



OUT OF ARABIA

FEATURE: ELLE MURRELL. PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF THEEB

Naji Abu Nowar talks to VIVMAG about his debut film *Theeb*, a story on Bedouin brotherhood and betrayal, as it amasses international accolades.

This year Jordan's Bedouin will no longer remain on the far-flung peripheries due to the monumental success of a film produced in the heart of Wadi Rum. "*Theeb* (Wolf) is an original film, a story from their rich culture blended with cinema and I don't think anyone has quite seen anything like it before," explains director Naji Abu Nowar.

A PRESTIGIOUS PREMIER

The coming-of-age story premiered at the 71st Venice Film Festival (VFF) last month where it was awarded the *Best Director* prize as part of the *Orizzonti* international competition. Respected as a hotbed for exposing vanguard talent, this

category is dedicated to films that embody the latest aesthetic and expressive trends in international cinema. Naji's premier full-length feature, *Theeb*, was produced by Rupert Lloyd of the UK and Jordanian Bassel Ghandour (who also co-wrote the film with Naji). After receiving a 10-minute standing ovation at its debut, the Bedouin Western was selected to screen at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF). Run as part of the Discovery Programme, showcasing directors to watch and exposing the future of world cinema, *Theeb* was praised in several reviews from notoriously harsh film critics as an "understated gem", "remarkable accomplishment" and for "radiating passion from every frame". "My favourite thing was being told by one

(TIFF) audience member that it was his second viewing. To me, there is no greater compliment a filmmaker can get," says the British-born, Jordan-raised director.

Theeb is slated to screen at another nine prestigious film festivals this year, including the British Film Institute's London Film Festival this month. Near the end of 2014 its screenings in rural Jordan "will bring the cinema to the people" through distribution support from the King Abdullah II Fund for Development (KAFD). *Theeb's* national premiere will fittingly be marked by an open-air event at Wadi Rum in the company of locals from communities that participated in its making. Following this it will be commercially released and screening at cinemas throughout Amman.

A still from *Theeb*,
filmed in Wadi Rum
and Wadi Araba



Hussein Salameh as Hussein,
the older brother of Theeb
who is played by Jacir Eid



RAISED BY WOLVES

In Arabic with English subtitles, the narrative drama follows young Theeb, who lives with his Bedouin tribe in a forgotten corner of the Ottoman Empire of 1916. Having recently lost their father, it falls to Theeb's older-brother Hussein to raise him. Before long, the siblings' lives are interrupted by the arrival of a British army officer. Where Hussein agrees to accompany the outsider on a mysterious and danger-fraught mission, Theeb is prematurely forced into the harsh realities of adulthood. In the equally severe yet stunning landscape, the adolescent grapples with his morality and must adapt in order to survive.

Naji was fascinated by making a film of this time and place: as the Ottomans were losing their grip on an outer-most reach, ushering in transitions that would shape the modern Middle East. During this period of the Great Arab Revolt the livelihood of those living by the newly built Hijaz railway was threatened and the land became a hunting ground for Ottoman mercenaries, Arab revolutionaries and Bedouin raiders.

Theeb is the follow up to Naji's short, *Death of a Boxer*, which screened at the Dubai International Film Festival in 2009, though the idea of making a film like *Theeb* had appeared in his mind many years before. "The first thing I wrote in 2003 was a kind of Bedouin Western, which wasn't very good but it made me realise that this world was ripe for cinema," explains the 32-year-old director. "In 2010 when Bassel brought me his wonderful Bedouin short film script, I knew he had something special and asked him if we could develop it together as a full length feature."

Shot entirely against the backdrop of Wadi Rum and Wadi Araba for authenticity, Naji's cast is largely made up of first-time actors hailing from one of the last of Jordan's Bedouin tribes to settle (many of the adult males had spent part of their childhood living nomadically). Jacir Eid stars as Theeb along side his real life cousin Hussein Salameh who plays Theeb's brother and Hassan Mutlag as the stranger. Englishman Jack Fox is the film's only professional actor in the role of the soldier and Marji Audeh plays his desert guide.



