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A DAYLIGHT FACTORY PRODUCTION

ANGELS ARE MADE OF LIGHT

A FILM BY JAMES LONGLEY

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ANGELS ARE MADE OF LIGHT

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Filmed throughout three years, **Angels Are Made of Light** follows students and teachers at a school in an old neighborhood of Kabul that is slowly rebuilding from past conflicts. Interweaving the modern history of Afghanistan with present-day portraits, the film offers an intimate and nuanced vision of a society living in the shadow of war.

LONG SYNOPSIS

Angels Are Made of Light traces the lives of students and teachers at a small school in Kabul, Afghanistan, over three years. Through the school we are introduced to people in the neighborhood.

Our first narrator is Sohrab, a boy who hopes his love of books will lead to a life of the mind, not manual labor. Sohrab's older brother, Rostam, wants to follow his father, but is torn about his future.

Their younger brother, Yaldash, feels trapped in his boss' metal workshop, and dreams of the luxury of study. Their father fears a return of war to the city, and their mother, teacher Fazula, reflects on the changing nature of youth in Afghanistan.

As the film progresses, the scope broadens to include characters like Nik Mohammed, a teacher in his sixties whose memories - illustrated with archival sequences - open a window into Afghanistan's past and politics.

Nabiullah, a new boy in the neighborhood, struggles to keep his father's hot food stand from bankruptcy and imagines a future Afghanistan with neither Americans nor Taliban.

Moqades, a young religion teacher, espouses non-violence and decries factionalism and corruption among the powerful. Teacher Hasiba sees herself in her young students, like the spirited Sita.

Rogul, an elderly cleaning woman in the school, recalls her youth under the Soviets and the slide into civil war that made her a refugee, and looks on nervously as tribal factions again compete for power.

A presidential election passes and the history of the country enters a new stage. But what does the future hold for the people of Afghanistan?

ANGELS ARE MADE OF LIGHT

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Much of our mental image of Afghanistan is related to war. It's easy to feel distanced from the normal lives of Afghans, we see so little of them. If we are asked to picture ordinary life in Kabul, our imaginations usually fail. Most of us don't have those memories stored away. Many people find the very idea of traveling to a place like Afghanistan terrifying. What happens to our thinking about the people of a place we only ever see in conflict, from behind the barrel of a gun?

Here, I am painting in some of that mental canvas with close-up memories of Afghan civilians. Through the safe and approachable world of a neighborhood school, the film encourages audiences to enter Afghanistan in their mind's eye. Giving viewers the opportunity to think about Afghanistan from an interior, civilian perspective is the essential motivating idea behind the movie and how it was made.

- James Longley

Q&A with director James Longley

Why film in a school? How did you choose this school in particular?

I had wanted to make a school-based documentary for some time. The strict social norms of some societies can make filming inside peoples' homes very uncomfortable for the families. If you are a filmmaker seeking a window into ordinary life, a school is a natural alternative to filming inside a home. It has a similar parent-child dynamic.

A school provides the kind of neutral territory that allows extended filming without putting too much social pressure on any one individual or family. A school is a place of learning - it's also a good place to learn about a country. The job of a school is to instill the foundational ideas of a society, ideas which - in Afghanistan - have been the subject of much disputation. Because children's education impacts the future, it is also possible to learn something about the future of Afghanistan by spending time in its schools.

We did not come to the Daqiqi Balkhi School right away. We scouted for months in Afghanistan. We visited - I think - seven different schools in Kabul, and a village school in Parwan Province, where we filmed several times. We talked to over a hundred students. We drank tea with myriad teachers and school principals. We met with parents and administrators and deputy directors. We visited two Kabul hospitals to discuss filming with them. We spent weeks filming at the largest government-run orphanage in Kabul. In the end, I felt that the Daqiqi Balkhi School was the best and most practical home for the film.

