

From Baghdad to Hollywood

Director James Longley spent two years making a documentary of daily life in Iraq, seen through the eyes of both Shias and Sunnis. Now it's tipped for an Oscar. **Stephen Applebaum** reports

While making the Sundance hit *Iraq in Fragments*, James Longley received death threats. This film, along with Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, is now among the 15 finalists for a best documentary Oscar nomination. Both films have been acclaimed by critics and won numerous other awards. Both bring important subjects to life with striking immediacy. Longley, though, believes that Gore's heavy-hitter has more chance of bagging the Oscar. "It has a big studio behind it and it made \$30m in US box office, whereas my film has made less than \$100,000 in US box office."

Still, I would not write-off *Iraq in Fragments* (one of four shortlisted Iraq documentaries) just yet. Gorgeously shot and sometimes startling in its intimacy, the film presents three compelling up-close-and-personal portraits of everyday life following the US-led invasion in March 2003, as seen through the eyes of ordinary Iraqis. Sunnis, Shias and Kurds all speak in their own voices, offering personal points of view largely absent from the mainstream media in Longley's native America. Filmed over two years, the documentary attempts to give "a more detailed impression of what's happening in the country and how the people feel," he explains. "I think it's filling a void that

is not filled by daily journalism."

The film takes us from Baghdad to the Shia stronghold of Nasiriyah in the south, and a Kurdish farming community in the north. Longley originally wanted to film a single family before, during and after the war. However, he discovered during visits to Iraq in September/October 2002 and February 2003 that his kind of film-making, involving interaction with ordinary people over long periods of time, was incompatible with Saddam Hussein's regime. "You could either film people who were vetted by the regime or film people and then hope that they wouldn't be interrogated by the Baathist intelligence services, which of course they would have been," he says. "So it made it impossible to really start a documentary in the way I had hoped."

Instead he filmed what journalists were permitted to film, such as a visit by a US congressman opposed to the war and locations where weapons of mass destruction were supposedly being manufactured. "The Bush administration would say, 'There is a site out in wherever where they're making tubes for uranium enrichment' and then the Saddam government the next day would ship 400 journalists out there in buses and you'd have permission to film a steel factory or whatever."

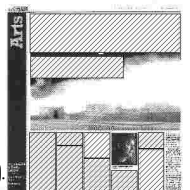
When Longley left Baghdad at the end of February 2003, there were still Iraqis who did not believe the US would invade. "To the last minute they

felt unsure about what was going to happen," he recalls. The atmosphere in the city had grown strange and foreboding; the air was filled with wild rumours. "As you can imagine in a country where a lot of people that you saw around you are connected with the regime, and they have the sense that maybe the regime was in its last days, there was this extremely paranoid and panicky kind of feeling."

Longley watched the invasion on television in Egypt and then returned to Iraq when Saddam's regime had been toppled. Getting back in was easy, no visa was required. "In the absence of government everything becomes very simple," he smiles.

The film-maker admits that he knew very little about the country when he first went there. But while not wanting to advocate an approach started from a position of ignorance, he argues that the occupation made Iraq a special case. "A lot of what had been written about Iraq was really regime-centric and had to do with how it functioned under Saddam's government. Even if you had studied the country in that context it wouldn't have done you a lot of good after the invasion."

Longley installed himself in a seedy apartment in southern Baghdad and then set out with a translator to document the country. Although he would increasingly fear for his safety, he says initially a lot of Iraqis were more afraid than he was. Under Saddam, everyone knew what was dangerous and what was not. With the police and



military now removed, crimes such as car-jacking, looting and mugging suddenly skyrocketed. "People were afraid to come out of their houses and sometimes after three in the afternoon all the shops would close down, and that lasted for some weeks and months, that paranoia."

A period of "guarded optimism" followed, during which people started to believe that maybe the Americans would invest in rebuilding Iraq. "But then hope for that gradually began to wane as months and months passed and nothing had been done in terms of the rejuvenation of the basic social services and infrastructure."

