

# SOLDIERS for CINEMA

The West has spent over \$500bn on its 11-year war in Afghanistan. During that time, 37,000 Afghans and almost 3,000 coalition soldiers have lost their lives. British filmmaker **Andrew Lang** (*Sons of Cuba*) travelled to Kabul to discover what freedoms, if any, this sacrifice has achieved for Afghan filmmakers.

We sat in silence as we drove down streets that were ever more narrow. The houses around us were no longer made of brick, but of mud and straw. "Where are we?" I asked our local fixer. "It's better you don't know too much," he replied. "Somewhere to the west of the city."

Restlessly, I flicked through my phone. The fixer turned to me: "May I see your phone?" I realised with a jolt that he wanted to check I wasn't texting our movements to anyone, and handed it to him. There was a silence as he checked the sent messages. "I'm sorry to do that to you," he smiled, handing it back. "But we're meeting the Taliban. We can't be too careful." As he said it, I noticed we were driving up the same street for a second time; we'd made a loop in order to avoid being followed. So there we were, reporter Jenny Kleeman and I, together with our fixer and driver, on our way to a so-called safe house to interview a Taliban commander. Our purpose? To ask him the Taliban position on cinema.

When the Taliban seized power in 1996, they outlawed the making and watching of films. Cinemas were closed down, and much of Afghanistan's film archive was burned. Televisions in homes were banned, and anyone caught watching TV was flogged—occasionally to death, according



to some accounts. Filmmakers went into exile. When the Taliban was driven from power in October of 2001, the filmmakers returned and started working again. Their films, mostly distributed on DVD, are voraciously consumed by an eager public. But the Taliban continue to be influential, both in controlling large parts of the country, and in their ongoing war with coalition forces and the Afghan government.

Finally the car stopped and our driver stepped out. "He goes in first to make sure everything is OK," our fixer explained. And then after a pause: "If you hear a bang, it's not OK." I wondered if he was joking.

There was no bang and the driver emerged, motioning to us to

follow. With the camera hidden in a bag, Jenny and I walked up the mud path into the house. Sitting in one corner of the empty front room, wearing a turban and an anorak, sat the militant. "Right, you have 10 minutes to do the interview—it's not safe to stay any longer," the fixer reminded us. After the militant covered his face, so that only his eyes were showing, I fumbled for the camera in the bag and the interview began.

"We believe that any film whose purpose is entertainment should be banned," the Taliban commander told Jenny as I filmed. "The kind of films that are for entertainment are against Sharia law [the moral code of Islam], and

we are strongly against that." "And what do you think should happen to people who make films?" Jenny asked. "The first time they do it we would issue a warning," was the response. "The second time we should punish them according to Sharia. That means death."

To conservative Muslims, films present an image that competes with God himself, as well as distract Muslims from studying the Koran. The presence of women on film is also seen as a temptation to men. Afghan men and women, therefore, really do risk their lives to make movies, and Jenny and I were keen to meet them. Ever since *Osama* (2003) won awards at Cannes and London film

festivals, Siddiq Barmak has been the best-known Afghan filmmaker internationally. Mention the titles of his films to ordinary Afghans on the street, however, and you'll likely be met with a blank stare. In a country where only 37 per cent of the population is literate (and only 12 per cent of women—the lowest figure in the world), appetite for art-house cinema is understandably limited. Films that are filled with action and romance, whilst still touching on the problems of everyday life, are what appeal to ordinary Afghans.

Salim Shaheen, by far Afghanistan's most popular director-actor, has made 107 films, both in Afghanistan and, during Taliban rule, in exile in Pakistan. To many, his films—which have titles like *Vortex*, *Destiny* and *Champion*—would look extremely over the top. High-octane fight scenes give way to song-and-dance sequences, with Shaheen (a portly 50-something) always playing the hero. Scenes are often unintentionally hilarious; Salim shooting down a helicopter with a rocket launcher, Salim vigorously beating up a villain, Salim serenading a woman a third of his age with song-and-dance, and so on.

Yet behind the melodrama, there is serious social commentary. Storylines involve war, terrorism, poverty, the drug trade and violence against women; in fact, you can learn a lot about the issues facing ordinary Afghans just from watching these films.

We found Shaheen in a gymnasium in downtown Kabul, directing a fight scene for his latest film. To describe him as larger-than-life does not do him justice; in a room of 20 or so people it was hard to notice anyone else. "Hit me! Hit me!" he yelled at one of his actors. And then as the actor gave him a gentle nudge, he howled and threw himself back. "That's what I call cinema!" he enthused. "I may not know much about fighting, but I know what makes people watch films!"

Aside from Shaheen's directing, the other thing that stood out was how low-budget the operation was. Besides a pro-ssumer digital camera and a boom, there was no other equipment. The crowd of extras seemed to be made up of friends and a few members of the public, who had wandered in to see what the commotion was about. Yet this seemingly innocent scene was also a potentially lethal one. At any moment, Shaheen reminded us, fundamentalists could attack, either by rocket, gunfire, or suicide bomb. "Every day our lives are in danger. Every minute we are under threat. But I believe God has given me this life, and he will take it back when the time is right," he told us. It was not mere bravado; in 1993, in what he believes was a deliberate attack, his set was hit by a rocket, killing eight of his crew. The excessive challenges Afghan filmmakers faced were not lost on Shaheen, who remarked: "In the West an actor gets a cold and everyone

feels sad. Here, we pay for what we do with our lives."

