

Jordan 2010

It started with a phone call from Simon Jago Design (now part of BDA Creative) in London town who wanted to know whether I was interested in working with them on a News studio lighting job in the Middle East in which they were involved. Now I'll be honest, at that point I hadn't heard of Simon Jago Design and was surprised that they had heard of me, but that's because I don't normally interface with London's higher echelon companies in the world of TV. A few moments with Google (other search engines are available) filled me in on their profile. They have designed and built many of the sets that are familiar backgrounds on News programmes both in the UK and abroad.

'Abroad' is a big place and the Middle East is an 'interesting' part of abroad so I asked for more detail. All the time we talked, I was thinking who had put forward my name ('you were recommended') whilst taking in the detail of the project.

ArabMedia Television has a complex (of buildings!) in Amman, Jordan and our very own Dave Evans had put a lot of design work into the project already. Dave had a great deal of lighting work on his plate and had mentioned my name as one who could possibly pick up the project and take it through to completion. Dave is always a busy lighting bunny and, aside from the One Show, has recently lit 'Lamb Watch' and 'Star watch' to my knowledge. (Does he feel a nativity coming on?)

As always, this was deemed to be a 'rush' job. The client wanted me there tomorrow but yesterday would be better. The compromise would be the Saturday coming.

Saturday 10th April

I met Sandra Fattore (of Simon Jago Design) at Heathrow where she talked me through a huge pile of design documents and visualisation. There were four studios in the complex and Dave had specified lamps and positions for each one. Much of the design involved specifying LED's and their control gear which I will freely admit is not an area in which I claim to have any useful knowledge. At all.

I did make that clear to Simon and Sandra and it was established that I would attend to the fine lighting of all studios using Dave's rig and do as much as I could in the time (one week) with recommendations for change where appropriate. Sandra had also provided me with images that had been taken of the studios as well as Dave's lighting rig.

Now, let's face it, nobody likes taking over halfway through a lighting job using someone else's plot. However, Dave's rig made sense in many ways and conversation with him cleared up any queries that I had.

The flight was with Royal Jordanian and was OK. Not good, not bad, just OK! We arrived late evening local time (plus 2 hours) and there was the deep joy in standing in the queue from Hell for a £10 Visa that took almost as long as the flight itself.

By 0130 I am checking into a nice hotel. My room number is to



Figure 1 The Crown Plaza Amman

be 911. Mmmm. International emergency number. That should have warned me that this was not going to be an event free trip.

Sunday April 11th

Having left Heathrow in warm sunshine, it's a little disappointing to a very murky non view outside my window. Is it smog or is it fog? No, it's the remnants of a sand storm of a minor variety. The sand in these parts is extremely fine and can stay in suspension in the air for days. After breakfast, a car



Figure 3 Well equipped Production and Lighting gallery

duly arrived and took me in to ArabMedia TV for about 10am. (8am UK jetlag time)

After meeting the local TV management in the form of Ahmad and Fadi, it was down to meet the crew and a tour of the facilities. First impressions were of a well kitted out building and modern facilities. A fairly long day ensued with the usual scenario of lamps going up and down, on and off with an accompaniment of barn door bashing and quite a lot of instructions in Arabic. The first day concludes quite well but also in the knowledge that I am certainly going to be busy for all of the allotted time. Return is scheduled for Friday April 16th. Inshallah. (God willing)

I take a walk from the hotel to familiarise myself with my surroundings and in the search of local colour before dark. I soon find that the simple act of crossing a road almost impossible. They are worn as smooth as marble. Hence much squealing of tyres. The pavements more like skateboard parks and are real ankle twisting stuff. They seem to be more a device for separating cars from houses and shops. It doesn't take me very long to find out that it is much easier to copy the locals and walk in the road! There is another technique for crossing roads in the Middle East and that is always to put a local between you and the oncoming traffic. This hasn't failed yet but sometimes it does require that you have to wait until that local wants to cross where you want to cross. My little tour takes me past a petrol station where your unleaded petrol is just 59 p per litre. Well, they do sit on a great deal of the stuff in that part of the world, I suppose.



Figure 2 The 'non view' from room 911



Figure 4 Pedestrians beware

On my return I reward myself with a very nice meal in the hotel restaurant. Fillet steak accompanied by wine that costs almost as much as the steak. Per glass.

