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Friday March 18th, 2016, 7.30pm

## Theeb

(Jordan/ UK/UAE/Qatar//2014. Cert 15)

dir: Naji Abu Nowar

starring: Jacir Eid, Hussein Salameh, Hassan Mutlag,  
Jack Fox

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The feature debut of British-born Jordanian Naji Abu Nowar, *Theeb* is described by its director as a "Bedouin western" - which is fine as far as it goes. But there's a freshness and an integrity to the treatment that makes it more than a spin-off of an existing genre. (It could also be regarded as a footnote to *Lawrence of Arabia*, but that's probably the least interesting aspect of it.) Nothing is spelled out for us: it's possible to deduce from internal evidence, broadly where and when we are, but there are no helpful signposts in the form of captions or chunks of expository dialogue. Much of the background to the plot comes to us in snatches of half-overheard conversation picked up by the film's protagonist, young Theeb (the name means 'wolf' in Arabic), through whose alert but often uncomprehending perception all the action is filtered.

As the boy, Jacir Eid gives a strikingly eloquent performance. Not in terms of words, as he has relatively little dialogue, but in his face, and in particular his dark, expressive eyes, narrowed in perplexity or wide with alarm, tell us at every moment just what he's thinking. Like virtually all the cast, he's never acted before: only Jack Fox (son of actor James Fox), as the British officer who comes seeking help, has previous screen experience. Otherwise, all the roles are taken by non-professionals, desert-dwelling Bedouin from Jordan operating in what's very much their own territory; the dialogue was devised by Nowar and his co-screenwriter Bassel Ghandour, in close consultation with their cast. (As Ghandour recalls, "They understood subtext, and nuance and subtleties. By the end of it, Naji and I were just writing and listening.") The result is a sense of unforced authenticity: the actors behave with no sense of self-consciousness, and only the Englishman seems awkward and out of place - but then, given the circumstances, that too feels authentic.

The wellspring of the plot stems from the Bedouin tradition of affording unquestioning aid and hospitality to strangers, even when this could involve (as in the event it does) danger and death - a custom summed up in the Arabic poetry that we hear spoken after the opening credit: "In questions of brotherhood, never refuse a guest." But the Bedouins' way of life is under threat; their age-old occupation, guiding pilgrims through the desert to Mecca, is being supplanted by the newly constructed railway. And, as it turns out, that same 'iron donkey trail' also motivates the Englishman (who wants to blow it up) and the bandit leader who brings about his death - since he too, he tells Theeb, used to be a pilgrim guide.



This man (billed simply as 'stranger'), showing up halfway through the action as a silhouetted, seemingly dying figure slumped on a camel, is the film's most ambiguous character. As played by Hassan Mutlag, he exerts a raffish charm that keeps Theeb fascinated; and even though one of the man's accomplices kills Theeb's beloved older brother Hussein, it sometimes seems as if the boy may be tempted to throw in his lot with the bandit -

**Synopsis:** The Hejaz region of the Ottoman Empire, around 1916. Theeb ("Wolf") is the third and youngest son of Bedouin sheikh Abu Hmond, who has recently died. Theeb's oldest brother has become the new sheikh. Theeb's other brother Hussein is teaching him to shoot. Two strangers arrive in the tribe's camp and are offered hospitality; a British officer, Edward, and his Bedouin guide Marji. When Marji explains that Edward wants to be guided to the Roman Well, Hussein offers to take them there. The three men set off and Theeb surreptitiously follows. When he catches up, Edward wants him sent back, but Hussein refuses. The Roman Well proves to be polluted with the blood of the men Edward hoped to meet there to guide him to the railway. At the next wadi, they encounter six bandits; Edward and Marji are shot dead. Hussein and Theeb hide in the rocks. Hussein shoots and wounds the bandit leader but is himself killed during the night.

Next morning, Theeb emerges to find the wadi empty, and buries Hussein. A camel approaches with a man slumped on it: it is the wounded bandit leader, abandoned by his associates. Theeb takes the bandit's gun, then reluctantly helps him to recover. They set out for the railway, encountering some anti-Turkish Bedouin rebels en route. The bandit explains that he used to be a pilgrim guide, before the railway robbed him of his livelihood. At a Turkish fort, Theeb sees the bandit sell Edward's notebook, watch and detonator to the Turkish lieutenant. Realising that Hussein was merely killed for profit, Theeb shoots the bandit dead. The lieutenant tells Theeb to go home.

### Credits

<b>Marji</b>	Marji	<b>Director</b>	Naji Abu Nowar
<b>Edward</b>	Jack Fox	<b>Screenplay</b>	Naji Abu Nowar, Bassel Ghandour
<b>Hussein</b>	Hussein Salameh	<b>DoP</b>	Wolfgang Thaler
<b>Stranger</b>	Hassan Mutlag	<b>Editor</b>	Rupert Lloyd
<b>Theeb</b>	Jacir Eid	<b>Music</b>	Jerry Lane
		<b>Sound design</b>	Dario Swade
		<b>Costume.</b>	Jamila Aladdin

(Jordan/UK/UAE/Qatar//2014. 100 mins)

who for his part demonstrates an almost fatherly care for the youngster. But, as the introductory verses also warn, 'If the wolves offer friendship, do not count on success'; and only when it becomes clear just why Hussein died does the dynamic decisively shift.

