

BEHIND THE BREADWINNER

Three countries, two styles of animation and one groundbreaking story converge in this Academy Award-nominated film

WHEN THE PARTNERS at Toronto-based film production company Aircraft Pictures first discovered the children's story *The Breadwinner* by Canadian novelist Deborah Ellis, they knew they had, well, a winner.

Aircraft partner Anthony Leo was on a trip with family friends in 2004 when he heard one of the mothers reading the book aloud to her daughter. Soon, the whole group had gathered around to listen to the story of 11-year-old Parvana and her family in Afghanistan in 2001. After the Taliban wrongfully arrests Parvana's father, she disguises herself as a boy to not only work and provide for her family, but also to travel undetected on the long journey to find her dad.

"[Anthony] knew there was something really powerful about it," says Andrew Rosen, Leo's business partner. "It's also a universal story—it's not just about Afghanistan. This story is about a young girl who disappoints her father and wants to get him back in the end after he's taken away."

A couple of years later, when *The Breadwinner* came up at the Ontario Media Development Corporation's "From Page to Screen" pitch session, Aircraft Pictures acquired the rights and planned for a live-action film. "Our original



intent was to make it a very tough film about the horrors under the Taliban rule," says Rosen. "But it's very hard to put financing together for anything—and, for a live-action kids movie about war, [the market] is non-existent."

So in 2012, Rosen and Leo decided to animate, using visually arresting films such as *Persepolis* and *The Triplets of Belleville* as their benchmark. "We knew we weren't going to compete with the Pixars and the Disneys. We didn't want 3D. We wanted the film to have

great artistic merit to it, so it would do justice to the heavy nature of the book," Rosen says.

Around that time, they saw *The Secret of Kells*, the first feature-length movie by Irish animation studio Cartoon Saloon. The intricately drawn, Academy Award-nominated fantasy film traces ancient Celtic lore with an animation style that Rosen and Leo thought would translate well to the cultural history of Afghanistan. Rosen and Leo tapped Ukrainian-Canadian screenwriter Anita Doron, who had lived in the Middle East before moving to Toronto, to adapt the script Ellis wrote for the prospective live-action film.

In order to share the brunt of financing, they also put together a production team spanning three *continued on page 50*



More than 300 people in three countries worked on the production of the film. "We use a program called Shotgun to allow people to track every single shot," says Andrew Rosen, partner at Aircraft Pictures.

Cartoon Saloon art director Ciaran Duffy, who worked on the "real world," says it was a chance to show physical depth in the animation, which Guru Studio worked on adding in post-production. "We have the mountains far away and then the city," he notes. "We had multiple layers—smog and dust in the air, and parallax in the camera movement to make everything feel deep."

We wanted to have a very stripped-down, Afghan sound to the music," notes Rosen. Production limitations meant they couldn't hire a composer from Afghanistan, but Rosen says they were thrilled to sign Canadian composer Mychael Danna, who won an Oscar for his original score in 2012's *Life of Pi*, and his composer-brother Jeff. "The Dannas did a great job of seeking out as many Afghans as they could to play the back-end instruments in this small ensemble," says Rosen. "When we first went to the mix room and heard that soundtrack, we were blown away by the intensity of it."

Art director Reza Riahi worked with French artist Janis Aussel on the paper cutout concept for the “story world” arc. They initially wanted to use real paper, and thoroughly tested the concept (see below) with rostrum cameras before settling on a digital treatment that would mimic the effect (see opposite page). Says Duffy, “It was way beyond the budget of the film. But it was all animated in the sense of paper cutouts, with no digital manipulation. We animated it in a way that could technically be done in paper—if you had 20 years!”

Toronto’s Guru Studio then added the lighting in post-production, giving the paper a 3D effect. “Guru really excelled at creating these shadows and depth in the story world sequences,” says Rosen. “When we first get them, they’re just flat, 2D scenes. But Guru created almost a stage play with them and really upped the drama. They were using light almost as a character.”





continued from page 46 | countries, helmed by Cartoon Saloon director Nora Twomey in Ireland. Luxeumbourg's Melusine Productions, a frequent Cartoon Saloon collaborator, assisted with the animation, and Toronto's Guru Studio handled compositing and other post-production effects. The film, noted for its two distinct forms of animation—Parvana's day-to-day reality unfolds in 2D alongside a parallel fantasy arc the producers call the “story world,” which is presented in a paper cutout style—premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2017.

Cartoon Saloon's Ciaran Duffy was an art director on *The Breadwinner*, working primarily on layout and backgrounds in the “real world” arc, while his co-art director, Reza Riahi, drove the overall character design as well as the visual direction of the fantastical “story world” (see pages 49 and 52).

