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## Jan Chats with Doc Filmmaker Nina Davenport about her new film **OPERATION FILMMAKER**

June 5, 2008

**JAN'S INTRO:** Rich & I saw Nina Davenport's doc **OPERATION FILMMAKER** at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Chicago International Film Festival in October '07. Almost a year later, it finally opened at one of our local art houses (the Gene Siskel Film Center), but despite excellent reviews, it was gone again in a flash.

Here's the basic story: An American film crew brings a young Iraqi man named Muthana to their shoot in the Czech Republic. They're offering him a great “learning opportunity,” but he has no clue what it really means to be “a production assistant.” When the shoot ends, they all leave, & he's stuck. The War in Iraq has become a quagmire, & his life is at risk if he tries to go home.

Let me just point out the obvious: once we fixed on Barack Obama as our Presidential candidate, most Americans promptly sent Iraq to the back of our collective consciousness, conveniently forgetting that people are still fighting & dying there “in our names.”

Kudos to Nina Davenport for doing her best to “keep faith” with Muthana long after others had abandoned him. Kudos to Nina Davenport for creating an excellent film that asks hard questions. Shame on us if we don't pay attention!

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**Jan:** We've had documentaries that purport to be “objective” (filmed from a 3<sup>rd</sup> person point of view) & now increasingly, post Michael Moore, we have the filmmaker making it clear that he or she is a “character” in the project. Were you ever tempted to make **OPERATION FILMMAKER** from that 3<sup>rd</sup> person “objective” POV?

**Nina:** I thought that's what I was doing at the beginning! It was a relief to make a film that wasn't personal because it's hard to make personal films. They get way more criticism. It's not like you get credit: “Oh, it was so brave of you to put yourself in your

## Jan Chats with Nina Davenport about OPERATION FILMMAKER

film. Let me give you awards, etc, etc.” It’s more like “guilty until proven innocent” if you put yourself in a film.

**Jan:** What impacts the choice of whether it’s 1<sup>st</sup> person or 3<sup>rd</sup> person?

**Nina:** When you put yourself in the film, it’s much harder to make it work because it’s not what people are used to. They assume that the filmmaker is not going to be in the film. So once you introduce yourself, you have to do it very well or people won’t like it.

It’s inherently not an easy thing to do, because it’s hard to be “objective” about yourself. For some people, it requires overcoming vanity. I don’t have that issue. In fact, I cut the scenes where I looked good in my prior film **PARALLEL LINES** because it looked too self-conscious, like I was trying to look good. Instead I kept scenes where I looked haggard & tired, driving cross-country in my car.

Turning your life into a movie is a real challenge, which is what I did with **ALWAYS A BRIDESMAID**. So I was relieved at the idea of not having to be a character in **OPERATION FILMMAKER**. I assumed (because I had nothing to do with this story) that I wasn’t going to be in it. The problem was I got drawn into Muthana’s life in a way that made it inevitable that I would be “a character,” because I was having an affect on his life.

**Jan:** Except, at the very beginning, Muthana turns the camera on you. Was this just “playing around” at the time, but it later became part of the story once you became part of the story?

**Nina:** During the editing process, I was able to find a few moments to slowly ease myself into the film. So, for example, I realized that I had the voice of me asking Liev Schreiber (the director of **EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED**): “So take me back to what you were thinking when you first watched Muthana on MTV?” (This is now how the film begins.)

When I found that shot where Muthana is filming me, I thought, “Thank God I found that.” When I found the shot where I say, “I can’t take this anymore; I’m going to put the camera down,” & I keep talking & giving Muthana advice, I think those are the points that indicate that I might be a character in this film.

**Jan:** So, those were unintended consequences, but they became integral to the story? Was the original plan to make your film an extra feature on the DVD version of **EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED** or something like that?

**Nina:** No, Liev called producer David Schisgall to say, “What do you think about bringing this guy over?” David said, “I think it sounds like a great idea.” Liev said, “What about making a documentary about it?” David said, “That sounds like a great idea, too.” It was always meant to be a freestanding documentary.

**Jan:** So, all the men on this project, one by one, they abandon ship, & the only person who’s left with Muthana is the one woman involved: You.