First, Teacher Fazula and her husband, Mir Abdullah, gave us permission to film and interview themselves and their three oldest sons: Rostam, Sohrab, and Yaldash. Being able to film with a family was decisive.

The second deciding factor for me came in the form of principal Faiz Mohammed, who appears several times in the film. Faiz Mohammed had been a school principal in Kabul for twenty-five years, even during the civil war. After the exit of the Taliban from Kabul in 2001, Faiz Mohammed spent his own money to build the school office and worked with other teachers to raise tents and create a much-needed school from nothing in the courtyard of a destroyed mosque. Faiz Mohammed very graciously allowed us to film at his school for years - even as the school shifted location - and was exceptionally kind and accommodating.

Having permissions from the various ministries, the support of the administration, the teachers, community leaders, the parents - and most of all the school students - was the key that allowed us to work peacefully and productively for three years. Filming over a long schedule allowed us to become known and accepted by the community, which improved the film.

How did you come to the idea of making this film in Afghanistan?

Afghanistan was ultimately the right place for this film, something that took much trial and error to discover. Between 2007 and 2011 I and my colleagues tried unsuccessfully to make variations of this same school film concept in Iran and Pakistan. In both cases, larger political events in those countries overtook our productions. In Iran we were interrupted by the Green Uprising of 2009. In Pakistan various political scandals - including the assassination of Osama Bin Laden - poisoned the political climate to such a degree that our filming was halted.

When I moved to Kabul in 2011, it already felt like a city clinging to stability. Bombings in Kabul were on the rise, the US was leaving, and people feared a return to civil war. Afghanistan remains an urgent subject: A forgotten people in a forgotten war zone, where political forces have often trampled the lives of the weak. I felt motivated to make a film that would let people see a side of Afghanistan we are missing: a human side.

Q&A with director James Longley (continued)

Why does the film focus on men and boy characters with so few women and girls?

The Daqiqi Balkhi School operated in three shifts: older boys, older girls - and one shift where very young boys and girls studied at the same time, in separate classes. We were given strict instructions by the administration never to film the students of the older girls' shift. This left only the option of trying to include the voices of girls from among the very youngest students.

The whole subject of filming girls in Afghanistan can be quite fraught, and requires special circumstances to be successful. Filmmakers I know who succeed in filming documentaries with women in Afghanistan are generally themselves women, often working with a female crew in an all-female environment such as a private girls' school.

Fazula's family - whom we mainly filmed - had two older daughters we never saw during our entire time in Kabul. The boy Nabiullah also had a sister, slightly younger than him, whom we were not allowed to interview or film.

In our final year of production we finally managed to begin filming in Teacher Hasiba's class of first-grade girls. But with the exception of Sita, a girl who was slightly older than her classmates, we were unable to record strong interviews with such young students.

As far as filming the boy students was concerned - in Afghanistan this is far more socially accepted. Unlike girls, the boys we included were relatively easy to film outside of the sanctuary of the school, in their neighborhood and around the city, at work or play. Girls, by contrast, were rarely seen outside their homes. Significantly, we could have access to the boys we recorded over a long period, as they got older - essential for a longitudinal film.

It was much more practical to record interviews with the male characters in the film; the women with whom we recorded voice-over interviews required their husbands to be present, and it was a greater imposition to ask both parents to be away from their work and families for the recordings. In the school, where most teachers were women, only two or three women teachers ever allowed us to film during their classes.

The gender separation of the local culture created a situation where the majority of our usable material was of male teachers and students, because we could film and record them most freely. Nonetheless, we have worked to include well-defined women's voices in the film, including the most salient political ideas of the documentary, expressed by the school custodian, Rogul.

I am also happy that other documentaries exist, such as *WHAT TOMORROW BRINGS* by Beth Murphy, that do a far better job addressing the subject of girls education in Afghanistan than I could ever hope to do. It is liberating for a director to discover that their film need not address every issue.

Is the film scripted? Did you direct people in the film?