Monday 12th April

On picking me up in the company car my driver tells me he is

also a rally driver. I sit quietly in the car as it squeals around a roundabout through impossibly small gaps having just done a kind of handbrake turn outside the hotel. I fumble for a missing buckle whilst gripping the unused dusty seat belt with clenched fingers.



Figure 5 On the way to work

We arrive safely at the studio centre and, formal meetings over; I meet the guys who are going to be working with me. The crew is led by Mr Abulal Hawa. His command of English was good and his ability to communicate over considerable distance without a megaphone was also impressive.



Figure 6 Nice Key, shame about the missing back light

There were a few issues with the lighting rig such as missing back lights but Abulal assured me that the lamps were on order. The real problem in **Studio 3** was where to put them. One of the news desks had the production control room as background with a lowish suspended ceiling behind the presenter.

The net result was lack of separation of the Presenter and the dark background of the control room. I suggested taking a ceiling tile out and putting in a small Fresnel lamp on a magic arm. This might have appeared in shot unless the Directors were



Figure 7 Studio 3: a panorama showing Newsroom in background left, control room centre rear and chat area: right

compliant with my plan. There was also a possible LED solution using litepanels which I had seen demonstrated recently to great effect. Very pricey, though.

I soon found another issue when I asked for a lamp to be faded up to 70%. An alarming lack of lux reaching my light meter suggested a dimmer law problem. And so it was; and it came to be that boffins were called in to delve deep into setup



Figure 8 On arrival, multiple key shadows prevail

menus. They consulted the Tablets and lo, it was solved in two shakes of a camel's tail and great was the peace that ensued.

I chose a light level of 600 lux as being appropriate to what was expected of the studio in conjunction with the modern SD Sony cameras. I explained the concept of running lamps at 70% as being not only economical in lamp running costs but also giving the desk operator flexibility during a live show. This practice, I believe, dates back to the early days of colour TV and a certain Derek Lightbody.



Figure 9 Individual Key and Back lights are set for each position

I noted that wheeled Presenters chairs did not fit in with my ideas on carefully barn doored lamps and precise lighting. Time and time again one finds this in News studios and readers will be well aware of the lighting angst that ensues.

My lighting training all those years ago in TVC was partly with the iconic Dennis Channon whose attention to precision barn dooring has stayed with

me ever since. One lamp, one function was one of his adages that is still just as appropriate today.

Later, my rally driver takes me back to the hotel in another record breaking time passing another traffic accident; second in two days. It is getting warmer and the haziness caused by sand blowing in from the desert has now gone.

Monday April 2nd

The LED system specified by Dave Evans was *not* the one that had been purchased and the client had already had serious problems with the system engine. Yes, lights have engines nowadays, too. The truly desperate part of it was that they could only be controlled by a mouse and a separate computer display. When I asked for a different colour 'look' to part of the set which should have been a simple push of a button, it was a biblical age before it happened. Not a good system for a News studio. Not good at all.



Figure 10 Crew Chief Abulal and I checking out a relit position

This was the first time I had worked with a set which embodied so many LED's as part of its construction. The good news is that they provide punchy, saturated colours which bring dynamic high contrast lighting that cannot easily be done by conventional lighting from overhead sources. As readers will know, the jury is still out on the colour accuracy (or C.R.I.) of them but in the case of scenery, that isn't nearly as important as with face and skin tones. The picture here showing Abulal and I at one of the desks does suggest that large areas of flown set lit internally by LED's can cause a colour cast on people

sat at a desk.

One thing that was blindingly obvious to me was the high brightness of the blue content as seen by their SONY Powerhad cameras. I have read articles which confirm that there can be a huge amount of energy at the blue end of the visible spectrum that TV cameras will happily render.

Each lunch time, I was taken out to a nearby restaurant with the senior engineer of the station for delicious food and to discuss the problems of Television, the Middle East and of the world at general. This is one of the things I like most about working abroad; meeting 'ordinary' people who can tell you a lot more about life in that country than Wikipedia and also in the context of face to face conversation.

Tuesday April 14th

[Unbeknown to me, a certain volcano called: Eyjafjallajökull had just blown its top in Iceland.]

