

ONE NIGHT ^{WITH} _{THE} KING

PRODUCTION NOTES

Epic. It is a term bandied about so cavalierly these days that it has all but lost its meaning. Yet many can remember that seemingly by-gone era when true Epics ruled the silver screen and audiences packed theaters to be transported to another time and place. They came to lose themselves in non-computer-generated worlds of sweeping human emotion, too vast to be captured by the confines of their televisions, during an age when going to the movies was still considered by many to be a genuine religious experience.

Filmmakers would scour the annals of history searching for the grandest of stories to quench audiences' insatiable thirst. Ironically, the most visited of source materials became none other than the Bible itself. These stories became films, produced not by zealots but by the most respected of filmmakers and devoured voraciously by audiences not for their religious dogma or theological proselytization but because these were the stories most sweeping in scope, passionate in romance, cunning in intrigue and exciting in adventure, played out on tapestries woven from the deepest of human conflicts and emotions, ripe with themes that often challenged or reflected on the current days' socio-political landscape.

On October 13, 2006 Gener8Xion Entertainment plans to recapture the glory and splendor of what going to the movies used to be about with the nationwide release of "One Night With The King." Produced by Matthew Crouch, Stephan Blinn and Richard J. Cook, from a screenplay by Blinn, "One Night With The King" is a sweeping adaptation of the Old Testament story of Esther that follows a young Jewish orphan who against all odds becomes Queen of Persia and saves the Jewish race from destruction.

It is a film of epic grandeur in the truest sense of the word, shot on location in the exotic, ancient Mogul palaces of Rajasthan, India, alive and teeming with breathtaking cinematography by Steven Bernstein A.S.C., lavish hand-made costumes by award-winning Indian designer Neeta Lula, and a wonderfully inspired cast.

And when one thinks of epics perhaps the film held in highest regard by critic and fan alike is David Lean's "Lawrence of Arabia." How fitting it is then that the genre is reborn in a film that reunites screen legends Peter O' Toole and Omar Sharif for the first time since "Lawrence," in vital supporting roles whose very presence seems to represent the passing of the torch to a new generation of epic filmmakers.

The great allure of the story of Esther is that it is a story of incredibly rich complexity that works on a multiplicity of levels – heart-wrenching love story, clandestine palace intrigue, grand adventure and ultimately a lone girl against an empire plot that plays out like it was dreamt up by Hollywood. But beneath all this is a genuine exploration of hatred, racism, revenge, courage and redemption. For the reality is that before there was Hitler, there was Haman the Agagite who very nearly brought about a total Jewish

holocaust twenty five hundred years ago. And before there were Schindler and so many other Jewish and non-Jewish heroes celebrated in modern films, there was a little Jewish orphan who saved her people from destruction. It is as epic as a story can get, yet at the same time can be boiled down to one simple theme...If this orphan, minority girl, a foreigner, could change her world, there's hope for all of us.

The genesis of "One Night With The King" began six years ago during the production of Gener8Xion's follow up to 1999's "The Omega Code." "The Omega Code" had been the number one independently produced and distributed film of the year. Matthew Crouch's grassroots innovations in rallying together a faith-based demographic that Hollywood had traditionally ignored proved to be so successful that his model eventually went on to become the foundation from which Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" would build its record-breaking performance. Yet in catering to this faith-based audience, the films were becoming increasingly narrow and niche oriented in nature. What's more, as evidenced by "The Passion," the more success these faith-based films found, the more divisive they seemed to become. What truly stirred Crouch and company was the desire to create films that could still satisfy the hunger of the audience "The Omega Code" had uncovered, yet at the same time, rather than alienating those of other faiths and beliefs, reach out to the broader mainstream with stories they could unite as well as inspire.

Enter Tommy Tenney, best-selling non-fiction author, pitching an idea to create his first ever novel while simultaneously developing its cinematic adaptation. The subject - the Old Testament book of Esther. What better way to reach out to audiences than through a story beloved by a multiplicity of ethnicities and faiths. For the story of Esther serves not only as the basis of the annual Jewish holiday of Purim, but to Christians it as a display of divine providence and destiny and Persians of a multiple of faiths embraced it as a story of inspiration and unity among all peoples passed down through their own rich history and the memory of a time when a Persian King and a Jewish Queen reigned together in peace.

Thus in the beginning of 2004, with Tenney's completed novelization in hand, Blinn began to adapt the screenplay. To capture the true essence of who they wanted the character of Esther to be, Crouch inspired Blinn to look to Blinn's two young daughters and birth for them a character that embodied all he would like them to become. Thus from the earliest stages, the vision became one to create a story rooted in the magic realism of innocence and wonder, set in an almost timeless world that mirrored ancient Persia yet was unlike anything anyone had seen before.

Soon after Crouch and Blinn embarked on a world-wide scouting trip that included stops in Morocco, Italy and India, hoping all the while to find those magical locations that would be just too awe-inspiring for words. To their surprise, they discovered that almost all their location needs could be met not just in one country, but one city, Jodhpur, India. While some virtual second unit would eventually emerge from Morocco, Jodhpur possessed three different royal palaces that were beyond anything the producers could have dreamt.

