

# Operation Filmmaker

A Film by Nina Davenport



90 minutes / 2007 / color / English

Aspect Ratio: 1.85:1

Sound: Stereo/English/with intermittent English subtitles

**ICARUS FILMS**

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## Short Synopsis

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In the wake of "Operation Iraqi Freedom," American actor Liev Schreiber had an idealistic notion: to rescue an Iraqi film student from the rubble of his country and bring him to the West to intern on a Hollywood movie (*Everything Is Illuminated*). It promised to be a heartwarming tale, a small victory out of the troubled mission of the U.S war in Iraq. But as in the war itself, "good" intentions yielded unintended consequences, and even this operation doesn't go according to plan. Director Nina Davenport becomes personally involved in Schreiber's charitable effort, and soon finds herself embroiled in a complex moral quagmire and all-consuming power struggle between filmmaker and subject. **Operation Filmmaker** is an engaging, sometimes comical political parable, taking the viewer on a riveting ride from Baghdad to Hollywood.

## Long Synopsis

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"This is the story of how well-intentioned Americans try to intervene in the life of an Iraqi. And how nothing goes as planned.

One year after the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States, MTV aired a documentary about Muthana Mohmed, a twenty-five-year-old Baghdad film student. Muthana had a winning smile and indomitable spirit, but his film school had been bombed to pieces. The American actor Liev Schreiber saw the MTV piece while preparing to direct his first feature. Feeling guilty for having so much opportunity while someone else had none, Schreiber invited Muthana to join the production of *Everything Is Illuminated* in the Czech Republic. It seemed like a dream come true, a story of bridging cultures, so documentary director Nina Davenport went along to film it.

Soon after Muthana arrives in Prague, the contrasts between his life experience and everyone else's prove gaping. At night, he watches television images of escalating violence in Baghdad; by day, he listens as crew members discuss the importance of editing a gag reel. When Muthana declares his love for George Bush, the liberal producers are taken aback.

Living away from his family for the first time, Muthana also isn't accustomed to taking care of himself. He has difficulty managing tasks like renewing his visa, not to mention comprehending expectations on a high-stress film set. The results are often harrowing. As Muthana starts to fear for his safety if he returns to Baghdad, his patrons reach the limits of their charity.

No one has a good exit strategy. For Davenport, what's meant to be a month of filming turns into a year and a half. She tells this story, full of remarkable twists and turns, with a sharp eye for humour and surreal juxtapositions. Everyone's motives are questioned, including documentary makers and their "semi-factitious" stories. What's remarkable is Davenport's ability to keep everyone's humanity in focus -- their dreams and better inclinations -- even as they blunder and grossly misunderstand each other. Are there lessons to be learned? The unintended consequences are too messy and situational to easily say. But in this mix of tragedy and farce, Davenport perfectly captures the follies of our times."

--Thom Powers, Toronto International Film Festival



## Press Highlights

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“Bitterly honest.” – S. T. VanAirdale, *The Reeler*

“An essential study in intercultural communication and the ways that it can go so very wrong.” – Eric Kohn, indieWIRE

“For a film that began life as a vanity project designed to document and act of kindness on the part of a Hollywood star, it’s a surprisingly evocative examination of privileged, well-intentioned ignorance.” – Katina Longworth, *Cinematical*

“Fascinatingly complicated . . . striking and complex.”  
– Wesley Morris, *The Boston Globe*

“A character study that abandons all pretense of documentary objectivity. A fascinating film!” – Mark Jenkins, *City Desk*

“A cautionary tale about the belief that cinema has the power to change lives for the better.” – Jessica Winter, slate.com

“An apt metaphor for the perceptual abyss that separates the domestic spin on the war and people living it on the ground.”  
– Geoff Pevere, *The Star*

“Not since Luis Buñuel have we had such a wonderful joke on do-gooder liberalism.” – Gerald Perry, *The Boston Phoenix*

**ROB NELSON**

**Critic's students give high marks to film about intern**



First Run/Icarus Films

Nina Davenport and Muthana Mohmed in "Operation Filmmaker."

If you ask me, Nina Davenport's "Operation Filmmaker" is among the richest nonfiction movies in many moons.

The documentary is about an Iraqi film student who's plucked from the streets of Baghdad to serve as an intern on a Hollywood set (and as de facto star of Davenport's film).