Disillusionment and cynicism thus colour the documentary's opening story (what might be termed the Sunni chapter) about an 11-year-old auto-mechanic in Baghdad. Torn between work and school, Mohammed Haithem's experience is fairly common

in a country where only about 30 per cent of children are now in regular education, according to Longley. What mostly fascinated the director, though, was his relationship with his boss, a sort of father figure who hits and taunts him, and complains how life for working-class Sunnis has deteriorated since Saddam was toppled.

"Mohammed loves him and believes that he loves him as well," says Longley, "but also it's this kind of despotic relationship. I think it allowed me to give a more allegorical layer to this story where it also becomes about the ambivalent relationship to power that is also in this society."

There's nothing ambivalent about the radical Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's followers' bid for power in the film's second story. They are flexing their muscles after years of oppression under Saddam, and burning with political and religious zeal. Longley got extraordinary access to the movement after a chance meeting in Najaf with Sheik Aws al-Kafaji, then head of the Sadr operation in Nasiriyah.

He filmed political strategy meetings, rallies, marches, religious ceremonies.

He was even allowed to ride along on an alcohol raid, filming as Sadr militia beat up, blindfold, and then haul

men they suspect of selling alcohol off the streets. Longley thought they were going to shoot someone. How did it feel filming the scene? "Being in that kind of situation is disturbing. I suppose there is a line beyond which you can't really cross and maintain your sanity, humanity, whatever. On the other hand, if they do shoot someone in front of you, well, it's too late for you to do anything then, isn't it?" It then becomes "one of those interesting moral quandaries".

The film conveys a sense of mounting danger and chaos. The tipping point came in April 2004, says Longley, with the blockade and bombing of Falujah, confirmation of rumours about abuses at Abu Ghraib prison, and the Shia uprising in Najaf. "It doesn't take very many incidents to turn an entire society against you," he says, "and in the case of Iraq there were thousands and thousands of incidents about which everyone knew. All the things that were not done well or not done at all, combined with the things that were horrendous, I think by the spring of 2004 had basically added up to the general population of Iraq no longer wanting the United States to be in their country at all."

Foreigners were being kidnapped and beheaded. "I began to receive death threats, in some cases at the locations where I was filming, where people would tell me, 'Masked gunmen have been here and told us if you come here again they will kill you and kill us'." Longley even found himself hauled before the Islamic court in Najaf, accused of filming the bodies of Mehdi Militia fighters in the Najaf cemetery, though he had intentionally left his camera in his hotel room that day, expecting trouble.

"The situation that I found myself

in in Iraq was not something that I was enjoying as a film-maker or as a human being in any respect," says Longley, who had already experienced being shot at during the making of his first documentary, *Gaza Strip*. "I kept on telling myself the next film I make I'm not going to do it in a war zone."

