

Interview

How we made Bagdad Café

Interviews by Pamela Hutchinson

‘I got letters every day from people telling me how the film inspired them to do something about their lives’

‘For the first time we saw a female in charge of something’ ... Marianne Sägebrect and CCH Pounder in Bagdad Café. Photograph: Pelemele Film

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Percy Adlon, director

It was a Christmas vacation and we were traveling the desert on Route 66 with our kids. We saw these strange lights in the sky, which came from, as we later discovered, a solar energy project. We took photographs and fantasized about writing a story for the actor Marianne Sägebrect, who we had had a success with in a film I’d directed called Sugar Baby. We just improvised and started joking about our round German star meeting with Whoopi Goldberg, because we had just seen *The Color Purple*. We saw the name Bagdad on a map, and we went there and there was nothing: just a few trees and a rundown gas station. We brought the two together under those solar lights and created our own Bagdad.

The film is a kind of a fairytale. I wanted the desert to look the way I imagine it and not how it really does, which is kind of grey. I wanted it to look like a Salvador Dalí painting. It has its own colours and I wanted them strong, as if they’re coming from inside and not from outside.

We had this mix of people: the Native American who is the sheriff, the abused German housewife who has an urge to clean everything and this struggling black family trying to make ends meet. They are all what Trump really hates. Because of our strange time with this exclusion of everybody who is not white, our film is now more urgent and contemporary than when we shot it 30 years ago.

Jack Palance at that time had a bad reputation. He was out of luck. I said, “I need somebody for this character who reeks of Hollywood,” and an actress from *General Hospital* recommended him. He passed on a \$1m offer to do a big TV series to make our film and his agents were angry at him, but it was great. He got the Oscar for *City Slickers* but they said he really got it for *Bagdad Café*.

The song *Calling You* was written for the film by Bob Telson. Neither of us liked typical film music. When I met him, he said: “I like film music best when Woody Allen turns on the radio.” He delivered *Calling You* and it changed his life. It was the biggest hit of his career.

I think we made some good films, but Bagdad Café is outstanding. We're very thankful for that. We thought it would not get out of this family of arthouse audiences, and so on. And then it suddenly burst into flames, with everybody. It was amazing.

'It was transformational' ... Bagdad Café. Photograph: Pelemele Film

CCH Pounder, actor

The best thing about Bagdad Café is how people are so grateful they have seen it – how it has inspired them to do something about their lives. I got tons of letters from people who wanted to leave the corporate world and reawaken their creative life. When they see the film they say: “I'm gonna do it.” Or, many people tell me: “I finally came out to my mum and dad.” I got these kind of letters day in, day out.

I knew I had it at the audition: Percy couldn't stay seated. He kept jumping up, as if he was having fits. And we had incredible fun on set. It was the only film I've ever made that's been shot in sequence. It worked so beautifully because I didn't know Marianne any more in character than I did in real life. It was one of those inch-by-inch, marvelous things. We were isolated in the desert in a hotel that had just been built and we, the film crew and cast, were the only occupants.

The cabaret act was terrific, because we learned the tricks and we were good enough that we actually got into the local magic club. I remember in the beginning Percy, who was so sweet, said: “Could you make it, umm, more black?” And I said: “Percy, look at me. You are doing a film about trying to avoid stereotypes and here you are, falling into your own trap. Be careful.” So that was a good education for all of us that day.

I love the suspicion he created between the two women. Brenda, my character, calls the sheriff to say, of Jasmin: “I don't know what it is but something is wrong with this lady.” But she couldn't put her finger on it. There were things Percy saw that I really appreciated. I loved the way he left everything open for you to discover.

Bagdad Café was transformational, knowing that you had this possibility, with a great film to encourage people to change their lives. For the first time we saw a female in charge of something, particularly a woman of colour. I used to say I regretted that was my first film because it was so magnificent for me, and as an actor you think, “Wow, if I start out like that, can you imagine what other characters I could play?” In fact, sometimes it doesn't happen. Sometimes it's just work.

A 30th anniversary 4K restoration of Bagdad Café is out now on Blu-ray, DVD & digital download.