The cast and crew at the 71st Venice Film Festival



Naji Abu Nowar accept the Orizzonti award for Best Director

AT HOME IN SHAKIRIYA

For the yearlong writing and production phases, Naji relocated from his Amman home to the remote Shakiriya Village. Along with academic and photographic research to provide genuine context, the team met frequently with Bedouin elders. They offered up stories of their forefathers “rich with character” and exposed the personal dramas of those times.

Theeb is careful not to present its characters in a way that insinuates a political statement. “Portrayal infers design and I try to create real people. We didn’t write the characters in the film to be political symbols, we wrote them to be human beings,” explains Naji. “I don’t like political cinema because I always feel that the characters and story tend to be rather two dimensional. The filmmaker is trying to force his opinion onto the real world, but the real world can never perfectly express their view so the filmmaker must then manipulate and alter what is real to suit their ideology. The characters end up speaking with the filmmakers voice to support his purpose rather than speaking with their own,” he adds.

Actively included in the story and character development of *Theeb*, the Bedouin were initially unfazed by cinema but became appreciative of the craft, invested and impassioned. “They also saw



Jacir Eid, who stars as Theeb, acknowledges the audience at the debut screening



Naji with his main cast who wear traditional Bedouin riding wear, embroidered with calligraphy of a poem featured in the film: “In questions of brotherhood, never refuse a guest. Be the right hand of the right, when men make their stand” They were designed by local label Hama Fashion



The crew of Theeb on set

Theeb as a chance to accurately reflect their culture which they feel has been abused by the inaccurate drama series on Arabic TV channels,” says Naji, likening this to the way Native American culture was portrayed in Hollywood of the 1940s and 1950s. For Naji the Bedouin’s desire to represent their culture went hand in hand with his penchant for creating authentic settings and characters in his work and they formed “a great creative partnership”.

The cast and crew of the low-budget Jordanian, Britain, UAE and Qatari co-production agreed to take pay-cuts, defer payments or even work for free to ensure its completion. Developed by Sanad, the development and post-production fund of the Abu Dhabi Film Festival, *Theeb* was also supported by Doha Film Institute, KAFD and sponsors including the Jordan Heritage Revival Company, Luminous Media, Ultra Water, Zain, Aramex and MAC.

THE SPIRIT OF CINEMA

Just as the hard truths of Arabian desert life in 1916 are revealed to protagonist *Theeb*, Naji has come to realise that you don’t need permission from anyone to make a film today. “For a very long time I laboured under the stupid mentality that I somehow needed a seal of approval from organisations and funds to produce films. Then I realised you just have to get out there and do it. This was a very liberating experience and it freed me to take risks,” he explains.

Imbued with this spirit, Naji will next turn his attention to a Jordanian epic. The ambitious production will take several years to be developed and he will begin work on a small English language film in the meantime, before returning home “to make the big one!”

To stay updated on the Jordanian screenings of Theeb, or for more information visit [Facebook.com/TheebFilm](https://www.facebook.com/TheebFilm) or follow on Twitter @TheebFilm.

OTHER UPCOMING JORDANIAN INDEPENDENT FILMS

IN OVERTIME

Also screened at VFF, this 13-minute short delves into a complex father-son relationship and was another homegrown work that made its debut at VFF this year. Directed, written and starring Jordanian-Canadian Rami Yasin alongside Israeli-Arab actor Makram Khouri, *In Overtime* was produced by award-winning husband-and-wife duo Ossama Bawardi and Annemarie Jacir of Philistine Films.

THE COUNCIL

Yahya Al Abdallah’s film exposes the challenges faced by the student council of a school for Palestinian refugees in Jordan. The documentary won support and funds to assist in its post-production and digital colour correction from Laser Film at VFF’s Final Cut in Venice (part of Venice Film Market). It was supported by Rai Cinema in acquiring television-broadcasting rights for two years and Sub-ti Ltd will make a master digital cinema package (DCP) also adding Italian or English subtitles.

POSSESSED BY DJIN

Dalia Al Kury’s film was also offered coverage of post-production expenses at VFF’s Final Cut by Centre National du Cinéma et de l’Image Animée along with master DCP, colour correction and French subtitles services by Titra TVS. The deeply engrossing crime documentary follows the case of *Aya*; a four-year-old Jordanian girl killed by her father because he believed her to be possessed and explores esoteric aspects of faith.