

The Kite

Runner

Roberto Schaefer's
journey through
time and place



Roberto Schaefer, ASC recalls his first impression of *The Kite Runner*. He and Marc Forster were completing post-production of *Stranger Than Fiction*. That was Schaefer's eighth collaboration with the director, dating back to 1995. Forster asked him to read the script for his next project, so they could begin talking about it.

David Benioff's screenplay was an adaptation of *The Kite Runner*, the best-selling novel written by Khaled

Hosseini, an expatriate of Afghanistan. The film is a DreamWorks SKG production that is slated for distribution later this year. The story spans some 30 years of the history of Afghanistan, beginning during the early 1970s, prior to the Russian invasion and the rise of the Taliban. Amir, the central character, has migrated from Afghanistan to California, where he is living the good life. He returns to his native land to help the son of his boyhood friend, Hassan, who is in trouble with the Taliban.

Amir is a kiting enthusiast and Hassan was a kite runner. Schaefer explains that kite flying is more than recreation for wealthier males in Afghanistan. It is a competitive sport with the goal of sending opponents' kites crashing to the ground. The working-class boys who race after and salvage them are called kite runners.

Basir Beria came to Kashgar to oversee production of the kites used in the film by the art department in

China. He also trained the young actors to fly them. The Californian is an expert kite maker and competitive kite fighter, who escaped from Afghanistan during the Russian invasion.

"I cried while reading the script," Schaefer says. "It struck me as a deeply emotional and sad story that is at the root of a lot of problems in the world today. It is a very personal

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Film stocks
KODAK VISION2 100T 5212, KODAK VISION2 200T 5217 and KODAK VISION2 500T 5218

Front end processing
Cinelabs Beijing

drama about being true to yourself and to your friends along with classic themes of revenge and betrayal.”

Schaefer and Forster agreed in their first discussion that the epic story called for a widescreen film format that would enable them to put the characters into landscapes and cityscapes that are like characters in the story as well as backgrounds.

The cinematographer and director spent a day in a bookstore looking for and photocopying pictures about Afghanistan and that region. They subsequently got additional pictures from location scouts, referenced photographs, narrative films, and Dutch documentaries produced in Afghanistan during the 1970s. Forster assembled a thick book of pictures that he shared with the producers, costume and production designers and Schaefer to make sure everybody was on the same page while they were discussing the color palette and other issues.

“They were thinking about Morocco, China and Turkey as possible locations for filming scenes set in Afghanistan, where most of the picture takes place,” Schaefer says. “Marc and the producers decided on China. I spoke with our producer (E. Bennett Walsh), Herb Ault (grip) and Ian Kincaid (gaffer) who worked on *Kill Bill* in China. I also got insights from Dan Mindel, Stuart Dryburgh and camera operators who have worked on commercials in China.”

Schaefer made a three-day trip to the Vantage facility in Weiden, Germany, before a decision was made about whether to produce *The Kite Runner* in anamorphic or Super 35 format. He shot tests comparing the new Hawk anamorphic and spherical lenses in Super 35 format. Schaefer says that he “fell in love” with the new Hawk lenses when he saw the tests projected. He both saw and felt differences in emotional impact.

Need for a DI

However, Schaefer decided that the Hawk lenses were too slow and big for scenes at some interior locations in China that were only 6 feet by 8 feet. He considered shooting big exterior scenes in anamorphic format and interiors with spherical lenses, since they were committed to digital intermediate (DI) timing, but decided that would have been impossible with the budget restrictions that they had.

Schaefer explains that the need for a DI was evident because some 460 visual effects shots were planned. That meant they would be scanning and converting considerable amounts of negative to digital files for compositing with background plates and computer-generated images (CGI). He and Forster had established a collaborative relationship with visual effects designer Kevin Tod Haug on various other projects.

“We had about 10 weeks in pre-production from mid-July until late September (2006),” he says. “We did tech scouts every place we planned to shoot in the San Francisco Bay area and at the various locations in China, including Kashgar, which looks remarkably like Kabul, where a big part of the story is set.”

They went through the script again and prepared a shot list and diagrams for every scene. Schaefer and Forster did additional technical location scouts, and the director also visited Kabul to verify and reinforce his impressions of that area.

Schaefer arranged to rent cameras and lenses from the new ARRI facility in Australia. His camera package included ARRIcam Studio and Lite bodies and an ARRIFlex 235 along with a range of Zeiss Master Primes, a Hawk 150-450mm, a Zeiss 15.5-45mm an Angenieux Optimo 24-290mm and 17-80mm zoom lenses. Schaefer chose to work with a relatively modest palette of KODAK VISION2 100T 5212, 200T 5217, and 500T 5218 color negative films.