But [why ask me?](#)

Better qualified to weigh in on Davenport's provocative study of art, aspiration and exploitation are the young students in my documentary film studies class at Minneapolis College of Art and Design.

["Operation Filmmaker"](#) was the first of two-dozen movies they're screening for this semester, and, given their highly vocal response to it in January, it has been one of the most engaging.

So on the eve of the film's Minnesota premiere at Walker Art Center, where it screens (for free!) at 7 on Thursday night as part of the ["Women with Vision" series](#), I exploited ... er, I mean I asked a few of my students to summon their conflicted reviews for the microphone.

**Tess Steube:** "It's a really unbelievable film. The more I think about it, the more I realize that I could easily get myself into that kind of messy situation — either as the filmmaker or the intern. It's disturbing to think that you could say to someone, 'Oh, let me help you,' and then

end up making things worse. I think there will be a lot of shocked people at the Walker — because of how the movie exposes the dark side of privileged people's good intentions. The film is strong medicine. I have some friends coming to the Walker who I hope will get to see it."

**Brandon Boulay:** "It is a film about a struggling filmmaker following a struggling filmmaker. They're both trying to be major film producers. But [Davenport] is a few steps ahead of [Muthana Mohamed], and my feeling is that in the course of making her movie, she basically exploits him. Is it an interesting movie? Definitely yes."

**Whitney Weir:** "I think 'Operation Filmmaker' gets to the heart of the American dream. The movie asks, Does the American dream even exist for people in need? Can we as Americans bring the American dream to a country by going to war with that country? The Iraqi man perceives that he's being offered the American dream, but he sees that the dream comes with all these conditions."

**Mac Plumstead:** "I think the movie will elicit extreme responses at the Walker. Our class discussion demonstrated that pretty well. Some people in the class were sympathetic to the Iraqi guy, while others just disliked him from the get-go and felt he was being manipulative. I'm sort of in-between. I think his aim was true initially, but that once he became disillusioned and resentful, he started trying to get even. In the end, both [Davenport and Mohamed] end up taking advantage of each other."

**David McCauley:** "I think the movie is a little bit manipulative. In the beginning, [Davenport] has a genuine interest in making an unbiased film about the Iraqi guy's progress. But then it feels like she becomes manipulative and does whatever she can to make a story. I don't know whether you can blame her for that or not."

## Honors / Awards

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Official Selection  
Toronto International  
Film Festival  
2007



Special Jury Prize  
Chicago International Film  
Festival  
2007



Grand Jury Prize  
for Documentary  
AFI Fest  
2007



KNF Duth Film Critics Award  
Rotterdam International Film  
Festival  
2007



Official Selection, Sheffield Doc/Fest  
Starz Denver Film Festival  
Stockholm International Film Festival  
Leeds International Film Festival, UK  
Santa Fe International Film Festival



## About Nina Davenport

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After studying photography and filmmaking at Harvard College, Nina Davenport completed her first film *Hello Photo*, a poetic travel documentary about India, which premiered at Rotterdam and won “Best Documentary” at the Melbourne International Film Festival. Her second film *Always a Bridesmaid* -- described by *The Hollywood Reporter* as “dripping with artistic merit” -- was autobiographical, and aired on Cinemax/HBO and Channel Four in the U.K. Davenport's third feature, *Parallel Lines*, a lyrical road movie about the private stories and personal grief of Americans in the aftermath of September 11th, premiered at IDFA (The International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam) in the Joris Ivens competition, and subsequently aired on the BBC's “Storyville.” **Operation Filmmaker**, her most recent film, first screened as a work-in-progress at the Rotterdam International Film Festival in 2007, where it won the prestigious KNF Dutch Film Critics Award, and later premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival. Davenport's unique and personal style of documentary has earned her numerous filmmaking awards and grants. She grew up in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan and lives in New York City.



## Director's Statement

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“For any American with a conscience, the war in Iraq has been an all-consuming preoccupation. As a documentary filmmaker, I felt the need to comment on 'Operation Iraqi Enduring Freedom,' in part to assuage the helpless feeling I had watching it unfold on TV. I was casting about for a topic when a unique story fell into my lap. David Schisgall, a friend from college, had directed a piece for MTV about young people living in Iraq, focusing mainly on American soldiers. “True Life: I'm Living in Iraq” also featured seven minutes about a young Iraqi film student, Muthana Mohmed, who was desperate to go to Hollywood. After the show aired, the actor and director Liev Schreiber contacted David. Liev wanted to give Muthana an opportunity to come to the West, and he thought Muthana's journey might also make for an interesting documentary. David thought I would be the ideal filmmaker to document this story, so I was hired.

