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The Single Take

□ THE SINGLE TAKE

- ALEXANDER, DAVID OELHOFFEN, FAR FROM MEN, GAME OF THRONES, GLADIATOR, KEITH UHLICH, KINGDOM OF HEAVEN, LAWRENCE OF ARABIA, MARRAKECH, OUARZAZATE, RIDLEY SCOTT, THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST, VIGGO MORTENSEN
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14th Marrakech International Film Festival, Second Dispatch

Twenty minutes southeast of Marrakech by plane is the city of Ouarzazate, home to several historic filming locations for *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), *Alexander* (2004), *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) and *Game of Thrones* (2011-), among others. The promotional packet given to us by our tour guides claims this as the “African Hollywood.” And there certainly was plenty of staggering spectacle, beginning at the earthen-hued *ksar* (fortified city) of Aït Benhaddou. It’s situated beside a shallow river that much of our group crossed (against the rules) via a makeshift sandbag path to better study the intricacies of the imposing adobe structures. Sad to say the river temporarily claimed movie executive and former Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences president Sid Ganis, who slipped thigh-deep into the trickling waters. The universe’s revenge for producing *Deuce Bigelow: Male Gigolo* (1999), *The Master of Disguise* (2002) and several titles in the unending Adam Sandler oeuvre? We were all equals on this sojourn, so let’s not read too much karmic vengeance into it. Sid righted himself quickly and gracefully, and the march across continued, much to the guides’ chagrin. This threw off the entirety of the schedule they had planned, though as it turned out, we only had to skip a visit to the Ouarzazate Film Museum, which I was assured was the least of the attractions. So it goes.

AÏT BENHADDOU

On the journey between Ouarzazate and Aït Benhaddou (about a half-hour drive each way via our fleet of festival vans), the desolate landscape struck me as a prime subject for the camera of Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami, who more than any other artist attuned me to the pleasures of simply, silently looking out the window of a moving car. I cherished the moment when we were stuck behind a slow-going truck on an ill-designed narrow road: Coming around a particularly treacherous incline, I suddenly caught sight of a flock of sheep making their way up a hill. I scanned around for the shepherd, who I finally spotted, his clothes slightly camouflaging him within the craggy expanse, as we drove around the next turn. There and gone, but were it not for a seeming inconvenience, I might have missed the scene altogether.

There was also plenty happening inside our vehicle: In the front seat, a brawny, effusive man chatted with a female friend (who I later found out was Sid Ganis' wife Nancy Hult Ganis), every now and then turning around to talk to my seatmates (a French-Moroccan couple) about the history of the Moroccan royal family. He moved flawlessly between English and French, and had a magnetic aura about him—pure charisma. Turns out this was Holt McCallany, son of singer Julie Wilson, and a notable character actor you've probably seen without knowing it. Among his credits are Brian De Palma's *Casualties of War* (1989), Hal Hartley's *Amateur* (1994), David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999), David Twohy's *Below* (2002) and Walter Hill's *Bullet to the Head* (2012). He also starred in the critically acclaimed one-season FX series *Lights Out*, about a heavy-weight boxer

critically acclaimed one-season FX series *Lights Out*, about a heavyweight boxer acclimating (poorly) to retired life, and has an upcoming role in one of my most anticipated titles for next year, Michael Mann's cyberthriller *Blackhat* (2015). His curiosity about the country was infectious, and it was great to just listen to him, though we occasionally chatted with each other about where we hailed from and where we were staying. At one point, I thanked him for offering me several handfuls from a big bag of potato chips and he replied, cheerfully, "Anything for a fellow New Yorker."

Eventually the group made its way to both the Atlas and CLA Studios, where Egyptian statues greeted us at the entrance, and we drove along a ragged dirt road (storms had recently flooded the area, so the terrain was extremely muddy) to the towering set of Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven*. We stepped where Jeremy Irons and Orlando Bloom stepped and were treated to a live display of stuntmen careening through the various archways on horses as thudding techno music blasted on speakers behind us. If you're going to use the remnants of a Ridley Scott superproduction for anything...personally I was more enamored to stand on an adjoining set (repurposed from *Kingdom of Heaven*) where Daenerys Targaryen "trades" one of her dragons for the Unsullied army on *Game of Thrones*.

