations and accompany them, encourage them... This is for me, the only way to sustain national cinema and also the presence of foreign shoots in Morocco by providing skilled crews in all departments. And we must tackle it first ... During one of my first film shoots in the Eastern European countries, on *Napoleon* in 2001, it was the first difference that I noticed while shooting in Prague and Budapest: The foreign crews did not arrive with all heads of departments imported from France or the United States but rely on local teams in all areas (which was also a financial advantage for them, with less expensive salaries and fringes.)

You just finished filming M. Night Shyamalan's movie, "The Happening". Tell us about the secrets of the film.

The first scene of the film takes place in "Central Park" in New York and Night Shyamalan wanted that the last sequence to take place in Paris at the "Tuileries Garden". At first glance, the scene was simple: Some atmospheres, park ambiances, then two characters, walk in the park talking when suddenly a cry from nowhere freezes the whole park and ... I will not tell you more, because it's the end of the movie.

A scene with a hundred extras in a Parisian park : at first sight, it is not complicated to organize, apart from the lock off in a garden that remained open to the public on a Saturday in September. At first I was surprised by requests for extreme precision relayed from him by his producers: Sam Mercer and Barry Mendel. We had several long meetings about these scenes, whereas usually, we talk about these kind of scenes 10 or 15 min on the phone or between two discussions on other sequences.

I later realized that Night Shyamalan was a very demanding director who loves to fine tune his work on the background scenes, all these little details that give reality, subtlety to things.

The team was shooting in Philadelphia the day before. They traveled at night and arrived Saturday morning in a Private Jet: Himself, his cinematographer : Tak Fujimoto, his production designer: Jeannine Opewall and his other producers then joined the set and the French crew at the Tuileries, directly : from the airport straight to the shoot.

He is relentless and I stopped counting all the round trips between different cameras set from one end to the other side of the Park (what the Americans called *Leap Frogging*) because we juggled all day from one corner to the other of the park as per the natural light . Working with him, even that briefly, was a real pleasure. I was impressed, first of all by his kindness and accessibility, his patience mixed with his high demand of subtlety. I hope to have the opportunity again to work on an entire film with him.

Most recently you have worked on Benjamin Gates 2 alongside Jon Turteltaub and starring Nicolas Cage. What relationship do you have with the actors ?

It depends once again on movies. Hollywood movies and the star-system, creates a distance that does not always favor simple or direct relationships with actors (often

surrounded by bodyguards and several personal assistants who act as barriers). On the set, it is of course (with some notable exceptions) the director who directs them. The assistant directors team, takes care of welcoming them, keeping them informed of the order of scenes or shots, supervising with production and facilities their comfort on set, giving them cues when the scene requires it. All this ends up creating close and endearing relationships in the long run .

In the background of the shoot, 2nd ADs and / or 3rd ADs are responsible for following a proper prep, make-up, hair, and communication with the actors (and this also promotes and induces a privileged relationship with them), because it is necessary to manage their stress, to comfort them, to endure sometimes certain whims or angers without never taking things personally.

You have also worked on the film *Marock*, how did the shooting go ?

A real joy. First, because shooting a "teenage movie" in my hometown of Casablanca has been somehow "rejuvenating and refreshing" for me and I think for the whole film crew. But also because I know Laila Marrakchi for over 15 years and I was very happy to work with her. Although I was a little nervous about working with a friend, because our personalities are not the same in life and under the pressure of filming and you have to know how to stay focused and keep the same rigor and demand as if you were working with a stranger. Anyway, it has been a real pleasure working with her and I know and she also knows that I will always be up for all her upcoming projects .



Ali Cherkaoui en compagnie de Martin Scorsese

Ali Cherkaoui in company of Martin Scorsese

To work with international film dinosaurs such as Martin Scorsese, Oliver Stone or Steven Spielberg, and to also work on Laila Marrakchi's debut feature. Is it beneficial ?

Yes absolutely. Each film brings its own fulfillment. And *Marock* was a very beautiful experience and human adventure . Some films are huge organizational lessons, others are “mise-en-scene” lessons and others are rich human experiences, especially if they take place in Morocco, in my hometown and are worth as much as a film of Martin Scorsese or Ridley Scott.

What is the best memory you can recall from a film shoot?