“Having two styles meant that no matter what one of us did, the other person could go further. As the real world became more de-saturated, the story world could really go for it and become oversaturated,” says Duffy. “But despite the contrast, we needed the two styles to not feel really jarring when they cut from each other.”

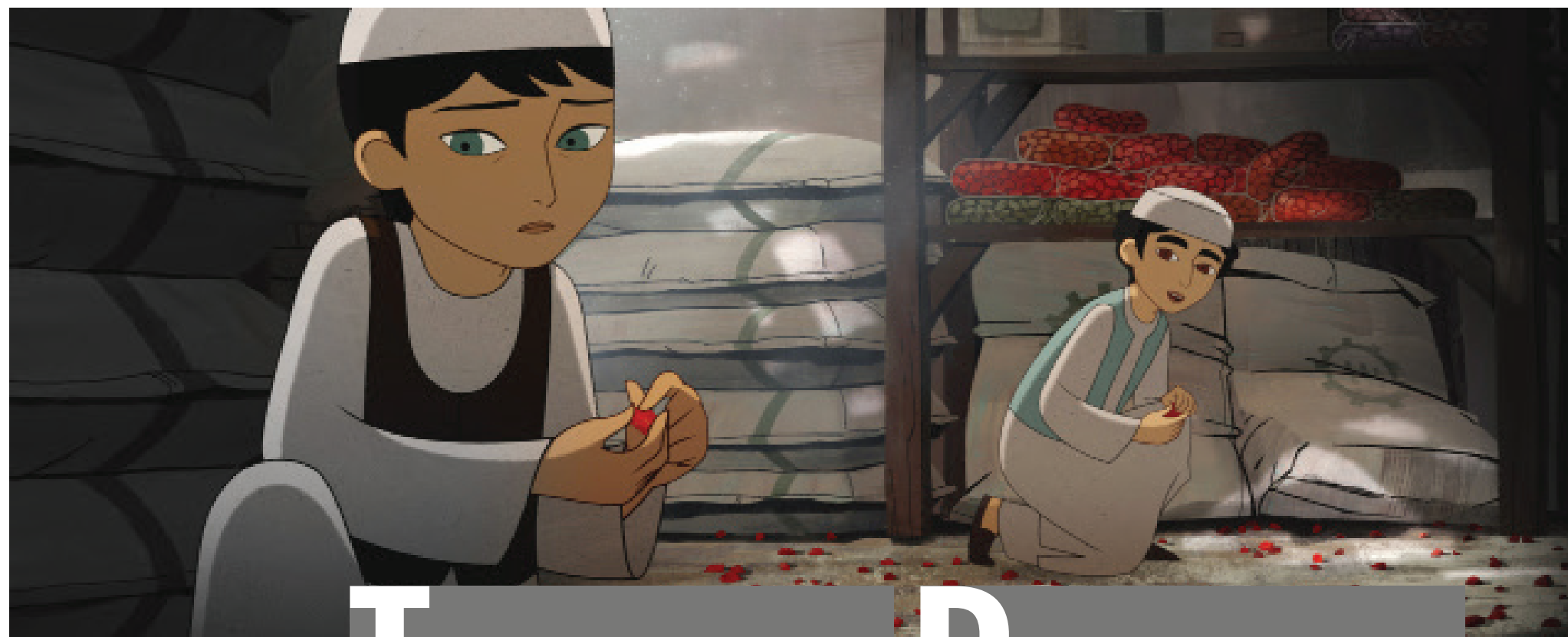
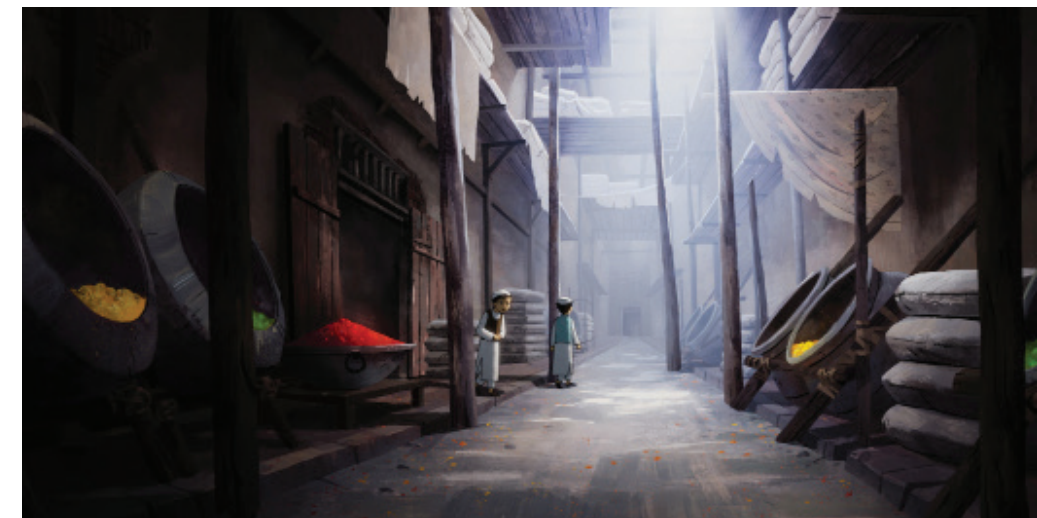
To mitigate that, Twomey and the art team explored a number of technically complex transitions between the two worlds. “But the more you tried to make it interesting,

