

ALUM PROFILE

Making It Real

A tender film about giving in a time of need

FOR RAOUF ZAKI, making a film is an act of faith. And more.

"It's about having faith, losing faith, having faith, losing faith, and having faith again," says Zaki, whose forty-minute *Santa Claus in Baghdad* was well received at screenings in schools and libraries across the United States last year.

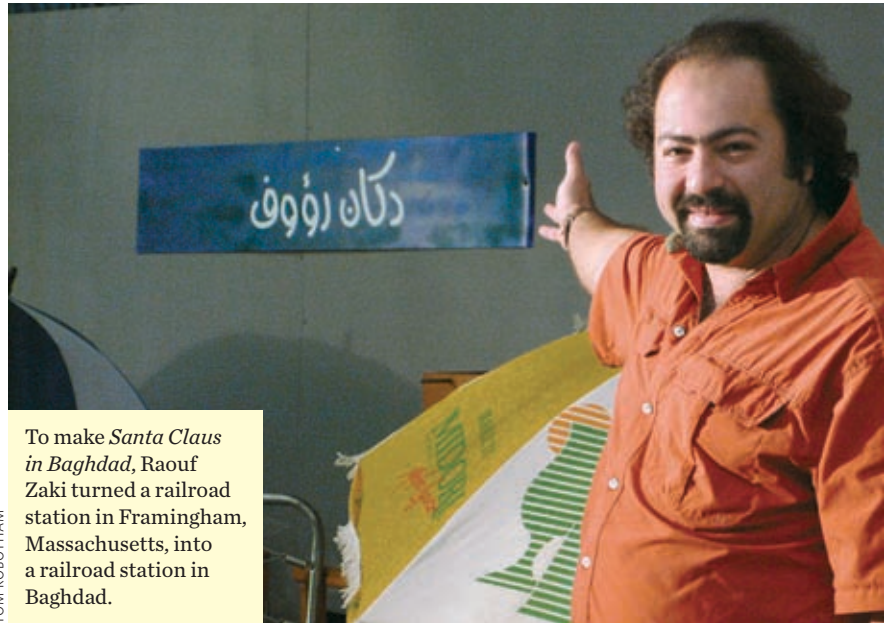
The idea for the film, Zaki's second featurette, came to him one day in spring 2006, when he was walking around Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. He had recently read *Figs and Fate: Stories About Growing Up in the Arab World*

by Elsa Marston, and several scenes in the book reminded him of his childhood in Egypt. The book's images of family life and schoolyard play haunted him as he walked through the cool New England woodland, and he felt a growing rush of conviction that he should turn one of the stories into a film.

WEB EXTRA
Watch a trailer for Raouf Zaki's *Santa Claus in Baghdad* at www.bu.edu/bostonia.

"I just fell in love with the story," says Zaki (COM'89). "After that I was determined to turn it into a movie. I felt like I had to be an alchemist, but when you decide to do something like that, sometimes all the forces seem to line up."

One of the most important forces that lined up was a remarkable Iraqi production designer named John El Manahi, who had worked on films like *The Station Agent* and *The Speed of Life*. Manahi, who was living in New York, knew that the design of certain types of public architecture, such as railroad stations and schools, look very much alike in countries around the world. Zaki says he watched



To make *Santa Claus in Baghdad*, Raouf Zaki turned a railroad station in Framingham, Massachusetts, into a railroad station in Baghdad.

TOM ROBOTHAM

in amazement as Manahi found the common structural elements to transform a train station and a schoolroom in Framingham, Massachusetts, into the same sites in Baghdad. Manahi also happened to be familiar with an open-air book market in Baghdad that figures prominently in the film, and managed to build a set that was a close replica, at least on film. For the street scenes that even Manahi's genius couldn't create, Zaki took his camera to Cairo.

Every effort, he says, paid off on film. *Santa Claus in Baghdad* is a heartrending, *Gift of the Magi*-like tale of a sixteen-year-old girl who searches for a gift worthy of her favorite teacher, and about her young brother, who believes that an uncle visiting from America is actually Santa Claus.

"It's a story about giving in a time of need," he says. "It's about people caring about each other and helping each other."

In that sense, says Zaki, whose first featurette, *Just*

Your Average Arab, was awarded Best Film in the 2006 Boston Comedy Film Festival, the narrative of *Santa Claus in Baghdad* was a lot like the making of the film.

"The blessing of working in America is that you are working with people from so many races and nationalities, and they all come together," he says. "My designer was from Iraq, one of my directors was from Israel, and here we were all working together. You could just feel the spirit."

ART JAHNKE



DAVID KURTZMAN