## Jan Chats with Nina Davenport about OPERATION FILMMAKER

**Nina:** I was, in a way, a mother figure to him. Muthana wanted me to take care of him.

**Jan:** OK, Nina, there's no disguising the fact that I'm coming from a Feminist perspective here: What's the difference if a woman is telling this story versus a man? In this case, it seems clear to me that you were still involved long after all the men were long gone...

**Nina:** It makes me uncomfortable to assume that it was because they were men that they abandoned Muthana, & it's because I'm a woman that I didn't. But I think that women in general are more compassionate, so it's probably not a coincidence that I was more compassionate towards him.

**Jan:** Are there specific ways in which the film would have been different if you originally started out as co-directors, & there was a woman & a man on the team? If the woman had left, & it had been finished up by a man, would Muthana have been represented less compassionately?

**Nina:** I think it depends on the person. The producer, David Schisgall, he never had to deal with Muthana, & he never spent more than ten minutes in the same room with the guy. But still he gave him money after the point that I'd decided never to give him another cent as long as I lived.

**Jan:** There that critical point in the film where David says to you, "Your relationship has deteriorated, so just wipe it up & come home." Then, in the next scene, you're back in New York, & you & Kouross Esmaeli are talking, & Kouross says: "We have multiple agendas here."

Kouross started out with a bigger role in this project, but now he just wants out. You say: "I'm not willing to give up trying." How much of it was that you frankly wanted to finish the film? Did you consciously realize that, in truth, you knew you were actually getting some pretty great footage?

**Nina:** Obviously that was a huge factor because I'm dedicated to my work. But also I'm an extremely compassionate person, so I wasn't constitutionally able to watch Muthana flounder & not help, particularly because, at various points, it required such small amounts of money. Given that I raised a lot of money for the film, it was hard to justify not giving him \$200 to get a passport. There were many junctures like that. In some cases, it was much larger amounts of money, like when he needed to get a visa. If he doesn't get the money, he's totally screwed.

**Jan:** You present Muthana in dire circumstances where, whether he was manufacturing the death threats or not, they were real enough. You interpolated scenes of his friends in Baghdad, to make sure that people in the comfortable Western audience understand the way his friends in Iraq are actually living while he's in Prague.

**Nina:** It was crucial because it was easy to forget. Muthana became so Westernized; he's living in this fancy apartment; he's going to bars. It was hard to remember what he came from, & what it would be like if he had been there in Iraq.

## Jan Chats with Nina Davenport about OPERATION FILMMAKER

So I realized: If I'm having trouble remembering it as someone who's read a ton about Iraq & watched a ton of news, then the audience is definitely going to need to be reminded of how he would have been living had he not gotten that email from Liev inviting him to work on **EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED**.

Also, there is a lot of unfair stereotyping. It's more complicated than it seems. Each culture has inherent weaknesses, & pride is a weakness of Middle Eastern male culture. But I didn't find Muthana to be "sexist," & I didn't find him to be anti-Semitic either. Would he have been less abusive to me were I male? Definitely! But that would probably be true of any guy in the United States too. I didn't find Muthana to be worse than men I deal with in the West.

**Jan:** Unfortunately most recent films about Iraq have done poorly at the box office because Americans just don't want to know. How do you try to break through that?

**Nina:** I do a lot of interviews, & every single review of **OPERATION FILMMAKER** has been fantastic. However, it's hard to get people in the theater to watch any documentary, let alone one about Iraq in a country with a short-term memory. When I made **PARALLEL LINES** (my 9/11 film), there was a two-year window, & then they weren't buying any more 9/11 films. 9/11 has actually gained more & more significance as time goes on, so it's just the American mentality. My job is to make films. I can't spend that much time trying to promote them because that's impossible.

**Jan:** So, what's next for you?

**Nina:** I made the film **ALWAYS A BRIDESMAID** (which came out in 2000), which was about my love life, & it got a fair amount of attention, so I'm making the sequel to that ten years later. Instead of turning 30, I turn 40, & it's about deciding whether or not to have a baby by myself because I haven't found a husband.

**Jan:** Well, I wish you the best of luck with **everything**, Nina, & I really appreciate your openness during this interview!



Nina Davenport with Muthana Mohamed.  
Photo Credit: Kouross Esmaeli

**June 5<sup>th</sup>**  
**phone interview:**  
**Interview notes**  
**condensed & edited**  
**by Jan,**  
**with assistance**  
**from**  
**Dalia Hoffman.**

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