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The CSC | CSC Members | Magazine | Demo Reels | Awards | Home

- Calendar
- Classifieds
- Education
- Membership
- Online Pay
- On Set
- Sponsors & Links

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Bringing "The Tudors" to Life:  
*HD Wizardry of Ousama Rawi csc, bsc  
Turns the Court of Henry VIII  
into Moving Art*

*by Don Angus*



**Ousama Rawi csc, bsc on the set of "The Tudors" photos courtesy of the CBC**

If award-winning cinematographer Ousama (Ossi) Rawi csc, bsc could travel back in time, he would likely find that the court of the young, tempestuous King Henry VIII looked much like he filmed it 499 years later.

Rawi is director of photography for the hit television series "The Tudors," a Canada-Ireland co-production that has just wrapped shooting its third season. Season two premiered in late September on the CBC in Canada, Showtime in the U.S., BBC2 in the U.K. and on other networks around the globe.

The show has won rave reviews and high ratings for its all-star cast and production values. Rawi won the CSC TV Series Award this past March for a season-one episode, and won the

Gemini Award last month in the category of best photography in a dramatic program or series. The series picked up 11 other Gemini nominations, including best dramatic series and recognition for the writing of creator Michael Hirst, who penned *Elizabeth* (1998) and *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007) for the big screen, and for the costumes of Joan Bergin, who won Emmy Awards the last two years for her work on "The Tudors."

Tom Conroy and Eliza Solesbury got deserving Gemini nods, too, for design and art direction, underscoring that the most remarkable feature of this series is how it looks: rich and dark with bright pools of fire and candlelight, the warm browns of wood panels and furniture and the brilliant colours of bejewelled gowns, necklace-festooned doublets and scarlet ecclesiastical robes.

For the viewer who cares about such things, the immediate assumption is: "this is 35-mm film." That viewer would be wrong. Seasons one and two were shot with the Panavision-modified ("Panavised") Sony F900 HD digital video camera, Rawi told CSC News in telephone and email interviews from Ireland, where the series was being shot. "I contemplated using the more modern F950, but I decided against it. Although it gave me the full-colour space of 4:4:4 compared to the F900's 4:2:2, the major disadvantage of the F950 for me was the fact that the capture part and the recording part of the camera are separated by a cable. This would make it inconvenient for shots where the camera would start low on a dolly and jib up to maximum height, having to cope with one more cable that could get entangled. Also I found that when in Steadicam mode, the cable was a hindrance."

He said the camera he wanted from the start was the Panavision Genesis. "In my opinion, it was the most convenient and cinematographer-friendly HD camera. It has a full 35-mm-size chip and takes standard 35mm Panavision lenses. They are true and tested lenses, and by using them I would get normal 35-mm look depth of field, something grossly lacking in the small-chip HD cameras."

However, the budget wasn't there to carry four Genesis cameras on the first two seasons. "When season three came along, I had a long discussion with Panavision, and we somehow worked it out that I could have my first-choice camera, the Genesis."

Rawi, who had never before shot a series, said his only previous experience with HD was in 2003 on a Showtime cable movie, *DC 9/11: Time of Crisis*, shot on a Panavised Sony F900. The DOP said the lighting design for "The Tudors" would have been different had it been shot on film, but the HDTV decision had been made by Showtime.

"My first task was to fully understand the characteristics of the camera of choice and learn its idiosyncrasies. Its limited exposure latitude, which I found to be seven stops, was a big impediment. Its biggest weakness is the inability to effectively deal with highlights. Even with the seven-stop latitude, there were only three stops available in overexposure before clipping



**Peter O'Toole as Pope Paul III "The Tudors"**  
photos courtesy of the CBC

occurred. I had to learn to fool the camera and to make the clipped highlights acceptable in the broadcast legal sense and appear to be completely normal to the viewer's eye."

