Theeb

A film by
Naji Abu Nowar

Orizzonti Award, Best Director, Venice Film Festival
Toronto International Film Festival
Special Mention, Sutherland Award (First Feature Competition), London Film Festival

Jordan, UK, UAE, Qatar 2014 / 100 minutes /Arabic with English Subtitles/ Cert 15

Opens August 14th 2015

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SYNOPSIS

In the Ottoman province of Hijaz during World War I, a young Bedouin boy, Theeb (Jacir Eid), experiences a greatly hastened coming of age as he embarks, uninvited but eager for adventure, on a perilous desert journey with his elder brother Hussein (Hussein Salameh) to escort a British officer Edward (Jack Fox) and his guide Marji (Marji Audeh) to their destination, a water-well on the old pilgrimage route to Mecca. This harsh terrain has become the hunting ground of Ottoman mercenaries, Arab revolutionaries and outcast Bedouin raiders.

Immersed in a way of life that has endured for centuries, the brothers are unaware of the tremendous upheavals taking place at the fringes of their world: the First World War is raging in Europe, and has now spread into the Ottoman Empire where the Great Arab Revolt is brewing, and the British officer T.E. Lawrence is plotting with the Arab Prince Faisal to establish an Arab kingdom.

In the ensuing journey, filled with danger and hardship, Theeb needs to grow up fast. If he is to survive he must quickly learn about adulthood, trust and betrayal, in a culture where a man's honour and righteousness determines his inclusion or expulsion from the community. Theeb must live up to the name his father gave him.

Shot entirely on location against the ravishing landscape of Wadi Rum and Wadi Araba in Jordan, and cast with non-professional actors from one of the last of Jordan's nomadic Bedouin tribes to settle down, *Theeb* is a genre-crossing blend of a coming-of-age drama and Arabian Western.

More details and downloads at newwavefilms.co.uk

Photos at www.newwavefilms.co.uk/press.html

CAST

Jacir Eid	Theeb
Hassan Mutlag	The Stranger
Hussein Salameh	Hussein
Jack Fox	Edward
Marji Audeh	Marji

CREW

Director	Naji Abu Nowar
Screenplay	Bassel Ghandour Naji Abu Nowar
Cinematography	Wolfgang Thaler
Editor	Rupert Lloyd
Producers	Bassel Ghandour Rupert Lloyd
Executive Producer	Nadine Toukan
Co-Producers	Laith Al-Majali Nasser Kalaji
Line Producer & Production Manager	Diala Raie
Sound	Dario Swade
Sound Mixer	Falah Hannoun
Music	Jerry Lane
Production Design	Anna Lavelle
Costume Designer	Jamila Aladdin
Hair & Make-Up	Sleiman Tadros
Associate Producers	Yanal Kassay Eid Sweilheen Ma'an Odeh

Produced by Bayt Al Shawareb, Noor Pictures, Immortal Entertainment

JORDAN|UK|UNITED ARAB EMIRATES|QATAR - 2014 - COLOUR - SCOPE 1:2.39 - DCP - 5.1 - 100 MINUTES

DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY & FILMOGRAPHY

Born in the UK in 1981, Naji Abu Nowar began his filmmaking career when he was accepted into the 2005 RAWI Screenwriters lab held in association with the Sundance Institute, to develop his first screenplay *Shakoush* (*Hammer*). He then wrote and directed the short film *Death of a Boxer* (2009) which screened at international film festivals including the Palm Springs International Shortfest, the Dubai International Film Festival, the Miami Short Film Festival and the Franco-Arab Film Festival. *Theeb* is Naji's debut feature film.

In 2014 Variety honoured Naji with their prestigious 'Arab Filmmaker of the Year' award.

2014 THEEB (100mins)

2009 DEATH OF A BOXER (8mins)

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

In Bedouin law, if a stranger arrives at your tent requesting refuge, you must grant him protection until the threat can be peacefully resolved. This is known as the law of Dakheel and it is considered a sacred duty for a host to protect his Dakheel, no matter what the circumstance. Indeed, there are many stories of a host granting protection to his guest only to discover the Dakheel has killed a member of the host's own family. But surprisingly this will not deter the host from his duty; he will protect the killer until peace has been made between them. A man's reputation is defined by what he does in such difficult circumstances. The more impossible the situation the more respect he receives for upholding the law.

Bedouin customs like this have grown from their environment, the desert. They are renowned for their generous hospitality because in the desert you must be able to rely on the kindness of strangers to survive. The terrain is too harsh, water and food too scarce for selfish behaviour. People need to help each other to ensure their mutual existence. It was the combination of a culture of cooperation for survival and a Dakheel type moral dilemma that formed the initial idea for *Theeb*. What would happen if you were stranded with your worst enemy but needed their help to stay alive? How would this relationship develop?