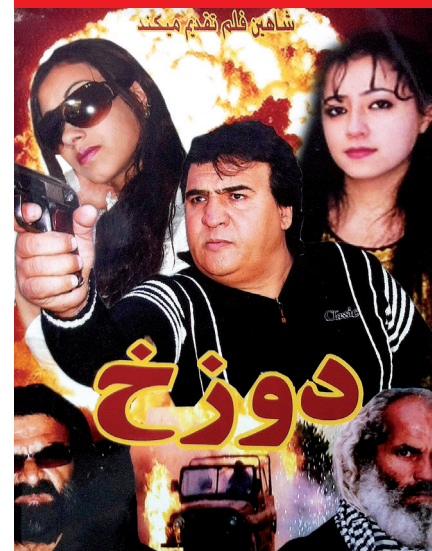
Even when films are made, the cost of striking 35mm film prints to service the six cinemas of Kabul does not add up for Afghan filmmakers, and so audiences must make do with Bollywood films—in Hindi rather than in their native Dari. In order to consume cinema in their own language, Afghans head to the DVD bazaars. Shaheen guided us through one such bazaar, where ramshackle stores offered thousands of titles, encompassing Bollywood, Hollywood and 'Kabulwood' (as local filmmakers call their industry). Given the vastly inferior budgets of Kabulwood, it was amazing to learn that the local films were the best-sellers. The owner of one store told us that when Shaheen releases a film, his store alone sells around 1,400 units a day. "People want to watch films in their own language," he told us. "And the films reflect Afghan culture and address the problems of Afghan society."

Indeed, the demand for Afghan films had helped Shaheen to achieve what filmmakers the world over dream of: complete artistic control over his films, and making a good living in the process.

If being a film director in Afghanistan is unusual, being a female director is virtually unheard of. Under Taliban rule, women were not allowed to be educated past the age of eight or to have a job thereafter. They were banned from being in public unless wearing

Opposite: Jenny Kleeman with filmmaker Saba Sahar and ever-present bodyguards

**"In the West an actor gets a cold and everyone feels sad. Here, we pay for what we do with our lives."**  
**Salim Shaheen**  
**Director/Actor**



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As reporter Jenny Kleeman (*below*) observed, filmmakers in Afghanistan are genuinely risking their lives for their craft

a burqa and accompanied by a relative, and images of women in photography or print were strictly forbidden. Despite an end to Taliban rule in 2001, Afghanistan remains—in terms of discrimination and non-sexual violence—the most dangerous place on earth for women. In this context, the bravery of the other Afghan film director we met on our visit was quite remarkable.

Saba Sahar is Afghanistan's first director-actress. We found her on the set of her latest production, a TV series in which—as in her two previous films—she plays a fearless and incorruptible female police officer. Like the films of Salim Shaheen, the excess of melodrama often creates unintentional hilarity. In one of my favourite scenes from her previous film *Najat* (*The Rescue*), a blonde-haired foreign girl is kidnapped by a group of bandits. Sahar, wearing what appears to be a 1980s style all-in-one purple ski suit, gives chase on her motorbike. Having dodged several hand grenades thrown by the bandits, Sahar radios back to HQ that she is going in for the kill. She corners the bandits and



rescues the stricken foreigner from the back of their car. The scene ends with Saba carrying the hapless foreigner through a corridor of admirers and in to a waiting ambulance.

While it's easy for an outsider to laugh at such scenes, it's important to bear in mind that, as with Shaheen's films, these are themes that ordinary Afghans relate to and become emotionally engaged with; gangs and the kidnap of foreigners are both familiar issues.

Sahar has a strong belief in the power of cinema to transform society. She believes that, by making films with a strong female in the leading role, she can prove that women are capable of taking an active role in society. Making this point has come at a price. "[The Taliban] rang me and told me, 'Say goodbye to your family because soon you will be dead.'" When she reported the calls to the police, who attempted to track the number, the callers were undeterred: "They told me, 'Why did you call the police? We're not afraid of them. We'll kill you in the middle of the street.'" Sahar now lives in constant fear for her life, and never leaves the house without an armed bodyguard. The impact of her work on her private life has also caused her to lose friends and be ostracised by certain members of her family, who believe it is shameful for a woman to be an actress. Despite this, Sahar said she was "prepared to die to advance women's rights in Afghanistan".

Shaheen and Sahar are on the frontline of the ideological battle that will decide the future of their country. On one side are those who would like to see Afghanistan return to being a conservative Islamic state, and on the other are those who want a more progressive, liberal society. Filmmakers are powerful voices in the debate; few people read newspapers in a largely illiterate country, and only four per cent of the population use the Internet. This scarcity of competition from other media means that when Shaheen and Sahar release a film, people really pay attention.

But the Taliban has also been paying attention, and may yet make Shaheen and Sahar pay the ultimate price. Throughout Kabul, everyone we spoke to predicted the Taliban would return to power, in some form, once coalition forces leave in 2014. Filmmaking and watching is likely to be banned once again. The filmmakers will be forced into exile, or face punishment for their past insults to Sharia.

We left Kabul with heavy hearts. Eleven years of war, \$500bn and 40,000 lives may not be enough, it seems, to earn Afghans the simple right to pick up a camera and make a film, or sit down to watch a DVD. *Andrew Lang and Jenny Kleeman's film Unreported World: Lights, Camera, Death Threats is now available to view on Channel4.com* ●

