

American
Cinematographer

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Iraq in Fragments

by Patricia Thomson

Director/Cinematographer: James Longley

It's been three years since the United States invaded Iraq, and judging from the lineup at Sundance, that's the amount of time it has taken to fund, shoot and finish the first wave of independent films on the subject. This year, three documentaries and one dra-

matic feature had Iraq, Afghanistan or the war at home as their focal point.



One of those films, *Iraq in Fragments*, quickly generated festival buzz and ultimately came away with awards for cinematography, directing and editing in the documentary category. That's quite an accomplishment for James Longley, who directed, shot, co-edited and co-produced the film. The 36-year-old had made only two previous documentaries: the Student Academy Award-winning *Portrait of Boy With Dog* (1993), an anamorphic, black-and-white short film he made while studying at the All-Russian Institute of Cinematography in Moscow; and the feature-length *Gaza Strip* (2001), which looks at the lives of ordinary Palestinians in Israeli-occupied Gaza.

By 2002, when Longley was casting about for his next subject, the drumbeat of imminent war in Iraq had begun, and he latched onto it. The question was, how to get inside Iraq? He first managed to hop on the coattails of journalists following Rep. Jim McDermott, a Democratic congressman from Seattle, into Baghdad. But Longley's efforts to obtain permission to shoot were brushed aside by

indifferent Iraqi officials. When he returned in February 2003, two weeks before the invasion, he got no further with permits, but by paying small bribes to police, he was able to capture an hour of B-roll footage on Baghdad's bustling streets. (This material appears in the opening shots of *Iraq in Fragments*.) To his great frustration, Longley had to sit out the war in Cairo because officials refused to renew his expired visa. After the bombing of Baghdad, however, re-entry was easy. "There was no government, no one to issue visas," he says. Longley moved to Iraq and stayed there for two years, eventually accumulating 300 hours of footage.

As with *Gaza Strip*, his intent with *Iraq in Fragments* was to create a *vérité* portrait of the common people. Initially, he wanted to film 10 stories in different parts of the country and planned to create both a multi-part television series and a stand-alone feature. "My initial plan was grandiose," he admits with a laugh. He did manage to shoot six stories and ultimately wove together three for the final film, one each in Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish territory.

The idea of an eventual transfer to 35mm influenced his choice of digital-video (DV) camera. Knowing he would work completely handheld, he wanted something light — at least lighter than the Sony-DSR500 he'd used on *Gaza Strip*. He also wanted something inexpensive so he could afford backup cameras, and something small enough to be discreet. Additionally, he wanted to avoid interlaced video and opt for 24-fps progressive scan. "I'd blown *Gaza Strip* up to 35mm, and it looks fine for a video blowup, but you can definitely see in motion that the frame rate doesn't quite match," he notes.

Longley settled on a Panasonic AG-DVX100, adding a DVX100A when the upgrade came onto the market midway through production. Using the 24p Advanced Pulldown setting, he shot in 16:9, and he opted to continue with this format on the DVX100A rather

than switch to the new “squeeze” mode on the upgraded camera. Early on, he decided against an anamorphic adapter because he intended to shoot numerous handheld close-ups. “The extra anamorphic glass on the front of the camera would have made that trickier, and the weight of an anamorphic front also throws the camera off-balance,” he explains. Rather than shoot full frame and crop to 16:9 in post, “I felt confident enough in my framing that I just went straight into letterbox and kept my original framing through to the 35mm transfer.” Ultimately, the MiniDV footage was transferred to hi-def at Modern Digital in Seattle, output to an HDCam submaster, and then recorded to 35mm at Alpha Cine Labs in Seattle.

Well-composed, close-up photography is a hallmark of *Iraq in Fragments*, particularly in the first chapter, which focuses on Mohammed Haithem, an 11-year-old who works for an auto mechanic and sporadically attends school. The camera often lingers on the boy’s doe eyes as he listens to elders talk politics or watches life on the dusty streets. A voiceover monologue reveals his thoughts and aspirations. “I didn’t just want to bring the viewers into Mohammed’s neighborhood, I wanted to put them inside his head,” says Longley. “I wanted them to see what he saw and hear what he heard, including the sound of his own thoughts.”

To achieve an aesthetic of intimacy, Longley favored wide-angle close-ups. “In order to have that kind of human contact where you see into people’s eyes, really get the texture of their faces and know what they’re thinking just by looking at them, you need to get close to them,” he says. “I was mostly pretty wide. I shy away from telephoto, which looks a lot like surveillance.” Wide angle is “the kind of close-up I prefer. You can have the subject in the foreground on one side of the frame, and things are still happening in the background on the other side of the frame. That’s just a more interesting way of framing shots.”

For rendering detail and texture, Longley found the DVX100 responded best to wide-open apertures. Sometimes he also increased the shutter speed to help capture detail, as in the crowd scenes and dust storms in chapter two. “I ran the gamut from normal to 1/500. Sometimes I was making those decisions because of exposure. The more important thing was keeping the iris wide open. I would use ND filters to darken the scene and then open up the iris. But if it was still too bright, I might increase the shutter speed in order to get the correct exposure with the iris wide open.”

Of course, equipment alone can't achieve intimacy. It was Longley's human relationships, built slowly over many long months with his subjects, that allowed him to capture unguarded moments. These include Mohammed in quiet reflection, Kurdish shepherds playing in a sunflower field, and Shiite leaders working through the logistics of regional elections. At times, his access was truly unique, as when he accompanies a Mehdi Army militia on a raid in an open-air market in Najaf, where they beat suspected alcohol merchants. Longley is right there in the jeep as they speed away, packed between armed militants whose faces are hidden behind scarves. “I was lucky,” he says. “Friends of mine who were doing the same kind of work were kidnapped in exactly the same places by exactly the same people.” Longley stayed in southern Iraq for 14 months, until the breakdown of security became untenable, at which point he moved north to Kurdish territory. “Sometimes your life is on the line to get different scenes,” he says, “but if you're able to pull through and have something formally interesting that doesn't feel like the camera operator is about to get shot, that is something people haven't seen before, that's the look I was going for.”

His luck also held with his cameras, which never broke down despite terrible abuse. Summer temperatures routinely soared to

115°F. “At one point, the camera got so hot during the filming of a brick factory that the Rycote wind cover on my microphone caught on fire,” he recalls. “Sweat was always dripping off my forehead onto the LCD screen. It was a nightmare.” Dust was another hazard, and Longley had to resort to gaffer tape. “The camera’s user manual tells you not to tape up the camera — it needs the little cracks to breathe and release heat — but there was just no way around it. To get a shot, I’d be lying on the ground in front of a thousand people in prayer on some big square, and it was very dusty. It was a matter of taking gaffer tape and closing off every opening of the camera, then peeling back a bit when I needed to open the cassette door and hoping a whole pound of dust wouldn’t float into the camera at that moment.” He would let the camera roll a few seconds to allow Panasonic’s self-cleaning head to do its job. In the end, “I didn’t lose any important material to drop-out, [and] I never had a need to service the camera heads during the two years of filming. I was lucky in all respects on this film.”