

# rawi's camera WOWS

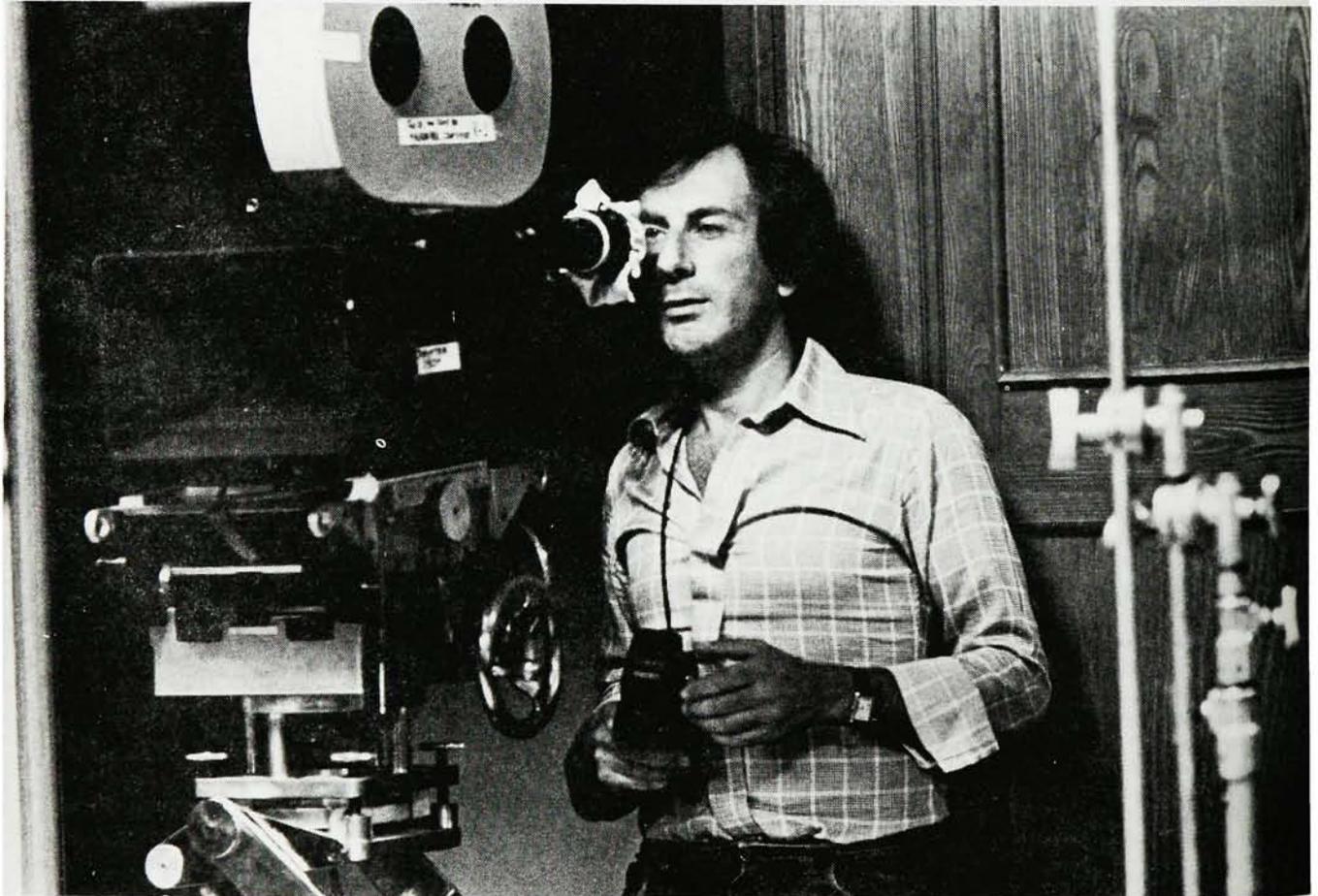
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British cameraman Ousama Rawi worked on the film *Coup d'Etat* in Toronto and shares with Mark Irwin some of his thoughts and techniques about lighting.