All of the scenes in the film are edited from unscripted, observational material. All voice-over text is drawn from unscripted audio interviews with the people in the film. I wrote out questions around which my Afghan colleagues would have conversations with the people in the film while I recorded them. Our English transcript wound up being over 8,000 pages. We recorded some 500 hours of picture. The motivation behind collecting this hoard of material was to put together a film that felt more transparent and unmediated. In other words, I wanted to erase the sensation of a camera as much as possible, to have the feeling of being in a place with people, and not being a stranger. This familiarity was the thing that needed the most time.

Q&A with director James Longley (continued)

Why did you choose to include so many people in the film?

The film features eleven different people with their own voice-over narration. For a documentary, this can be a lot, but it felt correct for this film.

A traditional story arc following an individual character seemed wrong here. The social paradigm of Afghanistan is family- and community-based; people are quite interdependent. Consequently, there is societal pressure not to stand apart from others. On a practical level, because everyone knew we were recording many different people at the school, it made being filmed socially easier for all participants.

Not only is it appropriate to Afghan culture, but having a wide range of voices in the film also helps convey a broader view of Afghanistan. The idea of the documentary is really to give audiences a sense of a place and the people who live there. Not to record the story of one person, but something more expansive. It was important for me to include many different perspectives on the neighborhood world being recreated inside the film, to make our reflection on this small corner of Afghanistan more multidimensional and complex - and hopefully more meaningful.

Were there safety issues filming in Afghanistan as an American?

I did not feel myself to be in danger while filming in Afghanistan. I rarely met an unfriendly person. I kept a low profile, living in a house behind a ministry near the center of Kabul with other foreign journalists. We had no guards or weapons; our wooden door opened onto the street. I tried not to keep a regular schedule or a regular driver. We sometimes walked across Kabul to film at the school and environs, or took taxis.

Mostly, the key to remaining safe in Afghanistan was to have good relationships with the local crew and with the communities where we lived and filmed. By the time I left Kabul, strangers would call out my name as we walked past their shops on the main streets of Jadayi Maiwand. After 200 filming days on location, the presence of our small crew had become a minor fixture in the area, and local acceptance of us and our film project helped keep us out of harm's way.

That said, I didn't encounter many other foreigners wandering the neighborhoods where we filmed. Afghanistan is an unpredictable environment. One can always be at the wrong place at the wrong time, or be targeted as a foreigner, or simply be misunderstood. What we did carried a risk. We were fortunate to have no problems over the three years of our production. For this good fortune, I give full credit to Afghan hospitality.

From where does the archival material in the film come?

We worked with the Afghan National Film Archive to find material that could give a broad-strokes outline of defining events in Afghanistan's recent history, and help those moments come alive. The story of the ANFA is fascinating by itself, and was made into a documentary called *A FLICKERING TRUTH* by Pietra Brettkelly. The Archive have since shifted to an UHD film scanner, but at the time I was obliged to record the 35mm celluloid images off the ground glass of their last good Steenbeck flatbed. One deep regret of mine was not being able to spend more time exploring the extraordinary world of Afghanistan's past hiding inside those stacks of old film cans.

PEOPLE OF THE FILM



Nik Mohammed
Dari teacher



Sohrab
Middle brother of Rostam and Yaldash



Nabiullah
A student



Rostam
Older brother of Sohrab and Yaldash



Rogul
School custodian



Yaldash
Younger brother of Sohrab and Rostam



Moqades
Religion teacher



Fazula
Dari teacher, mother of Rostam, Sohrab and Yaldash



Hasiba
Teacher of first grade



Mir Abdullah
Oven maker, father of Rostam, Sohrab and Yaldash



Sita
A student

KEY PERSONNEL

James Longley - Producer / Director / DP / Editor

James Longley was born in Eugene, Oregon in 1972. He studied Film and Russian at Wesleyan University and VGIK in Moscow. His student documentary, PORTRAIT OF BOY WITH DOG (co-directed with Robin Hessman), won a Student Academy Award. His first feature documentary film, GAZA STRIP, explores the second Palestinian uprising. His celebrated documentaries IRAQ IN FRAGMENTS (nominated for an Oscar for Best Documentary Feature in 2007, winner of jury prizes for Best Documentary Directing, Cinematography, and Editing at Sundance Film Festival) and SARI'S MOTHER (nominated for an Oscar for Best Documentary Short Subject in 2008) chronicle people living in the aftermath of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. Longley is a MacArthur Fellow.

