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Left: Boys study at an Islamic religious school, or madrassa. Right: Cinematographer David McFarland lines up a shot on the outskirts of Kabul.

Shooting *Black Tulip* in Afghanistan

By David McFarland

There have been periods in my life where I've strongly considered pursuing conflict photojournalism instead of continuing down the path of cinematography. I've always been deeply influenced by war photography, especially the work of James Nachtwey, Reza and Steve McCurry. Additionally, I've been lucky enough to work all over the world, in such countries as Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Japan and Mexico. So when I got the call to shoot a film in Afghanistan, even though I had to consider the risk involved, I jumped at the opportunity.

Black Tulip is a drama about an Afghan family dealing with life during wartime. After the Taliban are run out of the capital, the Dakka family returns home from a refugee camp and opens a restaurant. It quickly becomes a haven for free speech, catering to a clientele of artists and liberal thinkers. Slowly, the Taliban begin to trickle back into the city, and it becomes obvious that the Dakkas will have to choose between their personal safety and their hope for a new Afghanistan.

The film's director and co-writer (with David Michael O'Neill) is Sonia Nassery Cole, who grew up in Kabul and remained very involved with her home country after moving to the United States in the early 1980s. *Black Tulip* could have been shot in Jordan or Morocco, but Sonia felt strongly that it had to be shot in Afghanistan, with the people of her country. There was a different cinematographer on the project before me, but just 24 hours after he arrived with the production in Kabul, a powerful car bomb was detonated outside the Indian embassy, and some of the windows at the production's hotel were blown out by the explosion. The cine-

matographer decided the situation was just too unsafe and left the project. There was a very small window of time to shoot the film, right at the onset of winter. I was recommended to the production by someone who knew me as someone who shoots in funky places. When I got the call, I was in New Orleans, and I had just enough time to fly back to Los Angeles, get my stuff together and get on a plane to Afghanistan.

Before I left, I spoke to a good friend, Jim Denault, ASC, whom I often lean on for advice. He has made a career shooting in third-world countries, and he recommended I take a couple of pieces of equipment with me that I knew I could work with. I made a quick trip to Ikea and bought items to make some lightweight equipment (collapsible white hampers to make space lights, etc.). The next morning, on the way to the airport, I called Lightspeed LA and put together a small, documentary-style package.

Jim's advice was sound, for sure, because no one in Afghanistan had even heard of a C-stand! What little equipment there was dated back to the '80s: a few combo stands, sandbags, weird overheads, and the like. The gear I got from Lightspeed LA and my Ikea accessories became my main lighting equipment, and it was certainly the smallest lighting package I've ever worked with. I brought 800-watt and 400-watt Joker HMIs (one each), an Arri kit (lamped for 220 volts), and a small rigging kit of clamps and plates. I fitted the Ikea hampers with two mogul-based sockets and 1K tungsten globes, one in each end. That was our package.

Because Sonia and I had so little prep time together, there was no real chance to shot-list every scene. Instead, knowing this was a somewhat autobiographical story for her, I decided it was more important for us to have in-depth conversations about her life in Afghanistan. We also had a series of long discussions regarding

Photos by David McFarland, Ian McClocklin Sinclair and Baraat Ali Batoor.

tone, pacing and symbolism.

We decided on a very realistic visual style. To me, cinematography is action and reaction; it's about creating a visual language to support what's on the page, and it's about reacting to what's in front of you (lighting, architecture, etc.). Afghanistan is an incredible place, bombed-out, deteriorated and full of urban decay. Most of the architecture is monochromatic, but people's clothes are very colorful. They wear a lot of red, green and yellow, and Sonia and I talked about the meanings of these colors. Having that understanding really helped me make quicker decisions.

I shot the movie with a Red One (Build 20), Zeiss Superspeeds and an Angenieux HR 25-250mm zoom lens supplied by



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Birns & Sawyer in Hollywood. I opted for no filtration other than NDs, IR cutters and polars — no diffusion and no color filters. I often use warming filters or tobaccos, but they weren’t necessary in Afghanistan. Kabul has a really amazing and weird quality of light; it’s dusty and smoggy, so the light is already diffused. I did my sun chart and found that while we were there, the sun, at its highest point of the day, would be at only a 45-degree angle! Usually you’re chasing daylight to get that angle, but we’d



Top: An Afghan worker toils on a street strewn with rubble. Middle: Kabul’s locals added an invaluable sense of realism to the film. Bottom: Director Sonia Cole checks the framing as McFarland lines up a shot.



Above:
McFarland
(far right)
captures a fire
while filming
in the streets
of Kabul.
Right: The
crew lines up a
dolly shot in
an alleyway.



have it at high noon, and that really helped the overall look. We just didn't have time to fly in overheads or try and control the light. At most, I could fly in a bounce card or a little negative fill, but that was about it.

My longtime gaffer, Ian McGlocklin, and I always tried to start from the most natural place in terms of light motivation. At night, the available light in Kabul is a mixed bag. With no streetlamps, the people rely mainly on fluorescent fixtures that are often neon colors — blue, green, yellow and pink. Many of our setups were often enhanced by placing a 4' fluorescent tube on a wall of an alley, or by including a gas lantern in the frame. By attaching fluorescent tubes to the walls with zip ties and

including these sources in the frame, it was easy to create a realistic look without having a bunch of units hitting every building in the background — a luxury we certainly did not have.

The production was staying at a kind of guesthouse, an extended-stay hotel that was used mostly by the United Nations. The day I arrived, the Nov. 7 runoff elections had just been announced, and we were told, in no uncertain terms, that things were going to start blowing up. On the third day of production, Oct. 28, we were loading up the gear to drive to our location. It was only three blocks away, but it was too dodgy to walk anywhere. Suddenly, as the Call to Prayer echoed through the early morning,

there were lots of shots ringing out and explosions. One of our guards said, 'Let's go!' and we hopped into the car and took off.

Our location for the day was an attic doubling as a madrassa (Islamic religious school) where the Taliban comes to pick recruits. We were lighting through a window on the second story while bullets were flying by on the streets below. I couldn't really tell how close they were, but they were followed by rocking explosions. Then my cell phone rang, and we found out the Afghan army was running through our guesthouse and shooting from the roof.

We had to stop for a minute and decide what to do. Do we leave the country? Do we keep working? I called a friend in the State Department to try to get information about what was happening, and then a really big explosion hit, and it was all over. It turned out that the Taliban had attacked a U.N. guesthouse directly across the street from ours. After a 2½-hour stand-off, a detonation by a suicide bomber had killed all the attackers and five U.N. workers. That ended the ordeal. When we found out that all of our team was safe and the battle was over, we decided to go back to work. I turned my mind back to my job, which was a great distraction from the fear and anxiety.

We kept going, and every day there were more scary incidents — we'd hear explosions and find out that an RPG had gone off in a hotel three blocks away, or that the Taliban had just stormed into a place two miles from us. I'll tell you, there's nothing as nerve-wracking as being up on a rooftop with a 10:1 zoom and 6x6 matte box, praying you don't get mistaken for a gunner! But this was a movie about a free Afghanistan, freedom of speech and women's rights. It was an important story that I felt compelled to help tell, and I felt it was worth the personal risk.

I'm really proud of the way *Black Tulip* looks. We set out with a look in mind and did our best to achieve it against impossible odds. I'm glad I decided to do the project. No one on the production got hurt. I might feel very different if that weren't the case.

Ed. Note: Black Tulip will hit the festival circuit this fall.