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by Mark Irwin

Ousama Rawi checks a shot



I managed to meet Ousama Rawi two days before he began shooting **Coup d'Etat** for Magnum Films. I had followed his work after seeing **Pulp** (a Michael Caine comedy/thriller) in 1972. Since then I'd seen **Black Windmill, Gold and Sky Riders**, all of them incredibly well photographed and I was very honored to finally meet the man himself.

Born in Baghdad, and educated in Scotland, he began shooting news for Border Television in 1965. He worked from commercials directly into features, thereby sidestepping the traditional clapper/loader to focus puller to operator to director of photography route. At age 38, he has over 12 features and countless commercials to his credit.

**Cinema Canada:** I put your name in the company of Peter Suchitsky, Tony Richmond, Peter Bijou, Chris Menges... Is there a younger generation of cameramen in Britain?

**Ousama Rawi:** Yes, there is. Basically, we've all sprung up from commercials. In Britain, the commercial field is very, very active and our lighting technique stems from that. Agencies in England like to experiment with photography and it's terrific for the cameraman... Plenty of opportunity to test new styles, new equipment. You can quickly find out if it's a good approach or a bad one, and either abandon it after a one day shoot or remember it for your next picture.

*What will be your lighting style on Coup d'Etat? You have used soft light very well in the past. Since this has a sinister military theme, will you aim for a harder edge?*

I try to light in a way that you're not going to be aware that film lights are present on the set. I hate seeing six shadows if there's only one lamp in the room, or someone standing by a window with the light coming from the inside instead of outside. I couldn't possibly photograph a scene like that, but in the old days they did.

So, I will go for a natural source of light, except we do have a war room; now there a mood has to be created, basically low key. Martyn (Burke) also wants a lot of depth of field; he wants to do a Citizen Kane effect. Someone 3 feet away is sharp and someone 30 feet away is also sharp. Now that, as you'll appreciate, is

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Mark Irwin, an associate member of the Canadian Society of Cinematographers, graduated from York University and has shot a number of films. Recently, he has worked on the **The World of Wizards**, and on **Blood and Guts**.

going to need a lot of light; it's going to be a very warm set.

*Your lighting style has managed to be a directional soft light. How have you achieved that?*

Some bounce, some diffuse. It depends on two factors: one, the location we're shooting in, the height of the ceiling, the color of the ceiling, etc., and then two, the style of the director. If he wants to pan through 270 degrees or 360 degrees, that obviously poses a bigger problem for directional soft light.

*I've seen some lights you've had built for Coup d'Etat called a skylight. Is this something you've used before?*

Yes. I used it on the **Human Factor**. It's really to provide a directional pool of light, a soft pool.

*What I saw was like a huge lampshade frame with six 1000 watt bulbs pointing down. Do you cover it with diffusion or velour or...?*

Well, you have a choice: either white silk so that it glows, or else black for a small amount of spill. I think you have to do that, really. I think too many cameramen just live with what there is. They have a Lowell kit or conventional 2k, 5k or whatever. Why shouldn't we be able to design our own equipment? Normally, you get into a location and you have a pillar or something and you want to put a light behind it and you can't because the stand shows or the head shows... so design one. Make it narrow and small enough and that's it.

*To go from lighting to hi-speed lenses and available light: how do you feel about non lighting?*

Ideally, we shouldn't have to use lamps at all. I do like to design a shot in the sense of lighting. So just because I've got enough exposure doesn't necessarily follow that I'll not use any lamps; I try and change the direction of light, blocking out a window that's not in shot, etc.

*What is your approach to night exteriors? Is there a blue moon that shines on us all?*

Not the American blue... I find British blue is a much paler, much more subtle blue, against the full blueness of Hollywood. I dislike day for night. On **Sky Riders** I had a lot of it and the way I did it was with black and white film, high contrast. Let's face it, in moonlight you don't see colors so why show color.

*When Ossie Morris was shooting Equus here last year, he very openly expressed his lack of confidence in Canadian labs and their work. Have you experienced any such horrors?*

Well, Medallion is doing all our work. I spent a day with them and they were terrific. We're printing 5381 and not Gevaert because I think that finally 5247 and 5381 have now matured. I was very disappointed when I first used 5247 before the modification came in - terrible contrast ratio, shadow detail simply wasn't there. I mean 5254, you got used to over the years, and you could let somebody go under a tree from sunlit to shade and it looked after itself. This film - under the shade of a tree and it's gone, no detail, nothing. I had a look at the negative and it was all there, they just couldn't print it on 5381. So we printed it on Fuji - same problem. Then we tried 3M stock: not much better. Then we tried Agfa Gevaert and it was like chalk and cheese, the detail appeared. So the combination of Eastman 5247 and Gevaert 986 worked.