the more confused it got and the less effective it was. In the end, simple is just way better,” Duffy says, referencing a particularly elegant transition where Parvana is looking into a mirror and the camera pushes into the story world.

Driving the visual tone of the film to a place they were happy with took the better part of a year. In 2015, the team spent months in pre-production, poring over reference material from Afghanistan to inform their work for the story world, especially the small, colourful paper paintings called Persian miniatures. Duffy notes the art team was acutely aware of the impact of getting something wrong.

“When I first read *The Breadwinner* script, my first thought was, what are we doing making a film like this? How can we make a film like this in Ireland? We know nothing about it,” he says. “But I realized that Nora is not going to just make a nice cartoon about this. She asks a lot of questions and is incredibly thoughtful. That was the thing that made me think that I would actually like to be involved, just because I have concerns myself when people are making a story about another culture. You really have to be careful.”

Rosen says the team ensured there were numerous checks and balances along the way. An Afghan cultural advisor was consulted at every stage of the process, from script development to marketing. Renowned | *continued on page 54*



The scene where Parvana's mother, Fattema, is beaten on a deserted street for walking in public without her husband was challenging for Duffy to art direct (opposite page, top left). “You're caught on one hand trying to deal with the seriousness of the scene, and on a day-to-day basis, your job is to make backgrounds,” he says. “There was difficulty in trying to maintain that tone, where you are just trying to do right by the story and not get too carried away trying to make pretty pictures.”

Despite the serious nature of many of the scenes in the “real world” storyline, there are flashes of joy, too. “There are those moments where you've got to give people a break, like when they go to the candy factory,” says Duffy (above). “That was a challenge because it needed to feel exciting, almost like a Willy Wonka experience—but relatively speaking. Compared to what the rest of Parvana's days have been like, this is a great day in the candy factory.”





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- Ciaran Duffy, art director, Cartoon Saloon

Duffy started the “real world” backgrounds with playful buildings leaning in all directions (right) before turning to a more realistic aesthetic. “That’s a habit of people in animation—to have some fun with that kind of thing. But if you do that, then you end up with an image that suggests that there’s no gravity. We needed to undo that,” he says. “For example, there’s a scene where Parvana falls down a set of stairs when she’s running. You need to feel there is nothing funny about it.”

continued from page 50 | Afghan-American artist Amanullah Mojadidi reviewed Doron’s script to ensure it was a universal story that would resonate with all Afghan people. (“We wanted to make sure we tried to avoid any politicization of the story, because this is really meant for kids,” says Rosen.)

They also gave the Afghan Women’s Organization in Toronto a chance to vet the script. “They gave us copious notes about the time there, because there are few photo records—they’re part of what the Taliban destroyed. So we recreated a lot of it through people’s experiences,” Rosen says. Production obligations meant all of the voice talent had to be sourced from Canada, but the team hired many actors with Afghan heritage—including Kabul native Kawa Ada, who voiced Razaq and also served as dialect coach for the cast. And when executive producer Angelina Jolie signed on to *The Breadwinner* in 2015, she helped to finesse some final points based on her humanitarian work in Kabul.

Rosen says the validation from not only the Afghan community—he screened the film for Rula Ghani, the First Lady of Afghanistan, who loved it, telling Rosen it well reflected the importance of family in her culture—but also from the film’s intended audience has been rewarding. He’s attended many school screenings since the premiere. “It helps kids realize the world is a bigger place and that, especially in North America, they’re very fortunate to be living here.” ◀◀

Early concepts depicted the Taliban characters (right) in black and white, but the art directors switched them to shades of grey after producers consulted with their team of Afghan advisors. The group noted that in 2001—the year the film takes place—the Taliban, despite its fundamentalist stronghold, had restored some order to Afghanistan after years of civil war, giving civilians mixed feelings about its presence.