To overcome such a merciless predicament, a person would have to develop incredible strength of character. In Bedouin culture, a boy who endured such an ordeal would be called a Theeb [Wolf]. If someone calls you a wolf, you have earned their respect as a man of daring and cunning, a person who can achieve impossible feats. The wolf is an ambiguous creature both revered and feared, it is both a pack animal, loyal to its tribe, and a strong individual capable of existing by itself. So to be named Theeb at birth is to have the expectation of greatness placed upon you. To survive the boy must live up to the name his father gave him. But his success would be tainted by the tragic loss of childhood innocence.

Naji Abu Nowar, June 2014

INTERVIEW WITH NAJI ABU NOWAR

What is the significance of the word Theeb [Wolf] as a title and the name of your main character?

The Wolf is a very important animal in Bedouin culture. It is an ambiguous creature both revered and feared, an enemy and a friend. There are many songs, poems and stories surrounding the Bedouin's relationships with Wolves. Indeed if you are nicknamed 'Wolf ' in Bedouin culture you have earned respect as a man of daring and cunning, a person who can achieve impossible feats. Because of this the name Theeb is a standard Bedouin name, similar to other revered animals like the Hawk, Falcon and Lion. The ambiguity of a wolf as hero and villain, both feared and respected is something that attracted me as a name for our character. It is both glorious and tragic at the same time.

What is the significance of the poem at the beginning of the film?

The Bedouin have a beautiful tradition of poetry and oral story telling. Whilst living with them I was immersed in many poems, songs and campfire stories and this experience greatly contributed to the film. One song, whose melody is also the main theme for the film score, was about the Red Sea. I always loved the similarities between desert life and sea life and this was an important aspect of my directorial approach to the film, so as soon as I heard it I was thinking about incorporating it into the film. To achieve this I approached one of the Tribe's most celebrated poets Mdallah Al-Manajah and asked him to compose something for the film. Mdallah wrote a powerful poem in the form of a kind of ode to Theeb about life using the Red Sea as a metaphor. It was so beautiful and I immediately realized that it should be Theeb's father's poem to his son. It should begin the film, as almost a memory that Theeb is recalling, which then leads us into Theeb's opening close up, staring down at his father's grave as if trying to remember his father but finding it difficult to picture his face.

So the Bedouin were included in the creative process?

Absolutely. From the very beginning my producers and I agreed that the only way to make Theeb was to delve into Bedouin life and create something organic from within it. In order to achieve this we moved to the Wadi Rum desert of Jordan to fully immerse ourselves in the world of our story. We spent a year in the village of Shakiriya with some of the last Bedouins to have lived a nomadic life in Jordan. Newly settled, their lives were drastically changing just as the characters in our film. Whereas the elders knew how to ride, track, hunt and find water, the youth were mostly ignorant of these skills, reliant on four-wheel drives, roads and modern plumbing. They grew passionate about our project because they saw it as a way of preserving their culture.

So we formed a partnership with the Bedouin where we developed the story together based on our mutual desire for authenticity. As we learned about their folklore and traditions, the drama and depth of our screenplay evolved. Their contribution pushed us past the confines of a formulaic film and into a living, breathing world. This philosophy imbued every phase of the production. Our props were hand made by the tribe using techniques passed down through the generations. Nothing was ornamental and everything had to be functional, built for life in the desert.

The locations in the film are spectacular. Where did you shoot exactly?

THEEB was shot in Jordan in three different terrains. For Theeb's tribal territory, we shot in Wadi Araba in the military border zone next to the Israeli border. For the maze-like Pilgrim's trail, we shot in Wadi Rum and for the Ottoman fort we shot in Daba'a, which is about 70 km south of Amman. The bulk of the shoot was in Wadi Rum though, which was our base for over a year. It is the same desert where David Lean shot 'Lawrence of Arabia', however our locations were a little more remote than theirs.

Why did you choose to shoot so far off the beaten track?

The locations are essential to telling the story, they inform the drama and set the tone of a scene and should have their own unique character. For the Pilgrim's trail I wanted Theeb and the audience to be constantly surrounded by mountains. I never wanted the sky to touch the ground, like being in a maze or forest. Indeed there is only one shot in Wadi Rum where the sky does touch the ground and that was for a very specific dramatic purpose. Naturally this made locations difficult to find. Furthermore, Pilgrim's canyon, where most of the film is set, required a very specific type of geography. It took several months to find and it just happened to be in the middle of nowhere! It took us an hour of off-roading to get there every day.

Another factor that pushed us further out was that much of central Wadi Rum has become a popular tourist destination due to the success of 'Lawrence of Arabia'. Financially, we couldn't afford to have cars break our shots in the distance or remove miles of existing tyre tracks. You just can't cordon off vast areas of desert. Despite our best efforts, we did end up having to remove a few tracks digitally.