Studio 4 has my undivided attention today. It is a more Magazine type studio where guests sit against a background of the outside world seen through floor to ceiling windows. Bit like Pebble Mill at One for those old stagers who remember that show. The difference here is that technology has come to the assistance of modern lighting directors in that they have decided to use the RoscoView, a two part system to control the brightness of what is seen by cameras in this situation. Some time ago, I had seen a ROSCO demonstration of how it works. Briefly, a servo controlled rotatable Polarised filter on each camera lens can be adjusted to dim the view through the windows which are fully coated with polarised filter material. I will admit to being cynical about the system and its viability in a multi camera scenario but was very pleasantly surprised by how well it actually does work.

Dave had rigged double keys to allow for an increased illumination of, say, 1000 lux for seated positions in this studio (in a similar manner to the One Show)



Figure 11 Studio 4 with RoscoView window treatment



Figure 12 Remotely operated filter rotator

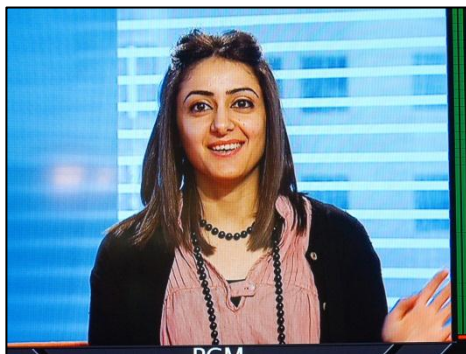


Figure 13 Single shadow, catch lights in the eyes!

The lamps were close together so double chin shadows were not really a problem. I did some experiments with 0.5 CTO on the window whilst deliberating on controlling the colour temperature difference from outside to inside but quickly found that that negated the RoscoView system completely! We white balanced the cameras to tungsten and adjust the rotators to produce acceptable brightness of the windows. The

outside on camera then, of course, quite blue but it actually grew upon us as a 'look' and when the director came along he seemed to like it too. We could have half CTB'd our lamps of course, but I wasn't keen to do that unless we had to.

There was a kitchen area for the inevitable cooking items and a very small area that had to use CSO backdrops in one corner. This area just did not work for me. People sat close to a blue screen that had to be lit from overhead by lamps that weren't really up to it: you know the score. I suggested one of the LED backlit screens (as seen at Showlight last year) but they were out of budget, I was told.



Wednesday April 15th

[Once again, in my ignorance, the Media was announcing that European air space was being affected by a giant ash cloud.]

Work continued in **Studio 3** where the set was still being constructed around us. I spent some time trying to imagine where seating positions were going to be and lighting them accordingly. Eventually we returned to **Studio 4** which was the most important in the scheme of things and continued sorting things there.



Figure 15 A One plus Two ready to go...

In fact, we were

forever changing our venue to try and sort

out issues as they arose. I made it known that we ought to be aiming for full rehearsals before I finished the following day. The curious thing was that this never really happened. What we *actually* did was to set up cameras to match the computer visualisations provided by Simon Jago Design. Each and every shot was slavishly re-created slowly and precisely. I did point out that what really mattered was that the lighting should just work for the Director in real time

situations; head turning, interviews, start and end shots, etc, etc. No matter, that did not happen. It was felt that they had to have a record on tape of each and every visualisation in order to demonstrate to the owner of the Studios that the 'Mission' had been accomplished.

Thursday April 16th

I happened to see part of a CNN News bulletin that talked of an ash cloud heading through European airspace. That didn't sound too good for my return home early the next day. 250 million cubic metres of ash were up there and spreading quickly.



Figure 14 One side of Studio 3's set up

On arrival at the Studios, I was told that tomorrow's Jordanian Airways flight was indeed cancelled and the choice was either later today or Sunday. Later today sounded good so I returned to the hotel and prepared to leave. My mobile trilled: the Thursday option has gone, plane fully booked. Fadi who was co-ordinating my travel arrangements asked me if I would like to fly from Amman to Beirut at 0310 and then onward at 0450 to Bucharest in Romania to catch a maybe flight into London?

Er, no thanks. I opted to stay put in my nice comfy 4 star hotel rather than being stranded in Romania if that was all right, thank you. Much as I would like a chance to explore Romania's capital. Fortunately that option was all right. The senior managers at ArabMedia TV agreed to pick up my accommodation and food costs 'for as long as was necessary'. Phew!

Of course I was letting Simon Jago know of all the developments as they occurred. There wasn't much that they could do about the situation from their position anyway except sympathise. I had more or less accomplished all that I could reasonably do in the time anyway. Fadi promised that he would be in touch to arrange some kind of outing for me on my first day of entrapment!