The next step of course was finding a crew who could not only capture but also build upon their incredibly ambitious vision. Inherent in their quest was also the desire to raise the bar of excellence not just over that of the films they had done in the past but to push the envelope of filmmaking in general.

Though turning to a director whose previous efforts had been relatively small and faith-based in nature might seem to run contrary to these goals, the producers found in Michael Sajbel someone who had an intimacy and understanding with the story's rich thematic elements. They knew that working closely together would most benefit the story and then surrounding themselves with a team of artists known for the highest degrees of excellence in their fields would insure that the film looked amazing.

In writing the script, Blinn had been additionally inspired by the magic realism of such films as "Like Water For Chocolate." How providential it then became when Steven Bernstein, that film's cinematographer walked through the doors of Gener8Xion to visit one of his regular crew members who was there working on the Esther screen tests. He was just coming off shooting "Monster" the film for which Charlize Theron had just won the Academy Award. By the end of the day, Bernstein was on board, excited by the prospects of shooting a story already dear to his heart and by the chance to make a film on the scope of "Lawrence of Arabia," his all time favorite film.

After cinematography, the next most important area of production was the costumes. The producers felt that too many films dealing in these ancient time periods got it wrong, and wanted audiences to come away amazed rather than insulted. Of course anything was possible with a big enough budget, but with their limited resources they knew it was going to be a challenge. That is until they were introduced to Neeta Lula on a subsequent scouting trip to Mumbai. Lula, it turned out, was something of the Queen of costume designers in a country known for its lavish costumes and extravagant films. She had won the equivalent of India's Academy Award on several occasions and her unrivaled creativity, matched with her ability to create thousands of hand-made costumes right there in India for an unbelievable price, was nothing short of a Godsend.

Indian production designer Aradhana Seth had just returned to America shooting "The Bourne Supremacy" in India when the producers met her. After several meetings, they came away impressed that she had the perfect blend of studio level experience, artistry and local knowledge of working in India to pull off such an ambitious endeavor.

As word leaked out that pre-production on the project had begun, the news that the story of Esther was coming to the big screen stirred such a passion that the production offices were inundated with over 5000 headshots mailed in by girls from around the country, most never having even acted before, looking to land the beloved role of Esther.

Interestingly enough, from the beginning, it was important to the producers that Esther be played by a newcomer – certainly someone with talent and training, but a newcomer nonetheless. The thinking was two-fold. First, it would allow the audience to experience

the actress and character without preconceived notions based on previous work. Second, they were intrigued by the prospect of an audience watching an actress undertake a journey from unknown to potential star that paralleled Esther's own rise from obscurity to Queen.

Thus the net was cast wide as casting director Liz Lang coordinated a search from Los Angeles that included casting directors in London, Italy, Israel and Mumbai, India. Ultimately four girls were chosen for screen tests, two of which were flown in from London and Israel respectively. In the end, Tiffany Dupont, then a recent graduate of University of Georgia, stood head and shoulders above the rest. Not only did she possess the beauty necessary to one who would be chosen queen, but also she possessed an intangible sense of innocence and wonder that personified what everyone was looking for in the character.

To play opposite Tiffany, the producers turned to British actor, Luke Goss for the role of King Xerxes, ruler of the known world and a man deeply troubled by the conflicting desire to forge an enlightened kingdom yet still appease the war-hungry princes pressuring him to continue in conquering footsteps of his father. A veteran of numerous films and trained on West End stages, Goss seemed to possess an almost paradoxical blend of mystery and charm. To top it all off, his real life experiences as the closest thing to a real-life king, starting out as a British rock star with his twin brother in the hit band Bros, gave Goss a deep understanding of the benefits and pressures of being the center of everyone's adulation. Once in India, Goss was further able to add to his research and preparation by spending time with the Maharajah of Jodhpur, witnessing first hand the mannerisms and personality of real life royalty from a culture not too dissimilar from that of ancient Persia.

Even before the script was written, there was only one person envisioned for the role of Mordecai, Esther's uncle and guiding light, and that was John Rhys-Davis. With no reason to believe he would even be interested, Blinn wrote the role specifically with Rhys-Davis (one of his all-time favorite actors) in mind. In keeping with what was unfolding as another in a series of providential "coincidences," John Rhys-Davis at the time just happened to share the same manager as Tiny Lister whom the producers had a relationship with and were already talking to about playing the role of Hegai, the battle-scarred royal eunuch who takes Esther under his wing and helps to get noticed by the King. With Lister, the producers were looking to cast against type and the result seems to have been truly inspired. Known mostly for playing gangsters and tough guys, the producers saw within Lister a deep-rooted sensitivity that no one had captured on camera and knew that drawing it out would create a truly moving juxtaposition with his imposing presence. Just as significantly it would further underscore one of the story's most powerful themes – that of looking beyond the face value of something in order to discover the true heart of the matter within.

