

200 PLAYERS. TANK HELMETS. A HEADLESS GOAT.



BUZKASHI!

A FILM BY NAJEEB MIRZA

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FILM SYNOPSIS

Byline

Surrounded by change, Azam, a traditional herder and Buzkashi player, tries to find his place in the new Tajikistan.

Synopsis

Since ancient times Central Asian shepherds herding their animals between pastures frequently faced attacks from wolves. To save their flocks brave horsemen would chase and grab the wolves, a skill that eventually evolved into a sport - the wolf replaced by a goat carcass. Playing among a mass of 200 horsemen, players demonstrated their individual strength, courage and honor by maneuvering through the scrum to carry the carcass across the goal line.

Azam lives in a small, dusty village in southern Tajikistan. He is a shepherd and one of the country's best Buzkashi players. Following the tradition of his forefathers he plays as an individual, eschewing help from other players to win sheep, cars, carpets and cash. His winnings have helped him maintain a good life for his household of 30 people - his two wives, 10 children, parents, and families of two absent brothers. But times are changing.

Azam's success on the Buzkashi field is being increasingly thwarted by competitors playing under alliances, referred to locally as "mafias". Such play is the field strategy used by his rival Khurshed, a member of Tajikistan's nouveau riche who believes that teams are the future of the sport - he would like to see Buzkashi modernized, more closely resemble western sports: two teams fielding five players each. He himself has a team that plays together against individual and mafia rivals.

Off the field Azam has his own challenges. Expenses for his growing children are rising, prompting him to sell animals to make up for shortfalls. In the past his winnings from Buzkashi more than adequately supplemented his herding income, but the prizes have been getting smaller and the mafias more difficult to win against. And this year, his sheep have been unexpectedly dying.

New year festivities of the spring equinox (Nauruz) signify the end of the Buzkashi season. It is in these tournaments that the best prizes with the greatest prestige are to be had. Between the challenges on the field and within his own family, Azam must find a place for himself in the new Tajikistan.

KEY TEAM MEMBERS

Najeeb Mirza, Director/Producer/Writer/Camera

Najeeb Mirza has a special love and history with Central Asia, a rich and beautiful crossroads between East and West that he has worked and traveled in. The feature length documentary *Buzkashi!*, set in Tajikistan, is his fourth film in the region. His previous works include: *The Sweetest Embrace: Return to Afghanistan* (2008), set in Afghanistan; *Falak: Song of the Soul* (2005), set in Tajikistan; and *Herders' Calling* (2004), set in Kyrgyzstan. Najeeb believes that sharing human stories helps make the foreign seem more familiar, through which we may better recognize our common humanity.

Micheline Shoebridge, Producer

Over the past 15 years Micheline has worked on numerous documentaries, dramatic series, short films, music videos and commercials, in both English and French. Her previous documentary, *Champions grisonnants*, won Best Documentary at the Milan Sports TV & Movies International Film Festival 2009 and was nominated for a G meaux in 2010. Micheline has also taught in the Documentary Program at Algonquin College and managed numerous film festivals.

Daniel Cross, Executive Producer

Daniel is co-founder of EyeSteelFilm in Montreal, named by RealScreen Magazine as one of the top 100 non-fiction production companies in the world. He is also an Assistant Professor at the Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema, Concordia University. He is a multi-disciplined, award-winning documentary filmmaker whose projects are reflective of his artistic philosophy that film is a medium for affecting social and political change. Daniel has directed and produced the Gemini nominated *Too Colourful for the League*, *Chairman George* (CTV, BBC Storyville and TV2 Denmark) and *Inuuvunga: I am Inuk I am Alive*, and was Executive Producer of the internationally acclaimed *Up the Yangtze*, and producer on the Genie award winning film *Last Train Home*.

Mila Aung-Thwin, Executive Producer

Mila is co-founder of EyeSteelFilm. Aung-Thwin has produced the feature documentaries [Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam](#), [Rip: A Remix Manifesto](#) (IDFA audience Choice Award Winner), [Up the Yangtze](#) (Genie award winner) and [Last Train Home](#) (IDFA Feature Documentary Winner). In addition, he serves as the President of the Rencontres International du Documentaire (RIDM), Montreal's international documentary festival.