It is always very difficult to choose: we live moments that are so different and so strong that not one can really stand above the others.

I still think of the magical ballet of the 8 helicopters taking off from Kenitra Air Force Base at sunset on *Black Hawk Down*. Or the moments of real emotion when we had to recreate a scene of the departure in exile of the Dalai Lama for India : when hundreds of Tibetan extras, who had already experienced the same scene in 1959, began to sob: All the technical team including Martin Scorsese himself began to cry, as the emotion was palpable and hard to overcome : The reality violently joining the fiction ...

And the worst ?

I have experience some chaotic film shoots, where we are sorely lacking information and we still have to make sure that all the elements are present for the shoot. To solve equations with several unknown parameters, without being able to read the second half of the equation. What can be conceived on small films with two actors in an apartment, can hardly be imagined when you are shooting gigantic scenes in period costumes with thousands of extras: the information is essential for an efficient and serene work . It ends up really tiring you in the long run and make your neurons heat up.

The Four Feathers by Shekhar Kapur in 2000 and *Alexander* by Oliver Stone in 2003 were, for example, two chaotic and unpleasant experiences for me .

You are often judged for not wanting to take the plunge : becoming a director. What are you afraid of?

I believe that the job of Assistant Director is a profession and a career in its own right . And One should not do this job if one feels as a “*frustrated director*”, because otherwise how to give so much time, energy, investment and intensity to a director if one is frustrated or embittered or just transitioning to something else.

However, I must admit that I started this career, wrongly believing at the time, that this position was a royal way towards film direction. In the meantime I have discovered a real job, thrilling, which certainly took me a moment away from my ambitions, but I did not give them up so far .

Do you imagine yourself working more in Morocco than in France?

Yes, it is important to me, at least as much as in France. Besides, even if I am based in Paris, I do not really work a lot in France. Here, I specialized a little in international and foreign productions, often shot in English. I often find myself filming elsewhere in Eastern Europe, in Dubai or in Tunisia such as now. In fact, I see myself working where there are beautiful experiences to live, whatever the country is .

We also know that you are involved in AFAR, the French Association of Assistant Directors, which is also celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. You are its Vice-Secretary General. You never stop ?

I was invited to join the a.f.a.r at the beginning of 2001. At the time, the association counted only about fifteen members. Today it has nearly a hundred. In 2002, I began by taking care of the website and web tools of the association by setting up a system allowing members to manage their CVs and availabilities directly on the internet.

And since 2004, I joined the board members and the council of the association to become: Vice-Secretary General, to participate more concretely in the functioning and the future projects of the association. But I would love to participate and bring the same energy to the launch of equivalent structures in Morocco. I may be utopian, but why not create the equivalent of this association by grouping the Direction positions of (Assistants-Directors, Script Supervisors ...) at the Moroccan or at the Maghreb level to promote exchanges of technicians, sharing of experiences, training of future assistant directors.

What is the purpose of the association?

It is mainly to break the isolation in which the assistant director can often be when facing productions and film crews . To defend the interest of this profession, while guaranteeing the productions a high quality of work on sets and the respect of a true deontology in this trade.

It also serves as a platform for exchange with the outside world: with Directors, Producers, Trainees who start in the business as well as internally : by promoting the sharing of knowledge and experiences between members.

Our two flagship projects are: Training and Safety on film sets.

For more information on Ali Cherkaoui :

www.alitronics.com

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY FOR ALI CHERKAOUI

1994 SOLOMON AND SHEBA | 1996 LALLA HOBBY. KUNDUN | 1997 LEGIONNAIRE | 1998 THE MUMMY | 1999 GLADIATOR. RULES OF ENGAGEMENT. ARABIAN NIGHTS | 2000 THE FOUR FEATHERS | 2001 SPY GAME. BLACK HAWK DOWN . NAPOLEON | 2002/2003 DANNY THE DOG | 2003 THE DIVORCE. ALEXANDER | 2004 SEX IN THE CITY MAROCK. TENERIFE | 2005 PARIS JE T'AIME. MUNICH. THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA | 2006 I AM FROM TITOV VELES | 2007 ENTOURAGE. NATIONAL TREASURE 2. THE HAPPENING | 2008 NINE MILES DOWN |