Signe Byrge Sørensen - Co-Producer

Signe Byrge Sørensen is a two-time Oscar nominee for producing Joshua Oppenheimer's THE ACT OF KILLING in 2014 and his THE LOOK OF SILENCE in 2016. She was also nominated for the Producer's Guild Award in 2016 for THE LOOK OF SILENCE. She received Cinema Eye awards for the production of both these films. A producer since 1998, Byrge Sørensen began at SPOR Media in 1998, moved to Final Cut Productions ApS in 2004 and co-founded Final Cut for Real ApS in 2009. While at SPOR Media she was the Danish co-producer for STEPS FOR THE FUTURE). In 2014 Signe Byrge Sørensen received the Danish Documentary Award called the Roos Prize along with the prestigious Danish awards the Timbuktu Award and the Ib Award. She holds an MA in International Development Studies and Communication Studies from Roskilde University, Denmark, 1998.

Joslyn Barnes - Co-Producer

Among the feature films Joslyn Barnes has been involved with producing since co-founding Louverture Films are: the César nominated BAMAKO by Abderrahmane Sissako, Elia Suleiman's THE TIME THAT REMAINS, Apichatpong Weerasethakul's 2010 Cannes Palme d'Or winner UNCLE BOONMEE WHO CAN RECALL HIS PAST LIVES and CEMETERY OF SPLENDOUR, Tala Hadid's THE NARROW FRAME OF MIDNIGHT, Deepak Rauniyar's WHITE SUN, Lucrecia Martel's multiple award winner ZAMA, and Nadine Labaki's forthcoming CAPHARNAÛM which won the Cannes Jury Prize this year. Among the documentaries are: Sundance Grand Jury Prize winner and Emmy and Oscar nominated TROUBLE THE WATER, the international hit BLACK POWER MIXTAPE 1967-1975, the Sundance Grand Jury prize, Peabody and Grierson winner THE HOUSE I LIVE IN, the Berlinale award-winner CONCERNING VIOLENCE, the HOUSE IN THE FIELDS by Tala Hadid, the Oscar nominated STRONG ISLAND by Yance Ford, Sundance Special Jury Prize winner HALE COUNTY THIS MORNING, THIS EVENING by RaMell Ross, and Göran Hugo Olsson's current hit THAT SUMMER. Forthcoming documentaries include ANGELS ARE MADE OF LIGHT by James Longley, and SQUARELA by Victor Kossakovsky. In 2017, Barnes was the recipient of both the Cinereach Producer Award and the Sundance Institute | Amazon Studios Producer Award. In 2018, she was nominated for an Academy Award for Documentary Feature and an Emmy Award for Exceptional Merit in Documentary Filmmaking.

Torstein Grude - Co-Producer

Torstein Grude is a film writer, director, cinematographer, creative producer, co-producer and executive producer. His films are most often political and/or philosophical and deal with human rights or gender-related issues. Films of the last decade that he has been involved with include MAGNITSKY ACT – BEHIND THE SCENES (2016), DIGITAL DISSIDENTS (2015), QUATRARO MYSTERY (2015), SNOW MONKEY (2015), INSIDE FUR (2014), THE LOOK OF SILENCE (2014), LOVE CITY JALALABAD (2013), GULABI GANG (2013), THE ACT OF KILLING (2013), BACK TO THE SQUARE (2012), PIRATE BAY AFK (2012), FAREWELL COMRADES! (6X52 - 2011), DANCE OF OUTLAWS (2011), PUSHWAGNER (2011), RUSSIAN LESSONS (2010), DISCOVERIES OF A MARIONETTE (2009), YODOK STORIES (2008), BELARUSIAN WALTZ (2007), ON A TIGHTROPE (2007), FOREVER PURE (2018), MEAT (2018), and MOGADISHU SOLDIER (2017). These internationally acclaimed films have won over 200 awards and honourable mentions and have been nominated for Oscars, Emmys, European Academy Awards and Amandas.

