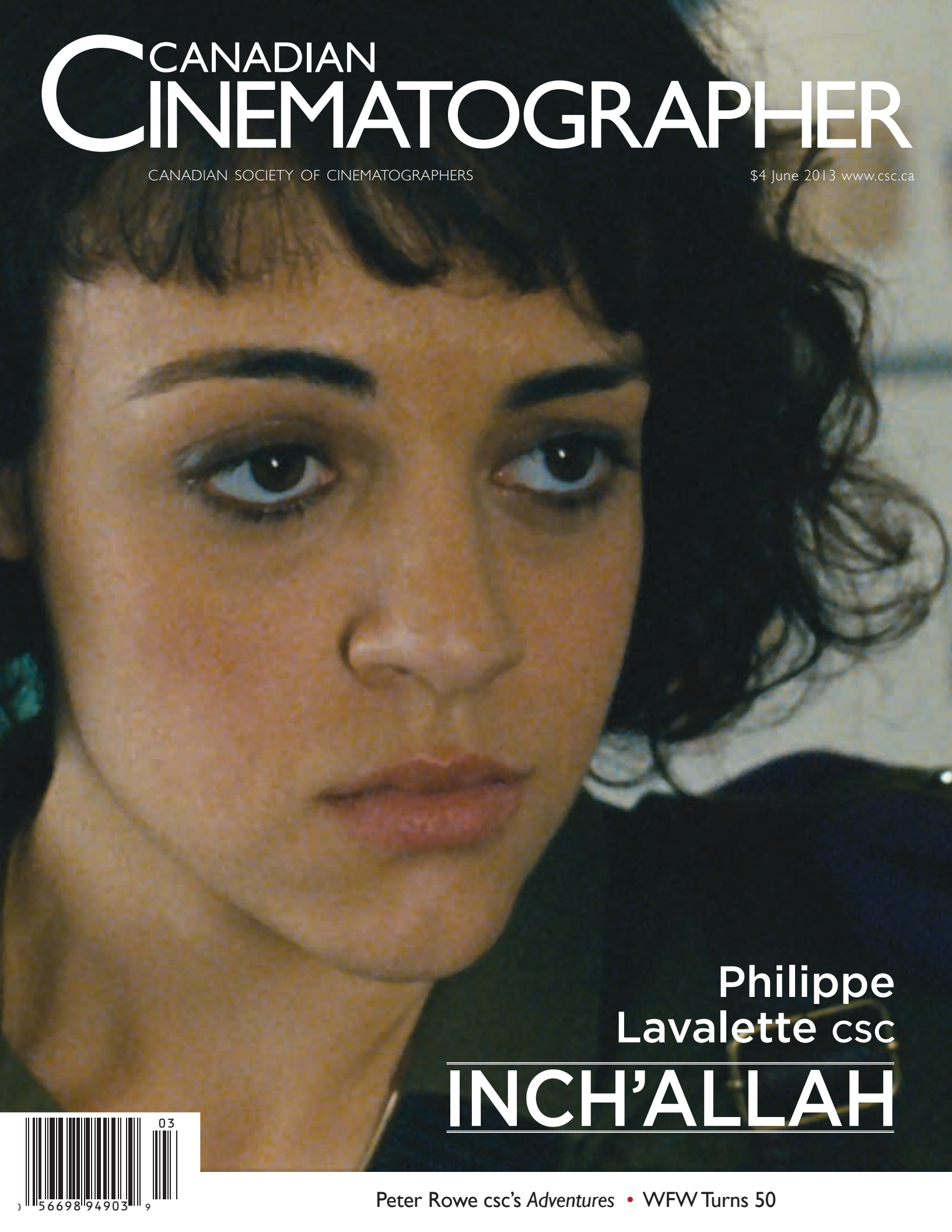


# CANADIAN CINEMATOGRAPHER

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Philippe  
Lavalette csc

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## INCH'ALLAH

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Peter Rowe csc's *Adventures* • WFW Turns 50



Philippe Lavalette csc on

# INCH'ALLA



Credit: Philippe Lavalette csc





There are moments in the politically-charged drama *Inch'Allah* where you can easily forget you're watching a feature film and believe you're witnessing real events. The camera is often unsteady as it follows the protagonist through Israel and the Palestinian territories. Sometimes it lingers on details you might be inclined to stare at in real life – a little boy squatting in a small mountain of garbage by Israel's West Bank barrier, for instance. At other times, it gets uncomfortably close to raw emotion, holding on a weeping face or the contortions of a woman in labour.

For director Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette, whose credits include *Les petits géants* and *Le ring*, shooting with a documentarian's eye was the most natural way to tell the story that had been brewing inside of her since she travelled to the region to make the 2005 documentary *Si j'avais un chapeau*.

"I had travelled a lot in Israel and was shocked by certain things I witnessed, and it made me want to keep going back," she explains. "And the more I went, the less I understood, and so the more I wanted to go deeper. I needed to write the story to get it out of me."

