

English and Arabic film reveals Journey to Mecca - REUTERS UK

Stanley Carvalho - Thu Jan 22, 2009

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Abu Dhabi (Reuters Life!) - The modern-day Haj experience writ large in IMAX film format is twinned with the ancient story of the Muslim world's best known ancient traveler in a new film which premiered this month in the Gulf.

"Journey to Mecca" made by Cosmic Picture was shot in Saudi Arabia and Morocco and tells the tale of Ibn Battuta's adventurous 14th century trek to Mecca from Tangier woven with IMAX coverage of millions of Muslims performing the Haj today.

"Four years ago, when we started on the film, we wanted to bring the story of one man's quest to reach Mecca to the giant canvas of IMAX - the most spectacular cinema format on earth with a screen some 25 meters (yards) high," said Dominic Cunningham-Reid, Producer of the film and Chairman of Cosmic Picture.

"We wanted to mix a 14th century drama with contemporary Mecca to show the past and present."

Journey to Mecca marks the first and only time an IMAX camera has captured an aerial view of the Haj from a helicopter hovering 200 feet above Mecca and the first time an IMAX team has been admitted into the most sacred sanctuary of Islam - the Grand Mosque at Mecca.

"We knew that if we could overcome the uncharted challenges of getting IMAX technology into the grand mosque of Mecca and up in the sky above it then we would make a film with the potential to promote a better fundamental understanding of Islam in the West while sharing the heart of Islamic heritage with the widest possible audience, regardless of religion," Cunningham-Reid said.

The producers maintain the film is non-political and is entertaining and enlightening to the non-Muslim world, helping them to understand Islam.

"We have looked at the Haj in a historical context by telling the story of Ibn Battuta," said Taran Davies, CEO of Cosmic Picture who describes 'Journey to Mecca' as a "dramatic film with a documentary element."

"It is a celebration of culture, it is about humanity and with a powerful message. Our aim is to create awareness and understanding to the next generation and of peace and understanding especially in the non-Muslim world."

The film is scheduled to show this month in Dearborn, Michigan and Paris and in February in Toronto. It will also be screened in Saudi Arabia which has only one theater and in various other countries where theatres have already booked it without seeing the film.

"There's tremendous interest in people understanding other people and we are relying on this aspect," admits Davies, dismissing any concerns about the film's legitimacy on grounds that non-Muslims produced it.

"It is actually a collaboration between people of different countries and different religions and without our co-producers from Morocco and other Muslim partners, we could not have got anywhere," explains Davies, citing how an Imam was very pleased by the project only because it was conceived by the West.

Journey to Mecca stars newcomer Chems Eddine Zinoun who played Ibn Battuta, Hassam Ghancy, Nadim Swalha and Nabil Elouabhabi. Renowned actor Ben Kingsley is the film's English language narrator.

For the producers, it was irrelevant to get major movie stars.

"The story is the important element of the film and major stars could have been a distraction. Ibn Battuta is you and me and need not be a great movie star," said Davies.

Ironically, Zinoun, the 28-year-old hero of the film died on November 12, 2008 shortly after the film was completed.

Despite the trials and tribulations of making the film, the crew of 85 from 30 countries enjoyed every bit of the work, able to maintain their creative integrity throughout to recreate the Hajj in the 14th century.

And while for some of the Muslim crew it was their first journey to Mecca, for some of the non-Muslims it was the closest they could get to one of the holiest shrines which is otherwise out of bounds for them.

(Editing by Paul Casciato)