KEY PERSONNEL (continued)

Danny Glover - Executive Producer

In addition to being one of the most acclaimed actors of our time, with a career spanning 40 years and including film classics like *PLACES IN THE HEART*, *THE COLOR PURPLE*, the *LETHAL WEAPON* series, and the acclaimed *TO SLEEP WITH ANGER*, Danny Glover has also executive produced numerous projects for film, television and theatre. Among these are *GOOD FENCES*, *3 AM*, *FREEDOM SONG*, *GET ON THE BUS*, *DEADLY VOYAGE*, *BUFFALO SOLDIERS*, *THE SAINT OF FORT WASHINGTON*, *TO SLEEP WITH ANGER*, and *MOOLADÉ*, as well as the series *COURAGE AND AMERICA'S DREAM*. Since co-founding Louverture Films, Glover has been involved with producing *BAMAKO*, *AFRICA UNITE*, *TROUBLE THE WATER*, *SALT OF THIS SEA*, *SOUNDTRACK FOR A REVOLUTION*, *DUM MAARO DUM*, *THE BLACK POWER MIXTAPE*, *THE DISAPPEARANCE OF MCKINLEY NOLAN*, *THE HOUSE I LIVE IN*, *HIGHWAY*, *CONCERNING VIOLENCE*, *THE NARROW FRAME OF MIDNIGHT*, *THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING*, *SHADOW WORLD*, *WHITE SUN*, *STRONG ISLAND*, and *ZAMA*. He associate produced Apichatpong Weerasethakul's 2010 Cannes Palme d'Or winner *UNCLE BOONMEE WHO CAN RECALL HIS PAST LIVES* and *CEMETERY OF SPLENDOR*. The recipient of countless awards for his humanitarian and advocacy efforts on behalf of economic and social justice causes, Danny Glover is a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador and a recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award from Amnesty International.

Basil Shadid - Executive Producer

Basil Shadid loves producing and adventure. He's produced award-winning fiction and documentary features, short and long-form episodic series, and digital and broadcast commercials. He's written a book, ran a record label, operated cameras around the world, built small companies, hitchhiked and hopped freight trains across the United States, has an MA in mental health counseling, swims in lakes in the winter time, and loves to find abandoned playing cards in the streets of random towns.

Susan Rockefeller - Co-Executive Producer

Susan Rockefeller is a partner in Louverture Films and a documentary filmmaker whose in-depth look at critical issues has led to top awards at many film festivals across the United States and around the world. Her recent efforts include producing and directing the HBO documentary *MAKING THE CROOKED STRAIGHT*, which received a Christopher Award, and directing and producing *STRIKING A CHORD*, which looks at the power of music to help heal Post Traumatic Stress (PTSD). She directed and produced *MISSION OF MERMAIDS* on ocean health, and is currently in production on two films: one about agricultural breeders, farmers and chefs, the other on Bach's "Coffee Cantata." When she's not making films, Rockefeller designs message-inspired jewelry to raise awareness about protecting family, art and nature, and sits on the boards of Oceana, the We Are Family Foundation and the program committee for The Stone Barns for Sustainable Agriculture.

