

Director's interview

1. What made you decide to make this film?

Obviously Afghanistan has been in the news for years but the pivotal moment for me was July 1st 2002 when I read of an erroneous attack by the US air force on an Afghan wedding party. While reading the heart-wrenching story of the dead and wounded - can you imagine such a thing on your wedding day? - I became determined to find out more about who were the Afghans and how, post-Taliban, they were living. But I knew that I had to find an individual story that would drive the film. I wanted to find someone about who a film was in itself worthy but also, through whom, we could learn about life for 'ordinary' Afghans.

2. How did you convince the people in the film to be involved?

Simple, I asked them. Before deciding to make a cinema feature, I had been approached to make a one-hour television film about the possible reconstruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan. For me, that wasn't the story: the story was those people who, I discovered, lived alongside the destroyed statues. I did my research and then simply packed my bags and headed off. Actually it wasn't that simple: there were many hurdles and precautions but, by August 2002, I'd made it to Bamiyan. As soon as I arrived, I simply wandered to the caves and, with my fixer Sami Sharaf, started talking to people. Amazingly the very first person I met on the paths from cave to cave was Deljam who I immediately took a liking to - and the film shows why. Within a few days I had decided both to focus on one strip of caves (a handful out of the hundreds) and, more importantly, one small boy. Fortunately all those I thought were interesting or important were willing to be filmed - including, of course, Mir. Some simply because I asked. Some to help tell their story. Some in the hope that they would benefit financially in some way.

3. Why did you pick Mir as the central figure in the film?

This was the key decision. Who would be the central driving force of the film? I knew - or felt - that it would be tough for an adult (talking primarily about the past) to hold an audience's attention for 90 or 100 minutes. I needed someone who was active in some way and most of the adults were not. It's the nature of their lives that they are stuck in a situation of passivity. Someone like Deljam was the closest to a central character in my opinion because he was clearly full of energy and life. But for me a child was more appealing. Partly because I knew one would be forced to think of the future of Afghanistan rather than solely its past. Partly because he may get up to all sorts of mischief that we could all identify with and understand. Partly because he would appeal to children and adults alike in cinemas and on TV screens worldwide. Mir, for me, represents and illustrates much more than just one life in central Afghanistan - he contains so much of childhood around the globe. His world is much more common than the wealthy upbringing that most western children enjoy. Finally, I chose Mir because he made me smile and I wanted the film to contain humour - because, despite everything, the Afghans I met were upbeat, lively and frequently funny.

4. Did focusing on Mir cause any problems within the community?

Naturally I feared that my focus on him and his family would cause them problems. The community at first simply labelled me a 'western aid worker'. They became confused when morning after morning there I would be, walking up the path to the caves, lugging my gear with me. Most eventually understood what I was doing and hoped it would somehow help get their story - as a community - to a wide audience. But, needless to say, there were those who wanted something from me there and then. They had seen journalists before - in Bamiyan or elsewhere - who either gave nothing or, worse, promised to help but didn't. A week or so into the first shoot, a delegation came to me and asked what exactly I was bringing to the community. I had brought childrens' clothes, food and money as well as my normal film-makers spiel about 'letting the world see how you live'. I didn't distribute anything until my last day (on each trip) and of course that did create a stir because I couldn't leave gifts with every family. So yes there was a growing undercurrent of jealousy towards Mir's family. They were very wise to keep their gifts hidden. On the last trip I made a donation to the girls school as, in theory, that would help everyone. In some ways, it is remarkable no-one ever tried to rob me, assault me or intimidate me in any way - they knew I was, in their terms, carrying a fortune on me. It is testimony to their innate humanity and decency that I was treated with great kindness and dignity. As a footnote, Mir suffered a bit of ribbing at school - some accused him of being 'son of a foreigner' - but he, as the film shows, can look after himself.

5. How did your presence influence the story?

This occupied my thoughts a great deal during the filming and indeed the production as a whole. I don't believe in the idea that a film-maker can be present in a limited environment - such as Mir's cave - and simply observe without causing some impact. The question is what is that impact and does the film still reflect the reality of the situation that you as the film-maker understand it? I think, however, the most significant impact I had was to alleviate their boredom - one has always to remember how few options they have on a day to day basis. I have a thousand things I could do in a day - they have ten, twenty, thirty. It is a remarkably salutary realisation. So a film-maker among them is of great interest and great fun. Of course over time, the interest wears off and one has to allow oneself to be dull, to sit quietly in corners and not participate - and also to ensure the fixer does the same. I think I also have to acknowledge that I substantially reduced the likelihood of them dying of starvation. Ultimately no-one, to my knowledge, died that winter of hunger though Muhammad Ali's life may have been extended by a better diet. But the assistance I gave was a safety net that probably ensured Mir's survival - if indeed that was ever really in doubt. I know also that my badgering of Abdul to send Mir to school had an impact - before my arrival, he and Khoshdel had simply not thought it that important. Perhaps therefore I changed the story but if I did, I'm pleased to have done so: their lives are ultimately far more important than my film.

6. Did anything surprise you about the people you met in Bamiyan?

I have been lucky to have travelled fairly extensively. In doing so, I have experienced that people are by and large kind, hospitable, entertaining and enduring. So I hoped that Afghans would be the same. And indeed they were. Of course there were some unpleasant moments and a couple of times of danger but an Afghan film crew in England would have suffered far worse daily trouble than I, although I admit they may not have faced the possibility of mines or armed roadblocks in quite the same way. The people of Bamiyan were generally very warm and accommodating, especially those one actually sat and talked to. That's not to say it was entirely safe: on one occasion, the people of Bamiyan decided to march in demonstration and all westerners were advised to hide indoors. I chose to film but my fixer later told me

that comments were evenly split between 'he's alright, leave him alone' and 'give him a good kick up the backside'.