Bob Moore, Executive Producer

Bob joined EyeSteelFilm in 2008 fresh out of law school to work on fair dealing arguments for *Rip: A Remix Manifesto*, a film about copyright law and mash-up music culture and has since produced feature docs such as *Last Train Home*, *Taqwacore: the Birth of Punk Islam*, *Inside Lara Roxx*, *Fortunate Son*, and most recently, *China Heavyweight*.

Randy Kelly, Camera

Randy is a director, editor and cameraman, who has worked on dramatic series, music videos, short films and documentaries in both English and French. During his 15-year career, his work has been screened on CanWest Global, Radio-Canada, History Television, Télé-Québec, Canal Vie, TFO, CBC and Musique Plus. His most recent documentary won Best Documentary at the 2009 Milan International Sport TV & Movies Festival and was nominated for a 2010 Géméaux. Randy has a passion for travel and has shot in 10 countries and counting around the world.

Jimmy Bustos, Camera

Jimmy was born in Laja, Chile and moved to Canada in the 70's. He loves what he does: shoot, direct, edit and write. He feels that every aspect of filmmaking is fascinating and finds that he learns something new in every position or on any project he works on. Jimmy has worked on many award-winning films and has traveled the world on many projects, always meeting new people, learning about new cultures and having some great adventures. Filmmaking is his Passion.

Omar Majeed, Editor

Omar is a director and editor working in the film and television industry for over ten years. He directed and edited his first feature-length documentary TAQWACORE: The Birth of Punk Islam, following an editing career in which he received a Gemini Award for 'Best Editing' on the groundbreaking series QueerTelevision. Over five years, Omar edited for various programs including FashionTelevision, MediaTelevision and SexTV.

Cameron Esler, Editor

Cameron Esler shot, edited and directed many award-winning documentaries and documentary television series. These include: Between Midnight and the Rooster's Crow, Superamigos, Small Wonders, Burning Water and Buzkashi!. His short films have won awards at festivals around the world.

Olivier Alary, Composer

A native of Toulouse, France, Alary is a Montreal-based musician and composer who has written soundtracks for a number of feature films such as *Up the Yangtze*, *Last Train Home*, and *China Heavyweight*. He has co-written with Bjork and has remixed two of her songs, released as B-sides.

Farangis Nurulla-Khoja, Composer

Farangis is a Tajik-Swedish-Canadian composer, holds a Diploma of Fine Arts in Composition (University of Gothenburg, Sweden). A musician, she works with the conviction that dance is the complement of music, and that language - particularly the language of poets - is above all a series of communicative sounds. Farangis recently worked on a new piece for Shanghai symphony orchestra and Percussions de

Strasbourg and composed the soundtrack for *The Sweetest Embrace: Return to Afghanistan*.

Cory Rizos, Sound Designer

Cory is a two-time Gemini Award winner and nominee for best sound. Current projects include Cirque de Soleil's making of the Michael Jackson Immortal tour, as well as sound design and additional re-recording mixer on Guy Laliberte's "Touch the Sky". Cory was also sound designer for *Up The Yangtze*.

Francis Hanneman, Color Correction

Francis has made a specialty of maximizing the image quality on long range documentary productions. Often shot over several years on a variety of formats and frame rates, he enjoys the challenge of getting the most out of every pixel to give the desired look. With a keen creative and technical eye, he has helped finish and color grade over 20 productions and series including *Last Train Home*, *Inside Lara Roxx* and *La course Évasion autour du Monde*.



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

When I first shook Azam's massive hand I knew immediately that he could crush it without even trying. Of course he could - he was used to picking up goat carcasses weighing 100 kg with just one hand, hanging down from his horse to grab it off the ground while other Buzkashi riders fought above him. It was clear to see how Azam's tremendous strength and horse-riding skills have made him one of Tajikistan's fiercest players in the sport of Buzkashi.

Azam is a rock, but a rock with a warm smile and the naughtiness of a young boy. For me, Azam offered a wonderful entry point into a life and sport little known outside the region. Living in a small, dusty village in southern Tajikistan, Azam is caught between traditional values and modernity as he struggles to make a living in a changing economy. But this tension extends to the Buzkashi field where the sport that was once meant to demonstrate the honor and strength of the individual is being modernized by the introduction of team play. His story reflects the dramatic economic and cultural shifts taking place in Tajikistan and around the world.

