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Our man in Cairo

Canadian producer Daniel Iron is hot off the success of *Away From Her*, and just plain hot, Gayle MacDonald finds, as he swelters in Egypt making his new film, *Cairo Time*

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Cairo - in the summer - throbs. So oppressive is the heat, visitors feel as if they sweat their body weight in water, and most shower twice, often three times, a day. Congested and polluted, the streets teem with people. Sand fills the air, already thick with car exhaust, sweat and (thankfully) the odd whiff of rich Turkish coffee.

But it's the noise that can unhinge the most placid of souls.

And Daniel Iron - a pretty unflappable sort, who normally rolls with the punches - is finding the sound pollution the most distracting thing of all. "You can't imagine. It's a very intimidating city to venture into, with roughly 20 million people," says the 44-year-old Toronto native, who has been in this ancient Egyptian location shooting his latest feature film, Canadian Ruba Nadda's romantic drama, *Cairo Time*. "The traffic is insane, and no one pays attention to stoplights," he adds, chuckling into the telephone. "They don't signal - they just honk to change lanes. I was in a taxi on an empty street, and even then the driver was obsessively honking."

Iron, who has studiously kept a low profile most of his career, has been steadily earning his chops over the past two decades, producing critically lauded TV and film. Among his projects: 1998's Oscar-winning *The Red Violin*, Sarah Polley's Oscar-nominated *Away From Her*, and the Gemini-winning television series *Slings & Arrows*.

A man whose stated goal has always been to work with writer and directors with unique voices, Iron is also currently co-producing (with Nick de Pencier) a documentary about lightning, called *Act of God*, directed by Jennifer Baichwal (with whom he made *Manufactured Landscapes*). And he recently secured the rights to make a feature film based on Barbara Gowdy's Trillium Award-winning novel, *Helpless*. Having landed in Cairo several weeks earlier, on this sweltering day Iron is grateful to be ensconced at the Sheppard Hotel, drinking in some calm. "Today, it's about 40 degrees," says Iron, from his suite, which also doubles as the \$4-million film's production headquarters.

"It's a dry heat though, and honestly, not as unbearable as Toronto when it's muggy."

For *Cairo Time*, Iron has assembled an international cast that includes the Oscar-nominated Patricia Clarkson (*Pieces of April*, *Far From Heaven*), Sudan-born actor Alexander Siddig (*Syriana*, *Kingdom of Heaven*), Spain's Elena Anaya (*Savage Grace*, *Sex and Lucia*) and Winnipeg's Tom McCamus (*The Sweet Hereafter*, *Shake Hands With the Devil*).

Written and directed by the 35-year-old Nadda (whose earlier work includes 2005's *Sabah*, about a Muslim woman living in Toronto who falls for a non-Muslim man), *Cairo Time* tells the story of Juliette (Clarkson), a woman in her late 40s who arrives in Cairo to meet her United Nations-employed husband (McCamus) for a vacation, only to be told he has been delayed in Gaza. He, in turn, sends his friend, Tareq (Siddig), a retired Egyptian police officer, to pick her up.

"She sees the city with an Arab man, and slowly a deep relationship develops," says Iron. "*Cairo Time* is a romance about a brief, unexpected love affair that catches two people off-guard. I don't want to give away the story, but it's by no means a sad movie. The ending is bittersweet."

Cairo Time's Canadian distributor, Hussain Amarshi of Mongrel Media, has collaborated with Nadda twice before, and believes she and Iron are a perfect fit for each other. "She's a very bright, energetic filmmaker, quite impassioned about telling her stories," says Amarshi. "Danny tends to put his head down and just work. ... He's drawn to good writing - projects that have a unique voice, like the work he did with Sarah on *Away From Her*."

In fact, Iron believes *Cairo Time* shares much with the mature emotional themes explored in Polley's film about a couple whose decades-old marriage is tested by a horrible disease. "*Away From Her* - and, I'm hoping, *Cairo Time* - proved there are adults out there looking for complexity in films: real emotions, real characters whom they can actually relate to."