7. What shocked you the most about the situation in Bamiyan?

It takes a while to really comprehend just how little people own - no photographs, no pictures on the wall, barely any books, magazines, clothes, shoes, toys. They own so little that they can - and have - put all their possessions on one donkey. Imagine how large a vehicle we would need to move our possessions. I don't believe we'll have ever have a world of equality but the division between the haves and have nots is appalling. I think my flight from Kabul to Dubai summed up how different two places can be - mind you, don't assume that one is good and one is bad. There is much to be said for some of the simplicity of life in Bamiyan - the food, albeit limited was delicious, the air was pure, people talked to one another, you didn't choke on the fumes of SUVs, no-one was obese, children were safe to walk the streets, and so on. There was a medieval feel to the place which contained certain elements to recommend it. But the lack of clean accessible water, the privations of the health and education systems, the harshness of the work, the omnipotence of the military – all these are major long-term problems in Afghanistan.

8. What made you decide to make a feature-length film, rather than a TV documentary?

I am an enthusiastic advocate of the feature-length documentary. Indeed, to me, they are simply feature films made with real people rather than actors. Some of the best films I have seen over the past decade have been documentaries rather than the more traditional fiction films. Sadly, television in Britain (and worldwide) has backed away from feature docs - indeed in Britain we have seen a serious decline in the commissioning of challenging, crafted documentary films. There is no shortage of factual commissions but that is quite different. I think this shows a great lack of courage on the part of the broadcasters and a slavish adherence to the flawed idea that TV must provide only what 'the audience wants'. So, there was never any doubt in my mind that 'The Boy who Plays on the Buddhas of Bamiyan' would be made first and foremost at cinema length, for cinema distribution. It's a risk as distribution is hard to secure but certainly the festival circuit is very active and rewarding. Television is very transitory - one's films air then may never be seen again - whereas theatrical documentaries have a much greater life and, for the director, a much greater interaction with the audience. 'The Boy..' will make the most of both worlds and, in doing so, hopefully attract the greatest attention to Mir and the 25-30 million refugee children like him worldwide.

9. Were there any difficulties involved with filming in Afghanistan?

The British Foreign Office were quite clear: don't go. And, if you do go, don't travel beyond Kabul. With that in mind, we did take issues of security and safety seriously. I had both specialist medical and security briefings - and talked to as many people as possible who had recent experience of working in the country. On arrival in Afghanistan, I was surprised on the one hand by the destruction that is almost overwhelming but, on the other hand, the normality of life. People are people and just want to get on with their lives. The first thing I did on my arrival was go and film in Kabul's main market just to see what people's reaction would be - and, pleasantly, there was little but smiles or disinterest. As for Bamiyan, one has to remember that the Hazara suffered very badly under the Taliban and are pleased the Americans

(aka: Coalition Forces) kicked them out. So there is very little anti-American feeling. That said, it's wise to remain alert. One also has to be very cautious of mines - though these have largely been cleared from Bamiyan. There are, however increasing dangers else where. En route between Bamiyan and Kabul, on one occasion we were threatened and, on another occasion, we had to run an armed Taliban roadblock. This once again served to elevate my respect for camera teams and journalists who cover such areas week in, week out.

10. Was it difficult to persuade Afghan women to talk on camera?

Very. This was a huge concern to me from the start. Obviously, without women, one has only half the story. But culturally and historically women are not easy to approach and talk to. So it took time to build up a relationship with Mir's mother, creating a trust between us that would allow her to feel comfortable in front of the camera and, sadly but perhaps just as importantly, create an environment in which the men in her life would not object to her participation. Certainly, if I was making this film again, instead of filming and sound recording myself, I would take either a female sound recordist or female fixer to help facilitate the appearance of women on film. One thing I did discover is that, when they do speak, women are very articulate and very angry - it is they who suffer the day to day privations and stresses of food preparation and child-rearing. I think it is they that should be the focus of further films - Afghan men have had enough air-time!

11. What was the highlight of your visit to Afghanistan?

There were many. The landscape is stunning, absolutely breath-taking. The generosity and humour of many of those I met. Being in Kabul and witnessing the extraordinary destruction. But above all, two things stand out: first the sense (after having made many history films) of being in a place where history was happening right now. I didn't have to try and imagine what life was like in 1st century Rome or 16th century Italy - I could be in 21st century Kabul and see history in the making. Secondly, and ultimately, the highlight has to be the time spent with Mir and his family in the caves - it is an extraordinary place, with extraordinary people.

12. What, for you, is the purpose of the film?

There are two: first I want as many people as possible to get a sense of what Mir's life is like. I want people to engage with him and identify with his youthful exuberance and excitement. The similarities between people of different nations far exceed the differences. Too often, I fear people forget this. Next time we read of an accidental attack on civilians in Afghanistan or indeed anywhere, I want people to think, even for a split second, of Mir, Abdul, Mirwari, Khoshdel and Deljam. People like them are the real casualties of war, terrorism and greed. A second, more self-centred objective is to make as strong a film as possible to add my filmic voice to the call for an increase in production and distribution of feature length documentaries. Television as it stands is doing an increasingly poor job in reflecting and interpreting the world - and, for the most powerful medium in the world, that to me is an abdication of responsibility for which we will all ultimately suffer.