*Inch'Allah* follows Chloé, a young Canadian doctor navigating the unpredictable world of checkpoints, soldiers, refugee camps and markets that make up daily life in the divided West Bank. Unable to bridge the friendships she makes on both sides of the barrier, the outsider finds herself drawn into the conflict, leading her to ultimately make a life-changing choice. Barbeau-Lavalette's goal here was to depict reality, not create an aesthetically pleasing image, which is why she chose her father, Philippe Lavalette CSC, with his strong documentary background, as director of photography.

"It was an easy decision for me," the director says. "Although he can work with light and make a beautiful, impressive painting, I didn't want to paint a beautiful painting. I wanted it a bit harsh."

*continues on page 8*

By Fanen Chiahemen



Shooting over 38 days in Jordan, both knew they would succeed by capturing the film in an organic way – keeping the crew and equipment light, moving quickly and staying close to the actors. “I didn’t want the actors to follow us; I wanted us to follow the actors. I didn’t want to say, ‘Okay, you can move from there to there.’ I wanted them to be in their energy and move the way they needed to move, and we would just go where they went,” the director says.

To capture the action, Lavalette chose the Penelope Aaton, shooting in 2-perf on 5219 Kodak film stock. “The producers decided to use film because the colours were truer and more realistic. It was great because the Aaton is a very light camera, so I could move easily,” the DOP says. “I needed a light camera. For the director, it was very important to keep the colours true because it’s not a sad movie. Colours are also a character in the film for her and for me too. So the film is faithful to the colours – red is red, green is green, joy is joy. And it’s better than digital.”



Of course, shooting on film meant waiting two days to see dailies, which were processed at Vision Globale in Montreal. “It’s always a risk; producers don’t like it,” Lavalette says. “And you have to wrap the set before you receive the rushes. It’s always difficult, but it was the right way for me and for the film.”

The style of shooting that Lavalette employed required him to work mostly with available light in all situations. “In the Middle East, interiors are very dark, and I tried to keep the same feeling,” he says. “So I was working with silhouettes and shadows. I didn’t try to lower the contrast.” In those scenes, he was able to keep the actors and action visible by backlighting with 4K HMIs.



The same philosophy applied when shooting exteriors, but things became more labour intensive when filming scenes at what was supposed to be the West Bank barrier – which was in fact a 350-metre wall built by the crew.



“We found an amazing location – a valley right in the heart of Amman, the capital. On the hills, there are homes overlooking the valley and others under construction, so we immediately associated that with Israeli settlements. At the bottom of the valley, there were Bedouin tents which we also ended up using in the movie,” Lavalette recalls.

The crew found that the best layout for the wall was in a north-south direction, which meant the wall would be in sunlight in the morning and shaded by the afternoon. “The big challenge was keeping the continuity with light and working with the moving sun,” Lavalette says. “So I had to work out a precise schedule with the first assistant director to shoot for the sake of continuity. Still, we often had to cheat by following the basic rule – starting with the wide shots when there was sun, and then once darkness fell, it was easier to light small areas with a powerful source, such as a 6K HMI. It’s a very classical way of working.”

Lavalette recalls with some amusement that working around the wall had some unintended hazards. “When the wall was built, the Bedouins rebelled because they believed we were trying to

Previous page: **Shooting at the 350-metre wall built by the crew.**

Above and next page: **Stills from *Inch'Allah*.**

All photos on these pages: Stills from *Inch'Allah*





separate ‘the rich,’” he says. “It took some lengthy negotiations, but they finally participated in the film enthusiastically.”

Part of the story also required shooting in a real refugee camp, often at night. Even in those scenes, Lavalette used available light from the camp, which consisted of streetlights emitting a greenish light, as well as small fires in the distance. The cinematographer was able to capture the action by using Zeiss Ultra Prime lenses with a T-stop of 1.3.

“We just had to adjust and work in very low light,” he says. “Of course, you have to be aware that a 1.3 lens is not at its best and that the depth of field is very small. We deliberately chose to go to the extreme and take the risk.”

Zeiss Ultra Primes, he adds, were also an optimal choice because of their weight. “Knowing that most of this film would be shot off the shoulder, I knew that the Aaton Penelope camera equipped with a Zeiss would be the most flexible and more ergonomic tool for this kind of shooting,” he says.

The other realities of shooting in crowded places like refugee

camp and markets is controlling people – or rather, not being in control of people. “But that’s my strength,” Lavalette offers. “It’s a strength that comes from documentary, being well-adapted to the situation.” For example, when faced with the problem of people looking at the camera, Lavalette simply tricked them. “You set up so people think you’re going to shoot in one direction, and then you just quickly shoot in another direction. You have to be very flexible, if not you’re dead.”

Both the director and DOP believe Lavalette’s flexibility and streamlined style of shooting, cultivated on documentary shoots, were an indispensable strength on the film. “It’s my way of working. I come from the documentary school, so I need to keep everything light – camera, crew and equipment,” Lavalette says.

And working with his daughter was an asset because he knew the story so well after many discussions with her. “We were very prepared. We spent a lot of time together choosing position, camera, lenses. The production paid for two weeks of prep, but for me it’s been 10 years,” he says laughing. 🍷