Friday April 17th.

Instead of flying home I went for a one hour walk around the nearby quiet streets (Sabbath Day) whilst waiting for Fadi to wake up after (he told me later) a drunken sleep.

He picked me up in his small car with his lawyer friend Zaid. He was born, he told me, a Palestinian in Bethlehem but went to Chile with his parents at an early age. His father is involved with airport design and he (Fadi) is trained as an architect.

They whisked me to Malaba, about an hour's drive from the capital, a small bustling town where both had been to school. I was shown around some ancient churches and saw some



Figure 18 Lunch was super! No Hubble Bubble pipe for me, though

Roman relics including mosaics and a paved street. It was a very pleasant outing and helped to take my mind off the uncertainty of when I would get home.

Lunch was super, lots of Arak, (a middle Eastern spirit not unlike Pastis) in a sunny courtyard with an old well and great food. After lunch we went to meet Fadi's family at a spring re-union for coffee and birthday cake for one of his aunties. His grandfather told me that he has been to Cardiff more than once! It's a small world and getting smaller.



Figure 16 Fadi and Zaid; my guides for Malaba



Figure 17 'Lunch was super'

After lunch I was taken to Mt Nebo for spectacular views over the Dead Sea. Maybe this was another way to get home: camel ride across the desert to the Med. where I could hitch a lift on a cruise ship back home.

Saturday April 18th

My first day of comfortable captivity begins. Of course I check out the news but then wish I hadn't. Volcanologists take great pleasure in stating that the eruptions could go for days, weeks or even months! It's at times like that that you realise that jetting around the planet has some drawbacks. I also realised that there was another problem looming. I had intended to fly out to Turkey just a week later to run some lighting training there and I had already booked, and paid for the flights.



Figure 21 Mosque near my hotel

Not much I could do at that point so I decided to walk into the old part of the city as it was a nice day. Mistake. Big mistake! It was much further than I thought (local maps were useless) and I once again discovered that pedestrians are actively discouraged in this part of the world. Pedestrian crossings? Dream on. However, I did eventually get there and was not wildly impressed with what I saw. Apart, that is, from the Roman amphitheatre. That was pretty spectacular.

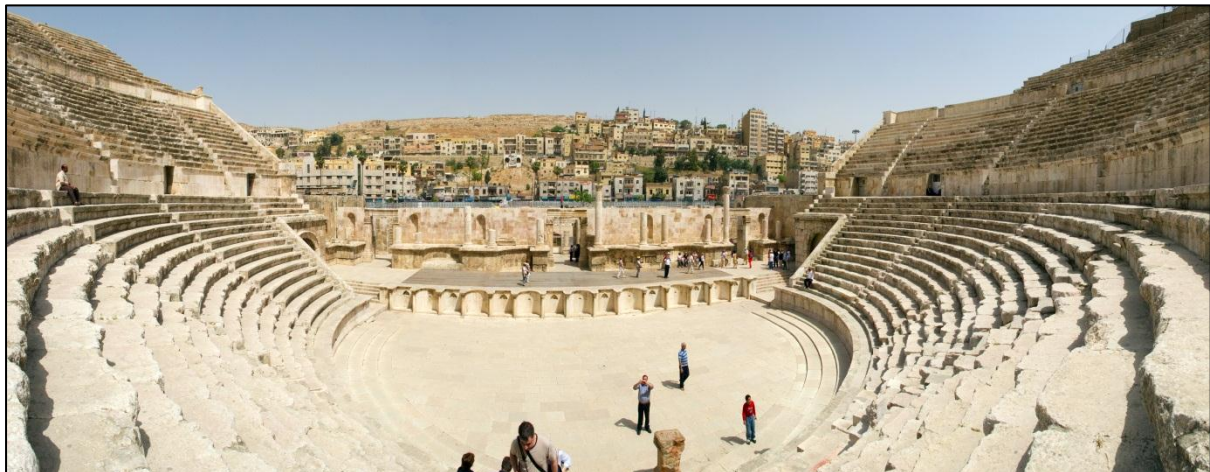


Figure 20 Roman Amphitheatre

I took a taxi back to the hotel (6 dinars) and had lunch in the Viennese café (part of the Grand Plaza Hotel) for about 10 dinars. Then I discovered the swimming pools (plural!) on the mezzanine floor so I sat out in warm sunshine whilst I pondered on my fate. Nice. Later, I ventured to a nearby shopping precinct but had to cross the roundabout of death in order to get there. I noticed that there was actually some slight evidence of white lines in the polished road surface which were intended to slow traffic down here, but now neither motorist nor even the average pedestrian could see them any longer. Today was the first day since my arrival that I



Figure 19 There are worse places to be marooned

hadn't seen any road crashes.