The Kite Runner was the first feature film to be processed at Cinelabs Beijing, which did the front-end lab work. Located in Bei San Huan Zhong Lu, the laboratory is a joint venture between Kodak and the Beijing Film and Video Laboratory (a wholly owned subsidiary of China Film Group). The facility utilizes Kodak Kit Chemistry for built-in quality control. It is managed by Edman Chan, who also manages Kodak Cinema World in Shanghai.

He used two and occasionally three cameras to cover scenes with groups of children and big exteriors, including some with 1,000 or more extras who had rehearsed their movements with the Chinese AD.

"Knowing that we were going to do a DI influenced the way we shot in some situations," Schaefer says. "We were shooting scenes in Kashgar in October and November when there was no direct sunlight. We wanted the softer look of winter light, but the Earth was rotating and the angles and intensity of sunlight

"When you work on a feature film the actors always bring something of their own to every scene that isn't going to be repeated in exactly the same way," he explains. "You have to recognize the magic of those moments and be ready to catch them on film."

Beautiful work

They had an ARRI LOCPRO Film Projector set up in a hotel room in

posted them on the LaserPacific FTP website for Goodman. The dailies timer posted selected images on the FTP site for Schaefer the same day that he corrected them.

"I saw them in my hotel room at night the same day that he did the work," Schaefer says. "That proved to be our most reliable and effective form of communication."

The DI colorist was Mike Sowa at LaserPacific. They also had



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They shot on two sets on stages at Beijing Film Studios for two weeks. One set was a bar and the other one was an interior of the lead character's house. The rest of the scenes in China were predominantly filmed in Kashgar, and also in Tashkurgan, which doubled for part of Kabul during the 1970s and early 2000s. Kashgar is in a desert area that gets very hot and dry with wind and dust storms in summer, and very cold and dry in winter. Tashkurgan is in a mountainous area at about 10,000 feet altitude.

Dramatic scenes

There are various flashbacks and flash forward scenes in periods ranging from 1971 to 2001 that take place in different seasons. Schaefer cites a scene set in San Francisco in December of 2001 that called for a cooler, less saturated look. The next shot is a flashback to 1971 during a very warm summer.

Schaefer covered most dramatic scenes with a single camera. He notes that many interior locations didn't have room for two cameras.

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There are nuances woven into the visual grammar that are meant to be transparent to the audience. Schaefer explains that there is a little more grandeur in camera movement in Afghanistan during scenes set in the 1970s than later in the story.

"The crane movement was a little more dramatic, and there were more tracking shots on a Steadicam or dolly," he says. "Camera movement is more truncated during the later periods without it being too obvious. There are a couple of handheld shots but it isn't obvious or sudden. It's subtle but I believe that it feels different to the audience."

Earlier in his career, Schaefer worked on archaeological and ethnographic documentaries in Italy, Egypt, Peru, Colombia and Brazil. He also spent six weeks shooting a documentary in the New Guinea rainforest. Those experiences taught him to react to moments when unplanned things happen.

Kashgar for about a month. They projected the tests that Schaefer had shot in Germany as well as film dailies for the first two to three weeks that they shot in China.

"That really helped because it allowed us to see film images projected on a big screen within as little as three days after we shot those scenes," Schaefer says. "The lab did beautiful work. We had crystal clear images. It was wonderful watching film dailies together. It's a richer look that gave everyone a good feeling about what we were doing together."

LaserPacific in Los Angeles provided DVHS high-definition dailies for Schaefer for the rest of the picture. He viewed them with a Sony projector in the hotel room where he had watched film dailies. The post facility also provided DVD dailies for Forster and everyone else.

Schaefer had worked with dailies timer Bruce Goodman on previous films. Email connections weren't always reliable, so they worked out a system where Schaefer used the Gamma & Density 3CP system on his personal computer to correct selected still images of different scenes. He

established verbal shorthand. Schaefer and Forster had collaborated with Sowa on *Stranger Than Fiction* and *Stay*. Schaefer also worked with him on *For Your Consideration*, a Christopher Guest film.

The conformed negative was scanned at 4K resolution, and down-rezzed to a 2K proxy file for the DI timing sessions. It was an interactive process. The images were projected on a cinema-sized screen, and Schaefer would tell Sowa what changes he wanted, including seamless blending of visual effects and live-action elements of shots.

"There are three main actors who are on the screen together in different periods, and who have very different skin tones," Schaefer says. "One of them tended to go a little pink on film, another was a little green, and the third one was sort of yellowish. We balanced those shots to look natural. We also desaturated some of the greens in trees and grass. There were scenes that we filmed at dusk that are supposed to be happening at night, so we darkened the sky a bit. We also touched up shots for moods and seasons."