*Why is it that lighting or a sensibility to light has changed? Why are you, as one of the world's best cameramen, seeing and expressing light differently than your predecessors?*

I think that what we're doing is really nothing new. It was done in the early silent days of Hollywood. Soft light was in right from the start because California had this harsh direct light and they started putting muslin over their open stages and diffusing sunlight. Black and white film developed, it became more low key, more realistic. Then color film arrived and that needed a lot of light; in the early days it was even slower than ASA 8. Then sound arrived and suddenly cameramen had to shoot inside, on a sound stage. They had to provide an immense amount of light artificially and I think the lighting style, the mood built up with black and white, had to go for the sake of illumination level. They had to pump enough light in to illuminate the subject just to get an exposure. So you got this hard light style, with Fresnel lens lamps which produces hard parallel lines and cameramen got stuck with it.

Then film speed increased, first to 16 ASA, then to 32 ASA, then 50 ASA, and now 100 ASA and higher. But of course older cameramen had only worked with that kind of direct light so it remained. They would now use less lights, but still in the same way that was imposed on them in the early days.

*So someone of your generation...*

Isn't tied down. We started with a higher film speed and learned how to create a more natural light from the beginning.

*Well, that explains how Freddie Young and Christopher Challis have retained their hard light style but then people like David Watkin, Billy Williams, Ossie Morris, Geoffrey Unsworth - they all worked through the same conditions, but their style is completely contemporary.*

Well, there you see! Two of those names - Williams and Watkin - came from commercials. From a photographic point of view, commercials are a terrific training ground and a means of expanding styles instead of reinforcing old ones. I don't think I'd ever want to leave them because they allow me to experiment, to learn.

*Canadian producers are forever flying in John Allcott or Peter Bijou to shoot commercials and Harry Waxman or Brian West to shoot features. The validity of this is a whole other article itself, but on a strictly craft basis, what gives British cameramen their style?*

I have wondered that myself... maybe because of the light we have in Europe, it makes us have to reproduce light softer...

*Well, consider this; New York cameramen are worlds apart from Hollywood cameramen. Gordon Willis and Owen Roizman have a totally different style from Conrad Hall and Haskell Wexler. It must be the texture of light.*

It must be... in California, they'd have to fill a much stronger sunlight, while maybe New York has more haze... We have so many cloudy days in England that we get used to soft light, so when we go into a room we don't want hard light.

*What have you learned or seen of any Canadian camera people?*

I think they're second to no one, really. I wish you were more recognized around the world. In Britain, we don't have that much of an indigenous industry any more so we've become a sort of service industry for American producers. They pass through London, pick up a crew and go off elsewhere to shoot a picture. I think Canadian crews should enjoy the same advantages.

*The advantages of international reputations will have to wait. Canadian cameramen may have built a name for themselves in the documentary field but we are greatly outnumbered and outclassed in theatrical features.*

*We provide many willing*

*assistants and second unit crews for the likes of **Supermen** or **Black Stallion**, but the creation of a distinct style, much less reputation, is a long way off.*

*And it may well be, as Rawi pointed out, that the source of creativity and style is in the volatile field of commercials. Indeed, the conditions and opportunities are the same, but here the attitudes are quite different. The likes of Fritz Speiss, George Morita, Nick Wolfe are not likely to sprint back and forth between the easy money and tight control of commercials and the 12 hour day, location schedule hassles of features. In fact, people like Harry Makin, Paul Van Der Linden and Bob Saad, recognized cameramen with a list of features to their credit, have taken their pension plans in the form of commercials, out to the greenback pastures. Only Reg Morris and Marc Champion, etc., work both sides of the line and perhaps it's the challenge of the one and the opportunity of the other that keeps them going. At any rate, the true test of style will be the day that a British producer flies a Canadian cameraman to England to shoot a feature.* □



On the shoot of **Coup d'Etat**: David Usher, gaffer; Rawi, lighting cameraman; Rick Wincenty, first assistant; and Martyn Burke, director