Tony Tabatznik - Co-Executive Producer

Tony Tabatznik is the founder of the Bertha Foundation, which dreams of a more just world and supports forms of activism that aim to bring about change. The foundation champions those using media, law and enterprise as tools to achieve their vision. It envisions a society where stories come from many different voices, where law is used as a tool for justice and where business delivers positive social impact. It works with a network of people whom we believe can change the world - activists working with storytellers and lawyers. While powerful on their own, the Foundation also look for opportunities for leaders to collaborate across portfolios.

KEY PERSONNEL (continued)

Kaada - Composer

John Erik Kaada (or "Kaada" as he's often called) is one of the most sought-after film composers in Norway. Also a prolific recording artist, multi-instrumentalist and producer, Kaada has enjoyed a string of critically acclaimed solo albums, a high-profile collaboration with artist Mike Patton, and many records and world tours as a member of the alternative power-trio, Cloroform. Kaada's style is perhaps most easily defined by his unique sounds and penchant for eclectic instrumentation. Kaada's film music can be heard in over 40 feature films and his music has been featured on TV shows like Late Night With Jimmy Fallon, Oprah, The Super Bowl, The Daily Show, 60 Minutes, and more.

Janus Billeskov Jansen - Editor

Janus Billeskov Jansen entered the Danish film industry in 1970, and in 1973 he was the lead editor in charge of a feature film for the first time. He has edited a large number of internationally acclaimed feature films and documentaries, and directed numerous Danish documentaries. Since 1979 he has been teaching editing and narrative at the National Film School of Denmark. He won the 2009 Sundance World Cinema Documentary Film Editing Award for his work on BURMA VJ. Billeskov Jansen has cooperated with most of the influential Danish directors in the past 30 years, most significant being the lifelong creative relationship with the Academy Award winning director Billie August.

Walteri Vanhanen - Editor

After a self-taught beginning, Walteri Vanhanen began producing and editing commercials and music videos before moving on to film. In 2012 he directed and edited the short documentary RIDING WAVES OF WINTER GLOOM and DOG DAYS (55 min, work-in-progress). He joined Final Cut for Real in 2015 and has worked as an assistant editor on LAND OF THE FREE directed by Camilla Magid, A COMEDIAN IN A SYRIAN TRAGEDY by Rami Farah, and on STRONG ISLAND by Yance Ford, working closely with editor Janus Billeskov Jansen. ANGELS ARE MADE OF LIGHT marks his first feature editing credit.

Henrik Gugge Garnov - Re-Recording Mixer / Sound Design

Henrik Garnov was born in 1961 in Copenhagen, Denmark. He graduated from the Danish National Film School in 1989. Gugge has worked on the sound of more than 125 films. Among recent projects are the two Oscar nominated documentaries THE ACT OF KILLING and THE LOOK OF SILENCE. He was also a sound designer on the Oscar winning short film HELIUM.

Thomas Arent - Re-Recording Mixer / Sound Design

Thomas Arent was born in 1983 in Viborg, Denmark. He is a graduate of the National Film School of Denmark and has worked professionally with audio and sound design on documentaries and feature films since 2008. Arent has created and produced a number of audio documentaries and in November 2016 he won the Third Coast Best Documentary: Foreign Language Award for his audio documentary THE DOUBLE.

MAIN CREDITS

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DIRECTED AND PRODUCED BY
JAMES LONGLEY

CO-PRODUCERS
SIGNE BYRGE SØRENSEN
JOSLYN BARNES
TORSTEIN GRUDE

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS
DANNY GLOVER
ANATOLY SAVIN
JEFF & LARA SANDERSON
BASIL SHADID

CO-EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS
SUSAN ROCKEFELLER
TONY TABATZNIK FOR BERTHA FOUNDATION

ORIGINAL MUSIC BY
JOHN ERIK KAADA

CINEMATOGRAPHER
JAMES LONGLEY

EDITED BY
WALTTERI VANHANEN
JANUS BILLESKOV JANSEN
JAMES LONGLEY

MAIN CREDITS (continued)

IN ASSOCIATION WITH DR K

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United States Artists

Art Matters

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