

Filmmakers' Forum

Shooting in "The Land of a Thousand Kasbahs"

by **Stephanie Martin**

Soldiers land in a village and scope out the area in a scene from *The Objective*, an independent film set in Afghanistan that was shot in Morocco.



When I was first approached about shooting the supernatural war film *The Objective*, producer Jeremy Wall warned me that there would probably be no other women in the cast or crew of the production, which would be shot in some of the most remote locations in the Moroccan desert. When he went on to pitch the project as "*Apocalypse Now* meets *2001: A Space Odyssey*," I was intrigued. When he added that we had an 28-day shooting schedule in more than 30 different locations, and that all of my crew would be locally hired, I trembled. But I cast all reservations aside, and *The Objective* proved to be one of the most challenging and rewarding collaborations I have experienced to date.

Written and directed by Daniel Myrick (co-director of *The Blair Witch Project*), *The Objective* tells the story of CIA operative Ben Kitch (played by Jonas Ball), who arrives in Afghanistan on a classified mission four months prior to the 2001 invasion. Kitch enlists six Special Forces soldiers to accompany him into the mountains of Afghanistan, where they soon

encounter an enemy they are ill-equipped to combat.

The meetings Dan and I had during preproduction were instrumental in establishing the framework for our film. We drew inspiration from the photographs of James Nachtwey, YouTube war footage, and photos of Afghanistan and Iraq from the VII Photo and Magnum databases. The shot list we devised during this time served as a thematic foundation we returned to frequently during production.

The camera style and production design were key in portraying the physical and psychological journey into the unknown. When the film begins, camera movement is fluid, with the camera primarily on sticks, Steadicam or dolly. As the soldiers venture into the desert, a handheld style predominates and is intercut with what Dan and I termed our "Desert POV." The Desert POV represents the mysterious element that the soldiers search for and later try to escape; we achieved it with very wide, carefully composed dolly shots. As the story unfolds, the soldiers' increasing despair is depicted via coverage on long

lenses, which also evoked the sense of being observed.

The use of color also was essential in illustrating this journey. In the beginning, the color palette is saturated. Light sources here are electricity-driven, and our color scheme is drawn from both the production design and the available light sources. As the film progresses, the palette becomes less saturated and serves as another metaphor for the soldiers' state of mind.

Although production initially suggested shooting on high-definition video, we decided that film, with its superior latitude and reliability, was the best option, given that we'd be shooting in the desert in extreme and unpredictable weather conditions. We shot Kodak Vision2 500T 7218 for night exteriors and Vision2 50D 7201 for day exteriors and day-for-night work. Because extensive special effects would be used, production decided to finish the film with a digital intermediate.

Two months prior to production, Dan, Jeremy, production designer Frank Bollinger and I headed to Morocco to scout locations. This stage of our process was very instructive because Morocco has such a rich filmmaking history. Every driver, waiter or storekeeper has an anecdote ready regarding *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Kundun*, *Hidalgo*, *Gladiator* or *Ishtar*. (Yes, even that last film remains a fond memory to many in Morocco!) Production support and equipment is on par with what you might find in Los Angeles. During the scout, we also got our first glimpse of the hospitable spirit of the Moroccans. In the middle of the desert, as we visited villages that are only now receiving electricity for the first time, people ranging from village elders to small children would always invite us into their homes

Photos by Francis Dreis and Jeremy Wall.



Above: In a helicopter, director Daniel Myrick (left) and cinematographer Stephanie Martin discuss shots while the lighting is set up. **Below:** Martin (right) and 1st AC Lilia Sellami film the soldiers preparing to depart the village. Jonas Ball is at left, with back to camera; Zinoune Chems Eddine is getting into the vehicle; and Matt Anderson is standing in the truck bed.

for a cup of tea.

With the exception of the opening and closing scenes, *The Objective* was shot south of the High Atlas Mountains, in what is known as "the land of a thousand Kasbahs" near the city of Ouarzazate. There we filmed in ancient Moroccan villages, an abandoned French magnesium mine, vast red-rock canyons, dry desert valleys, and lush green oases, among other places. At one time we'd considered shooting this film in California, but in the end we all agreed that it could only have been made in Morocco's exceptional locations.

As cinematographers, we bring our knowledge and skill to a set, but the eventual outcome of our work is due in great part to our crews. Although I had previously used local crews in foreign countries, most recently in Mumbai,

India, I was nevertheless a little nervous about hiring my entire crew locally. *The Objective* was one of my first opportunities to put my foreign-language skills to use as a cinematographer; I come from Argentina and grew up speaking Spanish, English, Portuguese and French. On this shoot French proved to be key, although English, Arabic, Italian, German, Portuguese and Spanish were all spoken on set as well. Often we communicated in five different languages at once, yet we somehow managed to understand one another!

With the help of Moroccan producer Karim Debbagh and various contacts from the Cinematographers' Mailing List, I was able to assemble a first-rate crew. My camera, grip and electric departments were exceptional. I found an ally, collaborator and friend in 1st AC Lilia Sellami, and nothing was impossible for key grip Rachid Mssiadi and gaffer Marco de Fillipis. Whether we wanted our large Jumbo lights on scaffolding at the death's edge of a mountain, or our dolly in the most remote of cliff tops, Rachid's reply to our hesitant questions was always, "*Pas de probleme, Stephanie!*" ("No problem!") We were very fortunate to have 1st AD Ahmed Hatimi at the helm of our production; he brought with him years of experience and his most kind and capable crew. His understanding of cinematography was instrumental in

making each day run like clockwork.

The crew's efficiency was vital in getting us through a string of obstacles. Camera batteries caught on fire, picture cars broke down, we were once rained out by a torrential rainstorm, we had to shoot through a sandstorm on our last day, we never saw dailies because the film was held up in customs, and six cans of film were fogged. Producer Andrea Balen still marvels that we had one of the lowest "L and D" (loss and damage) figures she's ever seen. That speaks to the professionalism of our crew.

Since my return to the States, many have asked about my experience as a woman cinematographer on a largely male set in a Muslim country. I can happily attest that I never felt that I was being treated differently because of my gender. My crew was very capable and respectful. Various crewmembers told me I was the first woman to shoot a feature in Morocco. I don't know if that's true, but it was satisfying to hear that they were happy to see a woman behind the camera. As it turned out, I did have some female companions on set: I was one of nine women in a 95-person crew, and three of the others were, I'm happy to say, in my camera department.

For me, the process is just as important as the product. My two months in Morocco allowed me to experience the country, capture the nuances of life there and form strong bonds that might last a lifetime. How many professions give you the opportunity to live in other countries and work closely with individuals from such diverse backgrounds? Many people just move on when the job is done, but I think it is important to cherish these experiences. It has been one month since my return to Los Angeles, and I speak to my new Moroccan friends on a weekly basis. I look forward to returning, and to many more shoots like this one. As they say in Morocco, "*A la prochaine, Insha'alla*" — "Till next time, God willing." ■