Rawi deftly handled the question: Would you rather have shot on film? "Much as I love film and consider it still the best image-capture medium available today, I found the challenge of using the emerging new HD medium - and trying to make it look no different from film - to be an exciting endeavour. It has to be remembered, film took over 100 years to arrive at its current state of excellence. HD has only had 10 years and it's already knocking on film's door. Imagine where it will be in another 10 years."

Rawi said he deliberately created deep shadows and bright highlights to increase contrast because "the HD cameras I was utilizing constantly wanted to flatten the images. I had to learn how to successfully fight that tendency. For inspiration, I borrowed from the great master painters, mainly Caravaggio, Vermeer and Renoir.

"Given that in 16th-century England the only source of light was natural daylight - sunny or grey - or the flame from candles, torches, flambeaux or fireplaces, I decided to restrict myself to mimicking those sources of light."

Rawi's next decision: What kind of candles? "I had special candles made to test on camera. I selected the best parchment colour for the wax that both the production designer and I determined was authentic looking enough for the wax colour of the day. I then had them made with a single wick, a double wick and a triple wick. This gave me three different levels of light output to test. The triple-wick candles, though much brighter, making my work easier, were unacceptable to the F900 cameras. They were clipped immediately, thereby having virtually no detail registered wherever the candles were placed within the image. It was as if someone punched holes in the image wherever there was a candle flame.

"This would have made the images unacceptable for transmission. I settled for the double-wicked candles. My decision enabled me to get adequate illumination without the danger of clipping. Thus I was often able to use the candles themselves that were in shot as the actual source of light. Also, I measured the colour temperature of the different flames and gelled any of the artificial lights I was using to match the candles, the flambeaux and the fireplaces.

"Needless to say," Rawi chuckled, "many a costume and a great deal of the crew's clothing was ruined or needed special cleaning because of the constantly dripping hot wax from the quick burning of the special double-wicked candles. They would burn down to one inch after 20 minutes. Candle height continuity was a nightmare for the props."

Rawi added, "The biggest challenge on all three seasons so far has been my decision to give the show a feature -film look in spite of having an episodic television schedule. We have 10 days to shoot a one-hour episode. For Showtime, an hour program is 56-minutes long. This necessitated a very fast blocking and lighting pace that I had to inspire my crew to get on board with. I can honestly say that the crew - camera, grip and lighting, which has been virtually unchanged for three seasons - are all working in sync, intuitively and totally understanding each other's needs like a well-oiled machine."

Ousama Rawi csc,bsc was born in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad, but was schooled in Scotland and began his film career as a "tea boy" for a commercial production house in London. He discovered that the best way to move upwards was to make friends in the film business and get a little lucky.

"While I was a glorified PA making tea," Rawi remembered, "I befriended a would-be director,



somebody who had a penny or two and was going to shoot a short film. I told him I would shoot it for free and I had access to equipment. At the commercial production house, I made friends with editors and people at the rental houses and labs who told me 'if you want to borrow a camera or purchase a roll of film, we'll get it for you.'

"So I shot the film for him, and the editors at the commercial house gave their time to cut the half-hour short - all the way down the line to mixing, to the print, etc. Then [the young director] submitted it to the selection committee of the Cannes short film festival. It went in as one of two British entries, and to my surprise it actually won second prize. So I was a 'tea boy' with a second-prize winner at Cannes."

Rank Film Distributors chose the short to open the program for the 1965 feature *The Collector*, with Samantha Eggar and Terence Stamp. "So now I was a 'tea boy' with a film I had shot on the circuit with *The Collector*. I guess I must have been 20 or 21."