My intent with ***Buzkashi!*** is to open a world that few in the West know - a seemingly far away and exotic land in which a strange sport is played - and through a warm human story connect it to similar stories of our own. Through an intimate view on and off the Buzkashi field we may find that what initially appeared so foreign may seem familiar, and that perhaps those seemingly different people so far away are just us, but in different circumstances.

ABOUT BUZKASHI

History

Buzkashi is an ancient sport originating in Central Asia; it is the precursor to polo. The nomadic Central Asians, in their efforts to protect their herds against wolves and other predators, developed extraordinary horsemanship skills that later became integrated into armies, such as of Genghis Khan, who used these talented riders to overwhelm adversaries as he extended his reach towards Europe. In the sport of Buzkashi, a hundred or more riders take to the field to gain possession of a goat carcass and carry it to the goal while fighting off other riders. Requiring exceptional horsemanship skills as well as tremendous strength and stamina, Buzkashi became an opportunity to gain respect and honor among peers and enemies alike.

But Buzkashi is more than a sport. It is also a part of the heritage and identity of the Central Asians, whose history as herders and nomads made horsemanship a key component of their lifestyle and survival.

Team play vs. Individual play

Despite the post-Soviet devastation of the economy and a ravaging civil war that left not a family unaffected, Tajiks remain guided by the long standing principles of honor, respect and integrity. In the sport of Buzkashi, these principles are demonstrated

through individual strength and fairness of play on the field. In other Central Asian countries the style of play has been “modernized” to resemble something more akin to hockey: two teams, four or six players per side, and clearly defined goals.

In Tajikistan, as in Afghanistan, the original sport is played with up to 200 horses on the field and each player playing for himself remains. Here, the most respected players are those who can single-handedly out-manuever the rest to score. These are the heros of Tajikistan, immortalized in the memory of Tajiks. But change is coming to Tajikistan. Increasingly across the country players are using alliances (called “mafias”) and team strategy to win, with techniques such as blocking and helping a partner’s horse out of the scrum for quick prizes. For many this change is a corruption of age-old principles passed through the generations. Others see this change as simply the reality of politics and power in this day and age: if money can buy off the country, can it not also buy off the sport of Buzkashi and generations of tradition?

Buzkashi around the world

Buzkashi is played throughout Central Asia (Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan), as well as in Afghanistan, southern Russia and western China. It is also played in a milder form in California, imported by the American soldiers posted to Afghanistan, and the Afghan diaspora.

In Central Asia many Buzkashi aficionados believe that the sport could one day be included in the Olympics.



ABOUT TAJIKISTAN

The film *Buzkashi!* is set in the majestic mountains of Tajikistan, and shares a border with Afghanistan, China, Kyrgystan and Uzbekistan. Tajikistan is a former Soviet state trying to rebound from the devastation of post-Soviet economic collapse and a crippling civil war that still sits fresh in the memory of Tajiks. Though Tajikistan is little noticed in the world's media, given its strategic position on the border of Afghanistan, China and Kyrgyzstan, it could be in the news in the future.

It's not surprising that many Tajiks lament the collapse of the Soviet Union - of which it was a part - given that the current floundering economy that sees about 80% of the population living in poverty. Poor economic opportunities have resulted in more than a third of adult Tajik men working in Russia, leaving women to manage families on their own. While officially illegal in Tajikistan, many families have taken on second and even third wives to help deal with the lack of men in the country.

Tajikistan has a population of over seven million people. While the national language is Tajik, there is a sizable minority of Uzbeks and Russians. Most business in the urban areas is conducted in Russian.

Sunni Islam is the official religion in Tajikistan since 2009 with 98% of the population being Muslim.



BUZKASHI! CREDITS



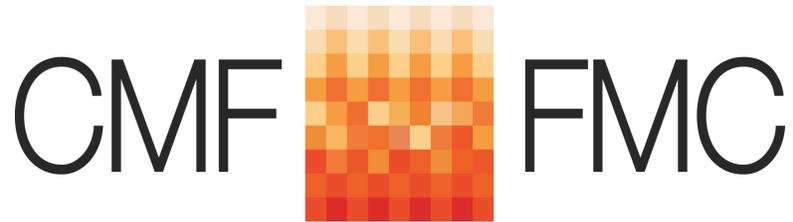
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