Sunday April 19th

I am thinking of cancelling my Turkish flights for (hopefully) a full refund tomorrow. This is the first time I have actually paid up front myself and am now regretting it! I *could* perhaps go directly there from Jordan or postpone the course.



Like all 'captives' I decide to start a routine to break up the day. I had looked into visiting Petra and having seen some staggeringly beautiful photographs that a tourist had left on one of the hotel computers but that would probably have involved two days and quite a lot of money. I also didn't want to be away from Amman in case the flight situation suddenly improved.

The next big question is: will I get home before my electric toothbrush runs down?



Monday April 20th

I decide to go in to the Studios to type up my report which I would normally have done at home afterwards. I spoke to my contact Ebru in Turkey and she was happy to postpone the course. I duly cancelled my flights.

It was a strange feeling being marooned, albeit in a nice, warm place in a comfortable hotel. Yes, I could swim in the pool, sunbathe or just wander through the back streets of Amman with my camera but I will admit to feeling very cut off and not a little homesick.

Later in the day CNN said that flights are gradually resuming to Europe. I Phoned Fadi and Ahmad to ask them to investigate. A return call said that it might be Friday before I get out.

Tuesday April 21st

I went into a travel agent next to hotel to find that there was one seat on an extra flight tomorrow. I met up with Martesh who looks after ArabMedia travel just across from the hotel. In the short time that it took him to check it out, the seat had gone. Jessica from Simon Jago Design called suggesting a Paris flight at 7am followed by Eurostar. I got a bit excited until I went to Martesh who said they were all booked. He did, however, give me a confirmed flight for Friday.



Wednesday April 22nd



Great excitement (for me) as I hear that some planes landed at Heathrow last night.

I had two shirts laundered at £4 each...

Thursday April 23rd

Much cooler today with a westerly wind bringing clouds from the Mediterranean.

I set about checking in on line. What a performance that was! It didn't like the expiry date of my passport being ten years hence. This is not a feature of Jordanian National passports and the system didn't like it. I went round to the travel agent next to the hotel and he suggested that I went to the city terminal of Royal Jordanian being only 2kms away. I legged it down there in record time, crossing two busy dual carriageways and stood in a queue for ten minutes only to be told I was in the wrong queue. The next man gave me a boarding pass but told me my case had to be checked in there, not at the airport.

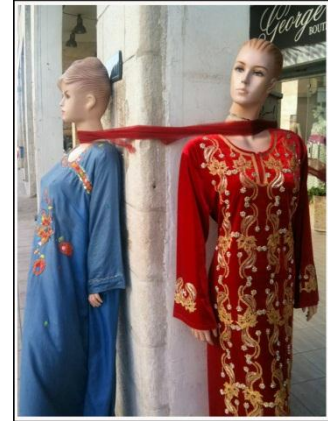


Figure 22 All tied up!

Oh, fine! I returned to see Martesh of Arab Media and asked for car to take me down at 6pm with my case and also at 9am tomorrow for the airport.

6pm. It was actually cold and had rained and I was ready with my case outside the hotel waiting for the rally driver who I thought would know me. After 40 minutes and three phone calls to Martesh I found out that a different driver was actually inside reception waiting for me! He duly whizzed me down to the RJ city terminal to check in my case. Will I ever see it again?

Friday April 24th

I was in a car on the way to an airport. Vapour trails were in the sky. Normality was returning. Once there, I was glad that I had checked my case in yesterday as there were long queues. There was still a 35min queue for immigration, but I didn't mind in the slightest; I was on my way home!

Foreign assignments always involve a lot of preparation and work but can still be enjoyable. This particular one had had the joker in the pack: a once in two hundred years eruption of a volcano with an unpronounceable name.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the support I had from both ArabMedia TV and also Simon Jago Design that enabled me to live out the crisis in relative comfort.

I would further like to dedicate this article in the memory of the late Graham Rimmington who has been instrumental in preparing many of my previous articles for publication in this journal. Along with many other readers, I will miss his friendship and humanity.