

IMAGE

PROFESSION : ASSISTANT DIRECTOR (*)

Ali Cherkaoui has worked on Gladiator, Black Hawk Down or recently Marock, Laila Marrakchi's first feature film, selected at "Un Certain Regard" (Cannes Film Festival 2005). Vice-Secretary General of the Afar, he has developed a system to improve the management of the logistics .

How did you manage to work on these big american films ?

It is by establishing "a siege" of the film studios, that with force of obstination, I managed to get myself hired on "*Kundun*", my first big film in Morocco.

After, many weeks of denials — I was applying for an assistant director's position — they called me back to be in charge of Martin Scorsese's video playback system... I have, of course, accepted the job, and this is how everything started for me. Later on, I rapidly, ended up, specializing in the management of high numbers of extras, because most of the film shot in Morocco are "large shows superproductions"

From my very first film in the Direction department, "*The Mummy*", I found myself working on marathon days with 500 extras. When the american assistant directors arrive on location, they usually don't manage this element. This responsibility has reached a peak on *Gladiator*, where I had to manage 2900 extras on the same day.

How does this management take place ?

On "*The Mummy*", I had the idea of developing a computerized management system for the logistics of this type of films. This system has proved to be successful and I was able to improve it, thanks to the resources put at my disposal but the different productions.

Little by little, I succeeded in creating a database program, capable of managing up to 8000 extras, which allows on the days with 3000 extras, to quickly check in, each one of them, manage the costumes, weapons & props distribution and to pay them. It is during the preparation, during the costume fittings, that we distribute to each a contract and a plastic badge bearing his name, his character name and a bar code linking him to the database. This badge is additionally color coded, which allows a quick sorting of the people, based on the shots, the different zones of the set...

This technique allows the producer to have an instant and precise management of the extras budget and to have flexibility and reactivity in the choices of extras dispatch by set.



Are you the only person who uses this system ?

It is an exclusive system that has always been used under my supervision and the one of my team. Friends Assistant-Directors, that I have trained to work with it, continue to use it in Morocco on big budget productions. It has been licensed and improved, since then and we are thinking of commercially distributing it, as many American producers, coming to Morocco, are asking for it, after having heard about it in Hollywood.

What are the main logistical difficulties of a film shoot in Morocco ?

The access to some locations, as for example, on the high atlas plateaux. But more and more often, the productions seek the help of the moroccan army, who possesses now a specialized department for the support of film shoots. The army rents, at a low price, all the logistics, tents, trucks, water tanks... There is a real political will to provide this help, which becomes quickly necessary for most of the American super-productions. These productions often require basecamps and film sets composed of 800 film technicians. On top of that, the inhabitants are sensitive to the economical wave triggered by the cinema and little afraid to host film shoots. In any case, I think that are very few places in Europe where you could, as on *Black Hawk Down*, lock an entire neighborhood during two months to turn into a film set, with automatic gunfire, explosions and other aerial firing...

Did you notice an evolution in the most frequently used film locations ?

Before *Kundun*, Morocco was only used for biblical sets, or classical oriental sets. The fact of creating Tibet in Morocco has I think, freed the minds. What followed is a series of films using urban landscapes, such as "*Spy Game*" where we have re-created Beyrouth in Casablanca, and, for "*Legionnaire*", a 1920s Marseilles in Tangiers or New Mexico in Ouarzazate for the las film by Alexandre Aja (The remake of "*The Hills have eyes*" produced by Wes Craven and the 20th Century Fox, NDLR)

And the Studios ?

The studios have evolved, following the films. The largest center is still Ouarzazate, the historical location regarding the Studios. Of course, most of the buildings started as simple hangars to become as of now, real film studios such as MPS (CINEDINA) in Casablanca, built after the *Asterix* film shoot, and used for *Iznogoud* in 2004. There are also studios, built by the De Larentiis Group that should soon welcome a John Boorman film. There are also talks about a large implantation in Marrakech, initiated by Jamel Debbouze, but that still seem in a state of project for now. If this gets confirmed, it would be an excellent geographical location, Marrakech being ideally located between Sea and Mountain for welcoming films.

Interview by François Reumont.

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