



Theeb
Director: Naji Abu Nowar
Country: Jordan
Date: 2014



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A review by Jay Weissberg for *Variety*:

A young Bedouin boy uses his nascent survival skills to outwit potential enemies in “Theeb,” a classic adventure film of the best kind, and one that’s rarely seen these days. Naji Abu Nowar’s impressive debut feature riffs on oater themes, and the stunning location work in southern Jordan has the grandeur of Monument Valley, yet this is no Western knockoff but a well-told WWI-era story grounded in Bedouin-specific customs. The best director prize in Venice’s Horizons section will certainly expand Abu Nowar’s horizons and could translate to modest arthouse play, even Stateside.

Jordan’s homegrown cinema output has been minuscule, making “Theeb” (meaning “wolf”) an especially welcome addition that should offer encouragement to aspiring local filmmakers and funding bodies (the pic was supported by Abu Dhabi’s Sanad Fund as well as the Doha Film Institute, the King Abdullah II Fund for Development, and Visions Sud Est). While set in western Arabia in 1916, the movie was shot entirely in Jordan, using mostly non-professional Bedouins whose powerful presence onscreen is a testament to both their talent and U.K.-born Abu Nowar’s working methods.

Recently orphaned brothers Hussein (Hussein Salameh) and Theeb (Jacir Eid) are from a family of pilgrim guides, living a traditional Bedouin life. Their relationship, terrifically delineated, is warmhearted and playful, with more than a touch of protectiveness in Hussein’s gently mentoring spirit toward his younger sibling. One night a British soldier (Jack Fox) and his Arab escort Marji (Marji Audeh) appear out of the inky desert blackness, asking to be guided to a well near the Ottoman train tracks.

Despite the soldier’s brusque behavior, the rules of Bedouin hospitality demand that he and Marji be treated with due respect. Hussein agrees to guide them to the well; Theeb wants to join, but he’s told to stay behind. Instead, the boy follows. Tensions rise when they realize they’re being watched — the director refreshingly (for some, frustratingly) refuses clear-cut exposition, though remarks by the soldier indicate that the British are keen to destroy the train lines, protected by Ottoman troops and an assortment of local renegades and allies.



The foursome are ambushed in a canyon, where Marji and the Brit are killed and Hussein and Theeb are forced to abandon their camels to seek shelter on higher ground. Tormenting voices of the Arab rebels ricochet around the canyon at night, making it impossible to tell where the sounds come from; the next day, Hussein is killed, and Theeb is alone. Then a mercenary (Hassan Mutlag) appears, seriously injured and slumped over his camel; the two need each other to survive, yet Theeb remains wary.

Like all well-done adventure tales, especially those with an intimate human focus and an expansive, epic vision, “Theeb” works on multiple levels. On the one hand, it’s the story of a young boy who witnesses his beloved brother’s death and has to survive the inhospitable desert while thinking of ways to restore his family’s honor — classic horse-opera material, complete with marauding bandits. By making his protag a young boy however, the director sidesteps the usual black-and-white, honor-and-revenge mainstays of the

genre, which certainly exist here but are tempered by Theeb's youth and uncertainty.

Then there's the historical context, which Abu Nowar very much wants audiences to understand — intro titles are far too ubiquitous in contempo cinema, yet this is one case where a brief explanation of Ottoman-British enmity might come in handy, especially given the West's distressing ignorance of the subject ("Lawrence of Arabia," shot nearby, covers similar ground). "Theeb" is set at the moment when the Bedouin lifestyle was on the cusp of radical change, and pilgrim guides like Hussein were made redundant by trains going all the way to Mecca. Young Theeb is a witness to these shifts, his survival dependent on the training he receives watching his brother, but his future as a traditional nomad is coming to an end.

The palpable affection for each other conveyed by Eid and Salameh (real-life cousins) has a cinematic intensity that quickly wins over viewers, and the novice performers' ease onscreen, especially young Eid, act as counterweights to the truly stunning scenery, which could so easily have stolen the show from lesser talents. As it is, the unearthly beauty of the landscape, shot in Wadi Arabeh and Wadi Rum by Ulrich Seidl's frequent collaborator Wolfgang Thaler, will doubtless boost international interest in shooting in Jordan. Abu Nowar's decision to film on Super 16 with an anamorphic lens pays off with glowing dividends, the format's scope and warmth ideal for this sort of story and location. Jerry Lane's score feels a little too Western, despite Arabic music inflections.

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