Nowar directs with sure-footed confidence, controlling the pace and subtly building the tension to the film's first shock moment at the well. Funded by Abu Dhabi, Jordan, Qatar and the UK, *Theeb* won the Orizzonti Award for Best Director at the Venice Film Festival. It also picked up a well-deserved award at the Camerimage, the International Film Festival of the Art of Cinematography: DP Wolfgang Thaler, who shot Ulrich Seidel's *Paradise* trilogy, captures all the stark, merciless beauty of the desert, not least in the nocturnal scenes. (Locations were Wadi Rum and Wadi Arabeh, home to Jordan's last nomadic tribes.) Jerry Lane's Arab-inflected score evocative of space and distance, often relies on unaccompanied, wordless voices.

A survival story at once epic in its historical implications and intimate as a coming-of-age tale (besides offering a tribute to a vanishing way of life), *Theeb* marks a new high point for Jordanian cinema and a more than promising feature debut for its director.

#### Another view

*"Only two kinds of creature get fun in the desert. Bedouins and gods", the exquisitely cynical diplomat Mr. Dryden (Claude Rains) tells T.E. Lawrence (Peter O'Toole) in David Lean's Lawrence of Arabia (1963), "and you're neither." He could have added a third category of desert tourists: directors. The desert is a supremely photogenic location and filmmakers as diverse as Bernardo Bertolucci, George Lucas and Anthony Minghella have all basked on the shifting sands and now Brit-born Abu Nowar joins their ranks with Theeb. It's 1916 and the world is at war but that feels very remote to Theeb (Jacir Eid), a young Bedouin who lives with his brother Hussein (Hussein Salameh) and his tribe.*

*The boys' father has died recently and their elder brother leads the tribe. But the war does finally intrude when a young blonde English soldier (Jack Fox) stumbles into the camp with his Arab escort Marji (Marji Audeh) seeking hospitality and safe passage. The soldier is far removed from the Lawrencian prototype, a hothead in regulations uniform, he passes around cigarettes but there is an anxious dislike of the Arabs bubbling under the surface and he makes no attempt to understand either the language or their culture. When Hussein is tasked with leading the pair across the desert to their rendezvous with a far-off British regiment, Theeb surreptitiously tags along for the adventure.*

*It's soon apparent that they have underestimated the dangers of the situation and when ambushed at a waterhole, Theeb is left alone and surrounded by an unforgiving environment and hostile bandits, he must muster his resources as best he can. Nowar shoots the human interactions from Theeb's waist height point of view, and we are given the impression of history being glanced*

*from the margins, obscured by the adults standing in the way. The conflict is not explained, but Theeb slowly comes to realise that his father's lesson - "The strong eat the weak" - is a motto to hang onto. It is this perspective that makes the film special. The relationship between Theeb and Hussein is touchingly developed very early in the picture, as they tease and play with each other, and Jacir Eid's naturalistic performance (Eid is a non-professional actor and the pair are real life cousins) gives the core of the film an emotional depth, making the terrible onslaught and dangers of the period all the more distressing.*

*When Theeb finds an unlikely ally in a pilgrim guide turned bandit played by Hassan Mutlag, he is presented with a genuine dilemma: honouring the bonds of family and risking death, or forging a new pragmatic alliance which might unalterably change who he is. It's a credit to the filmmakers that they don't soften, or seek compromise. Filmed in many of Lean's favourite locations, Theeb implicitly dialogues with that sun-drenched classic of western cinema; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Lean's Hamlet. All those characters who were ciphers to British-French geopolitical ambition and to some extent bit players to Lawrence's own mythic self-invention are here fully realised as human beings whose lives are shattered and whose families are destroyed by those wielding pencils over maps, and those who aren't Bedouin or deity thinking it fun to spend some time in the desert.*

John Bleasdale (Cinevue)

#### Our next screening - Friday April 1st, 7.30pm West (Germany 2013. Cert 15)

Nelly (Jödis Triebel) flees East Germany with her young son Alexej (Jacky Ido) only to find herself caught in a frustrating limbo, reminiscent of current immigration centres on either side of the Channel Tunnel. Before Nelly can be processed and given West German citizenship, she must first prove her loyalty to the West. And loyalty to the West means giving up the secrets of the East - even if you don't have any. Christian Schwochow's film generates a disturbing tension as Nelly attempts to navigate the murky hall of mirrors of Cold War politics. Covering some of the same terrain as Christian Petzold's *Barbara* (shown by the Society in 2014) but with a less clear cut approach to the personal politics of the situation, it's a riveting addition to the canon of Cold War cinema.