What kind of difficulties were involved shooting in such remote locations?

Sand. We consistently got stuck in the sand. I can't count the amount of times the Bedouin had to rescue us. The weather could be brutal too. Despite shooting in autumn the temperature in Wadi Araba frequently hit 40 plus. It was oppressive dry heat and by midday you felt like you were being cooked in an oven. When we switched locations to Wadi Rum we got hit with the opposite. There were sand storms, rain and even a flash flood that forced us to evacuate our pilgrim's well location. The behind scenes team joked that they were shooting the sequel to 'Lost in La Mancha'. So I was very grateful when we made it through the shoot because it was never a guarantee. Logistically it was very tough.

Did you and the crew live like nomads to shoot the film?

We chose our crew very carefully and only picked adventurous souls who were up for the challenge. We all wanted to shoot the film in a nomadic way but logistically we couldn't make it work. The idea was to shoot Theeb's journey in sequence traveling along the actual geographic route. However, the locations were too remote and the logistics were too tough for an entire film crew. Keeping the crew supplied with essential fuel, food and water would have been too costly and too dangerous in a vast area with no cell phone reception. Instead we lived in a catered for desert camp. It still involved some hefty off-roading and didn't have phone reception but it did have running water and a generator.

Did you learn any of their survival skills?

Our main Bedouin contact Abu Jacir grew up as a nomad and only settled into the village [Shakriya] during his twenties. He would often take me out and show me the terrain. It was through him that I got an education in tracking, hunting, plants, finding water and other skills that the Bedouin use to survive. I was also privileged to spend some time with a village elder who was like the Bedouin Sherlock Holmes. He could track anything. The police often called him if there had been a crime and he would track down the guilty.

How did your collaboration with the Bedouin come about? How did you present the project to them and what was their initial reaction?

When we first told the Bedouin of our intention to shoot a feature film with them, we were met with polite skepticism. Actually I think they thought we were totally insane but their tradition of hospitality prevented them from openly stating this. But after the first few months of living with them they began to realize that we were serious. Whether we were sane was still to be determined. We included them in the creative process from day one and that helped to forge our mutual respect. This creative collaboration played a significant role because one of their main fears was the misrepresentation of their culture. They get extremely irritated by the way they are portrayed in Bedouin soap operas that are very popular television series in the Arab world. This personal investment in making sure that they have a film that reflects their culture and history is what really made them engage in the project. It gave them a sense of ownership and this fuelled our story.

What was it like collaborating with the Bedouin? What challenges did you face?

From the start we knew that we couldn't make the film under normal circumstances as some of the pressures of production might clash with the Bedouin way of life.
We accepted this and engineered our working methods to compliment their culture rather than work against it. All our crewmembers were taught the most important laws and etiquette of Bedouin life and to their credit they never faltered. This was extremely important for me as I wanted to make sure that everyone got along and that we left their world as we found it. I wanted our friendship to last after the production wrapped and I am happy to say that it has.

How was it working with Non-Actors? What was your philosophy?

The Bedouin were only curious but not passionate about acting at the beginning. Their world is about their families, hunting and camels and the cinematic experience held little attraction to them. So it was important for us to make sure the Bedouin actors enjoyed the process and became passionate about the project. To achieve this we began the workshops with fun acting games that made us all laugh and imbued the group with positive energy. There was one called the Samurai game was particularly popular with us all. We would then slowly raise the level of concentration and effort required to tackle some of the more demanding elements of acting.

This whole process was carefully planned and scheduled with our acting coach Hisham Suleiman. It was based on his acting philosophies; case studies of films we admired like the Guti Fraga workshops for 'City of God' and Hisham's work on Ajami; lastly, we incorporated my understanding of Bedouin life to make sure the whole thing catered for their unique culture, attitudes and sensibilities.

How did the acting troupe respond to learning lines?

Some of the cast were illiterate or had little formal education so I knew it would be hard for them to memorize their lines. Hisham and I concluded that we should give them the general direction and allow them to speak with ease in their own way. This also helped me to achieve the spontaneity and naturalistic performances I was after. So the script became a kind of blue print that we referred back to when in trouble. However there were several lines that were very important to the story and those scenes were the only ones that we really rehearsed.

Camels play quite a large role in desert life and in the film. What was it like working with them? Aren't you familiar with the saying 'Never work with children and animals'

We all used to joke about that phrase a lot. Looking back, I think we must have been crazy to undertake such an ambitious project. The animals did cause quite a lot of havoc. On the very first day we arrived to set only to discover Theeb's donkey had run away. After three escapes we realized he was in search of a female to mate with and would give us the slip at every opportunity. There were many moments like this and we certainly have enough material for a good blooper reel with run-away donkeys, singing goats, and flatulent camels.