I went to Prague where Liev's film *Everything is Illuminated* was shot to investigate what I thought would be a fairly straightforward subject—a young Iraqi's experience as an intern on a Hollywood movie. I boarded that plane as myopically as America invaded Iraq, never imagining how complicated things would get or how personally involved in Muthana's life I would become. My own guilt about the war made it impossible to remain an objective witness to his story over the two years that I filmed Muthana's effort to realize his dream to be a filmmaker. For better or worse, I found myself filming a power struggle—between me, an American woman holding the reigns as director of the film, and my subject, an Iraqi man—in what felt at times like a microcosm of the endless conflict in Iraq.”

— Nina Davenport



# Credits

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## Featuring

Liev Schreiber  
Elijah Wood  
Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson

## Director

Nina Davenport

## Producers

Nina Davenport  
David Schisgall

## Director of Photography

Nina Davenport

## Film Editors

Nina Davenport  
Aaron Kuhn

## Composer

Sheldon Mirowitz

## Associate Editor

Dan Cantagallo

## Assistant Editor / Associate Producer

Tania James

## Associate Producer

Kristine Pregot

## Additional Camera / Field Producer

Kouross Esmaeli

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## Additional Editing

Matt Hamacheck

## Assistant Editors

Matt Bleistein  
Melissa Mathes  
Marisa Pearl

## Sound Editor

Dave Ellinwood  
Re-recording Mixer  
Ian Stynes

## Audio Post Facility

Dig It Audio Inc.

## Composer’s Assistant

Andreas Björck

## Translators

Amine Bouchentouf  
Dalia Ghebreyal  
Elishka Kocendoro  
Alaa Majeed  
Emna Zghal

## Additional Camera

Nezar Hussein  
Dhyaa Khaled  
Muthana Mohmed  
Isam Rasheed  
Filip Remuda  
Martin Stepanek

## Producer of Baghdad Diaries

Mona Mahmoud

## Archival Footage

BBC Motion Gallery  
MTV

## Online Editor / Color Correction

Will Cox at Final Frame

## Post Production

Final Frame

## Title & Web Design

An Art Service

Thank You

Mikaela Beardsley  
Cactus3  
Rebecca Carman  
Karam Dahiya  
William Davenport  
Joe Dorman  
Peter Dowd  
Jason Emerton  
Rob Epstein  
Tanaz Eshaghian  
Doug Jones  
Susi Korda  
Jo Lapping  
Ben Lewis  
Aaron Lubarsky  
Andrew Marcus  
Ross McElwee  
Amanda Micheli

Lottie Moggach  
Emma Morris  
Michel Negroponte  
Thom Powers  
Betsy Reed  
David Sampliner  
Maurie Samuels  
Alex Sherwin  
Karen Schmeer  
Steven Schneider  
Shanida Scotland  
Mark Sourian  
Mateo Taussig  
Elijah Wood  
Jack Youngelson  
Marianne Yusavage  
Amanda Zinoman

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Dylan Clarke  
Emma Cooper  
Corporation of Yaddo  
Daisy Gili  
Chris Heinz  
Dwayne Johnson

Amy Meselson  
Robb Moss  
Dana O'Keefe  
Leena Pasanen  
Elise Pettice  
Jan Rofekamp  
Elizabeth Rubin  
Julian Rubinstein  
Universal Studios  
Warner Independent Studios

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Very Special Thanks

Muthana Mohmed  
Peter Saraf  
Live Schreiber

Executive Producer for ITVS

Sally Jo Fifer

Executive Producer for BBC Storyville

Nick Fraser

Executive Producer for TVOntario

Rudy Buttignol

Executive Producer for YLE

Lena Passanen

Executive Producer for SBS  
Mark Atkin

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TVOntario  
SBS Australia  
Yle Teema Finland  
BBC Storyville

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In Memory of my Mother  
Kitty Davenport

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An **Icarus Films** Release