Shooting in a foreign land, meanwhile, presents its own challenges, but, says Iron, there are also amazing perks. "Sound is impossible here. People, as I've said, communicate with their horns. Another time, our art department had scouted out this perfect desert town with little Bedouin houses," he recalls, laughing. "We show up, and the entire place had been painted blue. We had one day to paint it back to its original colour - desert beige."

"Later, we were trying to mount cameras on a Jeep in this tiny village, and in front of us was a parade of camels, goats, mules, dogs, sheep and oxen. Our sound guy turns to me and says, 'This is better than the Santa Claus parade. Just smells different.' "

Iron and his crew also shot at the Pyramids, twice. "We had this stunning view. Unbelievable. After that, we went into the White Desert, eight hours outside Cairo, straight into the Sahara," says Iron, his voice sounding wistful. "It's this strange, otherworldly place. In the middle of the desert, you have these white, limestone mushrooms growing out of the floor. In the distance, you see white, smooth hills, like glaciers. You can't believe you're on this planet."

To get his cast prepared for such a mad, magical culture, especially the urban parts, Iron advised they do one thing: "The best way to acclimatize yourself to the city is to run back and forth across [Toronto's Highway] 401 a few times a day. Truly, take your life into your own hands."

What was dead easy about making the film, says Iron, was the casting: "From the very start, the two leads we have now were the ones we wanted from the beginning. Patti is amazing in everything. She is just the character. And Alexander is incredibly handsome. This film is very romantic, and he's magnetic on the screen."

New Orleans-born Clarkson jumped at the role when her agent (the same person at Creative Artists who represents *Away From Her*'s Julie Christie) sent her the script. "There aren't that many great scripts out there for women over 35 who can play a romantic lead," asserts Iron. "We were bombarded with calls from agents and directors, including some other big names."

"But Patricia is the darling of the film-festival circuit, and that's what this movie needs," adds Iron, who, before striking off on his own with Foundry Films, worked as an Osgoode Hall-trained lawyer, legal counsel at Telefilm Canada, and partner at Toronto's Rhombus Media. "She is in every frame of the film. She and Ruba get along extremely well, and they have similar ideas of what the character should be. Behind her eyes, you can see three or four different emotions going on at the same time."

"When Ruba wrote the script, we went to great pains to purposely leave space for Patti, knowing she's so fantastic at using expressions as ably as words. ... She's often as powerful in silence as she is in motion." The film is a Canada-Ireland co-production. "It's nearly impossible to shoot an entire film outside of the country and still meet Cancon expenditure requirements," Iron explains. "Under Byzantine rules, if you co-produce with a European country, the treaty allows you to shoot in a third country if the script demands it. Nadda approached David Collins - whose Dublin-based company, Samson Films, produced the sleeper 2006 hit *Once* - to team up with Foundry Films. "Nadda knew David. I had seen *Once*, and thought, 'That's the kind of movie I like to think I do.' I had an instant rapport with him," says Iron, adding the film is

a majority-Canadian-owned co-production, with the Irish providing a few crew people and some cast. "But Ruba is the cement of it all. She's fluent in Arabic. We'd be dead without her."

For her part, Nadda has equally glowing things to say about Iron. "Danny has been utterly wonderful," she says during a break in filming. "I was desperate to make this picture, and he made *Cairo Time* happen. His faith in me is enormous."

As he approached the wrapping the film earlier this month, Iron said his hope is that it will be through postproduction by the end of November. His next priority is to develop a festival strategy. "I'd love to see it go to Cannes and be a huge success everywhere in the world," he says, only half joking. "I always would like every movie I produce to go to Toronto," he adds, referring to the film festival held there each September, "but given when we finish, that clouds that."

In his suite overlooking the Nile, the crew has started to recongregate, and Iron has to end our interview. But before he heads off - back out to the Pyramids for a final day of shooting - he shares his thoughts on camels. "Pretty amazing creatures. I can't believe how cute they are. In their hideousness," he observes. And while some of his colleagues have hopped a ride on the drooling beasts, Iron is still mulling that particular option. "I'm not sure. It's kind of like riding a moose. And I've never had the urge to do that. ... As a general policy, I don't ride ruminants."