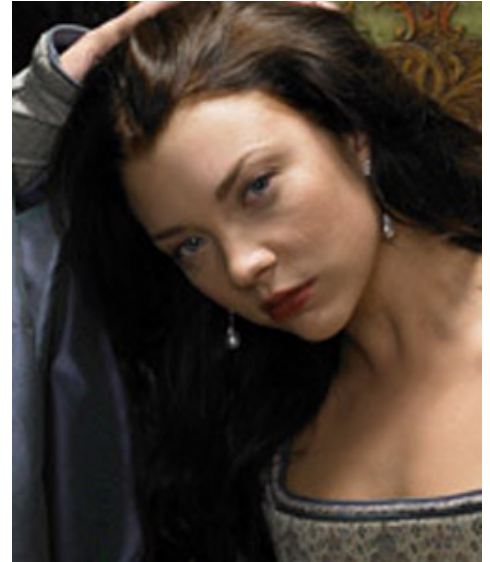
Rawi next moved to a regional television station as a newsreel cameraman where "I got my union card." After about 14 months, he moved to London as a freelance cinematographer "calling myself a DP and hoping someone would give me a break." It came as a commercial for a hair product, *Brylcreem*, which the director said even he could light.

"That was my first experience working on a real job that wasn't newsreel." Two or three weeks later, the director called Rawi to shoot another commercial, then another. "Soon other companies were using me and before I knew it I was a busy commercial cameraman."

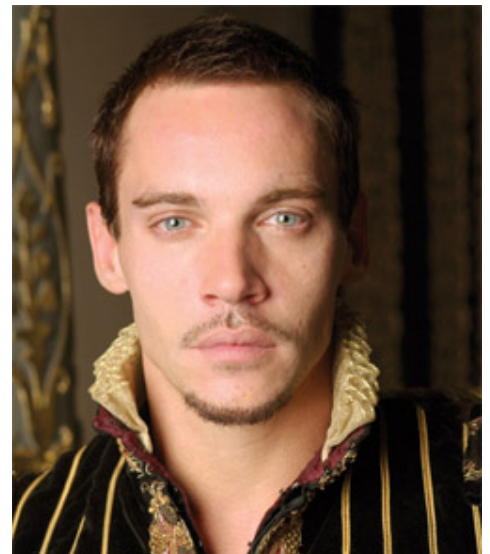
The cinematographer's first feature was Mike Hodges's 1972 crime thriller *Pulp*, starring Michael Caine, from United Artists. UA was initially opposed to the unknown Rawi as DOP, but Caine, one of the co-producers, was persuaded by industry friends to hire the young shooter. It was just about the time *Pulp* was released that Rawi was invited to join the British Society of Cinematographers.

Rawi's introduction to Canada came in the late 1970s as director of photography on the UK/Canada co-production *Coup d'etat* (also known as *Power Play*), starring British actors Peter O'Toole, David Hemmings and Donald Pleasance. Writer/director Martyn Burke, a Canadian, initially shot scenes in Germany, to be followed by the rest of the shoot in Toronto. However, money problems shelved the project until 1977, when Rawi crossed the Atlantic to film the balance of the picture. During those eight to nine weeks, the DOP met several Canadian producers and, shortly after returning to the U.K., he was offered a 12-month contract to shoot commercials in Canada. He then joined two commercial producers to form a production company and "in the blink of an eye, 10 years went by."

Finally, "I had to get back to long form because I missed



**Natalie Dormer as Anne Boleyn**



it terribly." He moved to Los Angeles in 1994, but maintained a home in Toronto and now travels back and forth for personal and professional reasons. He joined the CSC in 1981.



**Jonathan Rhys Myers as King Henry VIII**

While "The Tudors" is shot in Ireland - 75 per cent of the interiors are shot on standing sets at Ardmore Studios in Dublin - post-production is done in Toronto at Technicolor and Dufferin Gate. Rawi said the series uses three Ardmore stages and "sometimes we spill over temporarily to a fourth. It is where we are based and feels like home to us all. The Irish producer, Morgan O'Sullivan, and the Canadian producer, Sheila Hockin, have been a joy to work with."

Rawi also cited Ross Cole, senior colourist at Technicolor, for his "exemplary work on all episodes of the series. He has been the colourist from the beginning and continues to be the colourist on season three. He fully understands the style of the show and produces flawless work."

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