The role of Haman, the film's antagonist who seeks to annihilate the Jewish race, was perhaps the trickiest to cast, as it was the role that could have most easily fallen into the cliché. And yet James Callis, a classically-trained actor who was coming off supporting

roles in the two “Bridget Jones” films and was just starting his now very successful run on “Battlestar Galactica,” managed to capture the essence of the character in a way that both fascinated and repulsed, a nuance the producers found remarkably akin to the nature of what evil truly is.

Jonah Lotan’s boyish good looks and ability to generate genuine pathos in the role of Jesse, Esther’s childhood friend who hopes to run off with her only to face the tragedy of being captured and turned into a eunuch, made him the immediate choice for the role. The fact that he was an Israeli actor, born and raised, added further to the authenticity of the character, not to mention helping out the other actors with proper Hebrew pronunciations.

Of course, of considerable note is the casting of Omar Sharif as the role of Prince Memucan, the general of the King’s army who becomes something of a father figure to Xerxes. In an interesting example of how the presence of an actor can shape a film, the role of Memucan was originally quite inconsequential to the overall film. Yet when the prospect of Sharif’s involvement arose, Blinn seized the chance to flesh out the character, creating the opportunity to utilize not only Sharif’s obvious talents, but even his legendary status to serve as a voice of reason within the story.

For the role of Samuel the Prophet who appears in the prologue and whose actions reverberate through the course of the story, the producers felt it essential to cast someone truly iconic, someone whose very presence commanded attention and could leave a lasting impression on the audience that this was a film to be taken seriously...who else but Peter O’Toole?

With cast and crew in place, the focus of everyone’s attention turned once again to Jodhpur, India. Actual shooting of the film became a grand adventure almost as exciting as the film itself. The Umaid Bhawan Palace. The five hundred year old Maharanghar Fort. The Balsamand Lake Palace. The crew found themselves transported to another time and place working in these ancient locals, some home to centuries old battles that have left them scarred with the sumptuous patina one can only find on that which is genuinely old.

As amazing as the locations were, everyone knew that in and of themselves, the locations would not be enough to achieve all that was envisioned. In order to achieve such a grand scale on a limited budget, the filmmakers had to improvise on every turn. Yet how fortuitous these limitations were as the resulting creativity once again helped to take the film to another level.

For in looking at the film, one would expect that the royal throne room, with its towering columns, fifty foot winged lion statues and thousand extras, was created with the help of visual effects. Yet such is not the case and the visuals are so much more stunning as a result. The columns and statues were all fashioned by hand without the help of power tools and raised by hemp lines with the aid of fifty men. Production Designer Aradhana Seth then made use of what Rajasthan was so famous for, its hand-woven fabrics, using

them wherever possible in her designs and set dressing, creating a look so rich and varied, they invested each scene with a magical quality that would have proven impossible without them. Seth also made good use of India's wealth of flowers, bringing them in by the truckload, completely covering the floor of the throne room with marigolds for the wedding and the floor of the bridal chamber with rose petals.

Cinematographer Steven Bernstein then drew on paintings of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, and the America illustrator Maxfield Parish for the film's color pallet and composition. The huge fortress exteriors were lit for night shooting by an army of crafts people who made three thousand torches of wood and rags and another army of extras to carry them. Interiors were lit solely with torchlight and daytime scenes were kissed by the most amazing of natural light, filtered through the dust blowing in off the Rajastani deserts that seemed to dance through the air like glittering gold.

By the time production ended in India, it was clearly apparent that success had been only made possible thanks to an army of workers that resembled something of a United Nations gathering....Christians, Jews, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, and Jains working side by side without rancor or conflict to achieve a common vision, an endeavor that came to mirror the very thematic unity of the film itself.

Back in the States, the long editorial and post-production process commenced and a top-notch visual effects team was assembled with the task of tying together the various locations on a "Lord of the Rings" scale and an indie film budget.

The last element to fall into place was the music. After an extensive search, composer Jac Redford was brought on board. Working with Moscow Symphony Orchestra, Redford created an award-worthy score just as majestic and moving as the film's vast visual counterparts. In another amazingly providential "coincidence," when one of the vocal parts recorded in Moscow for a traditional wedding song didn't work out, Redford was introduced to Shani Rigsbee, a much-loved Persian vocalist whose mesmerizing voice had been featured in the Academy Awarding Best Picture "Crash" and "The House of Sand and Fog." Amazingly, Rigsbee had just a few years prior made the rounds of Hollywood pitching her own take on the story of Esther and the King Xerxes of her ancestry. She jumped at the chance to get involved and brought in Persian lyricist Paksima Zakipour to create the vocals for the wedding and finale procession in an ancient formal Persian dialect...once again displaying the potential of unity among peoples who are today too often depicted in the media as irreconcilable enemies.

The making of "One Night With The King" is certainly a tale almost as grand as the film itself. Yet the true story is the film itself...a return to an era when films truly mattered, truly moved us, truly spoke to us. A time when demographics and target audiences mattered far less than grand stories well made and well told. "One Night With The King" is the rebirth of the epic for this day and age. It is indeed a story of faith, wonder and hope, not because of what wins converts, but because these are the themes that have spoken and connected most deeply with the passions and longings of the human spirit down through the ages since story-telling first began.