

## Captain Abu Raed

SpeedGrade Goes to Sundance with Amin Matalqa's Debut Feature



*"I always wanted to make movies. The silver screen could be an outlet where my imagination would be manifested with shapes, colors, people, and music. Oh, what a feeling that would be!"*

- Amin Matalqa

Captain Abu Raed, playing at Sundance next week, is the product both of one man's drive to become a filmmaker, and of the people in a part of the world whose stories ache to be told. Just shy of his 32nd birthday, Amin Matalqa has already left one financially rewarding career and is now on the cusp of a whole new kind of success. "I studied Business Marketing at Ohio State University, but my video camera never left my shoulder." After four years in telecommunications, Amin decided to change course and moved to Los Angeles where he made short films, wrote screenplays and, after three years, was accepted into the Directing MFA program at the American Film Institute. "All of that was just preparation for what I really wanted to do: make features."

Amin Matalqa's first film is set in Jordan and tells the story of Abu Raed, a janitor at the airport in Amman. The children in his neighborhood believe he is a pilot. Abu Raed humors them with made-up stories of his travels but is soon drawn into the painful realities of these youngsters' lives. "The kids who played these roles were not trained actors, and ten of the twelve



are from orphan centers (they have mothers but no fathers) in refugee camps,” explained Amin. “We auditioned over 200 children for these roles and found truly gifted performers. They are the story-behind-the-story in this film.”

The movie was shot with ARRI D20s. “Originally I was adamant about using film cameras,” said Amin. “If we couldn’t get 35 millimeter then I wanted to go with 16 mm at least. I had shot enough video and I just didn’t want anything about this film to look cheap.” But one of the challenges facing the production was the fact that there are no film labs in Jordan. “My producer David Pritchard and cinematographer Ray Peschke talked me into looking at digital cameras. When I first saw and handled the D20 I knew this was the real deal. We could use 35 mm lenses with it and Ray was keen to use it. After spending a day playing with the camera at Clairmont, I was sold.”



Clark Graff of Gigapix Studios was brought along to supervise the pipeline. “Clark is amazing. He knows how to get things done. When the gear arrived in Amman a lot of it had been damaged in transit and would not work. Clark and Urban Olsson, our assistant technical director, just rolled up their sleeves and got to work - for days. By five o’clock the evening before shooting was scheduled to begin, we were good to go.”

Captain Abu Raed is set in Amman, the capital of Jordan. However, the neighborhood exteriors were shot in the ancient city of Salt, half an hour from Amman. “I wanted the look of the yellow stone buildings, the arched windows and the brick streets that you only find in Salt. I wanted to use color to accent the themes of the story and I wanted Abu



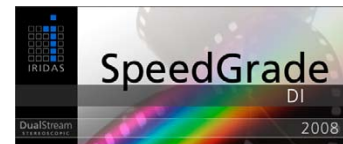
Raed, the main character, to appear in warm yellows - in contrast to some of the harsh realities that he confronts in this story. I wanted the feeling of my favorite Italian films."

Shooting was completed in a remarkable 23 days. "I don't think I will ever forget the experience," says Amin. "At the wrap party we had producers from the wealthier segments of Jordanian society dancing joyfully with children from refugee camps. It's not a sight you'll see often."

Postproduction was done halfway around the world at Gigapix Studios in California. It was Clark Graff, Technical, Production and Post Supervisor at Gigapix, who made the decision to finish the film with SpeedGrade DI. "When we were shopping around for this project we decided that SpeedGrade offered the feature set and capabilities we needed," he explains. "Plus we liked the company. If we had a question about an EDL, for example, we just sent it over to Munich and the guys got right back to us. Open communications and a vendor that listens to your ideas are very important to us."



Clark is a hands-on person with a strong background in electrical engineering and computer technologies. He insists on building his own systems for any project. The team ran SpeedGrade DI on an AMD Opteron-powered digital film recorder and sent the uncompressed HD-SDI signal to a 50" Panasonic TH-50PF9UK



full resolution plasma display. Clark used linear color space adjustments within SpeedGrade DI to color balance the monitor for accuracy in grading. “We proofed the images simultaneously on a Sony Cine Alta BVM-F24 monitor.”

Grading was done by Mark Read with support from DI expert Claudia Meglin who has extensive experience with the ARRI D20 and who helped implement one of the first SpeedGrade pipelines in 2003.