From there, we had a stopover and snack in the on-site Oscar Hotel, which boasts a bar dedicated to Morocco-shot *Gladiator* (2000) (seems Sir Ridley really likes filming in "Mohammad so-and-so from such-and-such" countries). Then Canadian producer Michael Prupas led us through the gargantuan sets of the upcoming Spike TV miniseries *Tut* (2015), which stars Ben Kingsley (of course) and Avan Jogia (an ABC Family/TV-movie staple) as the eponymous Egyptian ruler. The sets were impressively detailed, with one—likely the courtyard of Tut's palace—spreading out for a football field or more. I believe Prupas invoked Elizabeth Taylor's *Cleopatra* (1963) as comparison for the intended size and scope, which inspired my travel companion-cum-colleague Marshall Fine to crack, out of studio executive earshot, "Hopefully it's a better movie."

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: MARSHALL FINE AND HOLT MCCALLANY

Let's take that opportunity to talk about a better movie: I'd wanted to visit Ouarzazate, in part, because *Far From Men* (2014), a Marrakech Film Festival Out of Competition title, was shot there. Written and directed by David Oelhoffen (adapting Albert Camus' 1957 short story "The Guest") and starring Viggo Mortensen (who was attending the festival for a tribute to his career), the film begins with a towering widescreen supertitle announcing the setting as "Algeria, 1954." That primes us for an explicitly political work, but the War of Independence is more of a backdrop for Oelhoffen. He's made a spare, moody, and melancholic Western in the vein of John Hillcoat's *The Proposition* (2005), with which the movie shares the trance-like compositional talents of musicians Nick Cave and Warren Ellis.

Mortensen plays Daru, a teacher at a school in the remote Algerian High Plains. There's something immediately mysterious about him, though Mortensen doesn't go for the laconic opacity of Clint Eastwood's *Man with No Name*; you never feel like he's hiding his past (or is mythically without one), so much as he's using his rough-hewn politesse to divert any inquisitive attention. All that matters is who he is at this particular moment—you *could* dig deeper, but maybe it's better not to try. Daru has an uneasy peace with his neighbors, some of who are warning him to leave the area so as not to be killed by the French and Algerian soldiers fighting nearby. (As a man without any professed loyalties, he's in more danger than most.) But whatever the perils, he's not willing to leave his little corner of the world.

Then a fleeing lawman tasks Daru with transporting an Algerian prisoner, Mohamed (Reda Kateb), to the city of Tinguit to stand trial for murder. He's hesitant, of course, but agrees to at least house the hog-tied accused for the evening. There are some beautifully performed, nearly wordless interactions between Daru and Mohamed as their hierarchical differences (free man and criminal) fade away in the light of restraints loosened and a meal shared. (The original French title of Camus' story, "L'Hôte," translates to both "quest" and "host.") And after militants attack the school, Daru decides to make the

treacherous journey to Tinguit, avoiding the road so as to draw less attention, and affording ample time for these taciturn men to bridge whatever differences remain.

Their journey is consistently compelling, including run-ins with soldiers on both sides of the Franco-Algerian conflict, a poignant stopover at a one-horse-town whorehouse, and plenty of existential wandering through forbidding, far-reaching vistas, all of them evocatively photographed by cinematographer Guillaume Deffontaines. Aside from one battle sequence (a tense confrontation in a cave with gunshots echoing cacophonously and the “enemy” force almost entirely out of sight), *Far From Men* is a contemplative study of two men on the outskirts of history. Oelhoffen isn’t making a blunt comment on this terrible colonialist war beyond emphasizing, in a slow-burn way, how the brutality (or the constant threat of it) wreaks havoc with everyone’s humanity. Against this fraught setting, both Daru and Mohamed have to learn to live with themselves in toto—who they were, are and may still be—and it’s a rewarding pilgrimage in which to share.

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