“SpeedGrade is a key piece of what we call the Director’s Confidence System,” says Clark Graff. “Ultimately our goal is to get the director, DP, and colorist in the same room at the beginning of the pipeline rather than at the end as is the case in traditional workflows.” This approach aims to provide directors with a clear idea of their shots which “allows them to make better choices on set.” In the end it means the director can push the images further in production while greatly reducing the need for correction in post.

There was every reason to ensure image and color precision on Captain Abu Raed. “Our director had a very clear idea of how he wanted the film done, right into details which many directors are not aware of,” says colorist Mark Read. Specific musical instruments in the film score and color schemes were associated

with different figures in the story. "It was as if 'cello melody & sunset color' were just as much part of a character, as the clothes they were wearing or the expressions on their face." For the looks of the movie, Amin wanted three main color moods. Abu Raed was shown in warm colors like candlelight or a sunset. His nemesis, a troubled man, lost in a world of violence, appears in a cold steely blue, high-contrast look. The third color mood, violet, represents sacrifice & redemption and is used for the conclusion of the narrative and in foreshadowing moments through the story.



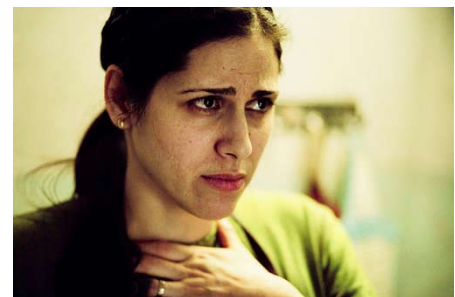
"There's this brutal scene that takes place in a kitchen," explains Mark Read. "The overall look of the shot is the cold blue. But even in one of the worst



moments, there is hope, symbolized in the warm violet glow of an incandescent light bulb, almost nonsensically placed in the otherwise cold, florescent-lit room." Along with the secondaries tools, Mark used animated masks for many scenes, allowing him to accent parts of the image as they move across the screen. SpeedGrade's ability to grade highlights, mid-tones and shadows – within the overall grade was also very helpful for the sophisticated grading this project required. "With its high

dynamic range, its solid feature set, and the ability to work with virtually any format, SpeedGrade may well be the most versatile system out there."

"Mark was amazing," says Amin. "I learned a lot from him and just love what he did with the images. I felt like I could stare at them forever." Others who have seen the finished film agree. "It's visually very impressive," says Steve Crouch, director of IRIDAS USA. "We're hearing a lot of good things about the look of this film and we expect to the response will grow as it hits the film festivals this year."



*Captain Abu Raed, starring Nadim Sawalha and Rana Sultan and introducing Hussein Al-Sous and Udey Al-Qiddissi, is the first Jordanian feature film aimed at both domestic and international audiences. Captain Abu Raed premieres at the Sundance Film Festival on January 23, 2008, and opens in theaters in Jordan on February 6. Watch for it at film festivals throughout 2008.*



Writer and director **Amin Matalqa**'s own father was a pilot. The filmmaker was born in Amman, Jordan and moved to the U.S. as a teenager. After a brief but successful career in business, he decided to "follow his bliss" and moved to Los Angeles to study and create films. 26 short films later he was able to assemble the financing and a team of 200 to create Captain Abu Raed. And this is just the beginning: Amin plans to make many films yet and is already hard at work on his next project.

Transplanted Canadian, musician, filmmaker, and technological renaissance man **Clark Graff** first heard of SpeedGrade from Kim Libreri when the two were working on the Matrix sequels. "I learned a lot from Kim and SpeedGrade is just a part of it." Clark is technical, production and post supervisor at Gigapix and owner of GRAFF Network Services. He has worked on The Matrix: Reloaded, The Matrix: Revolutions, The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King, I, ROBOT and many other films.



Only the second-ever user of SpeedGrade way back in 2003, **Mark Read** created the world's first all-digital, tapeless uncompressed production pipeline for Lazytown, Nickelodeon's popular children's program. Mark's company, Hypercube, based in Boulder Colorado, provides consulting and project supervision for advanced digital acquisition and postproduction. Recent films Mark has worked on include Tropic Thunder, The Changeling, Stillwater, and Letters from Iwo Jima.