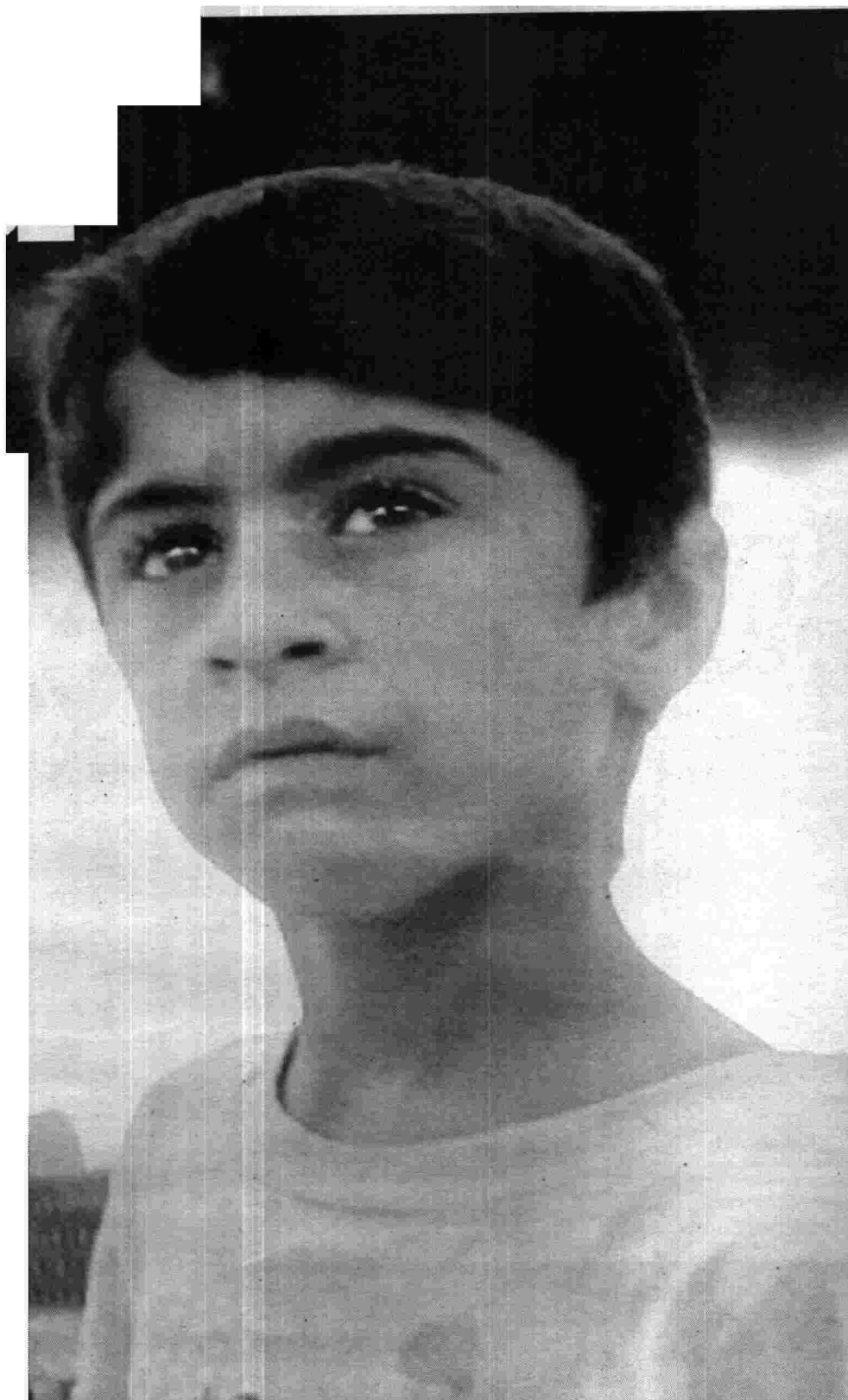
Even in Baghdad, where he had previously felt safe, Longley started to sense the anger of locals. Eventually the situation became so dire that in October 2004 he left Baghdad for the north, and never returned. It was not just his own life that was at risk, but also those of the people with whom he collaborated. Allan Enwiyah, his translator on a short film he made in Iraq, was killed when the *Christian Science Monitor* correspondent he was working with was kidnapped.

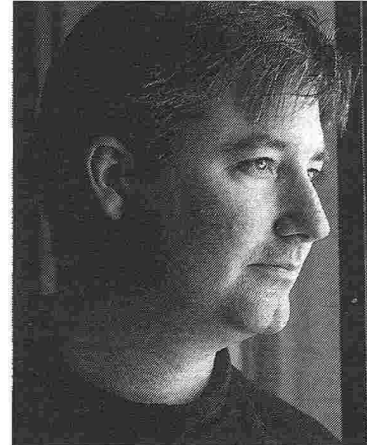
When Longley edited *Iraq in Fragments*, it broke down along religious and ethnic lines. Even so, he stresses that he is not advocating splitting up the country.

"The fact is Iraqis have been living together for a very long time," he says. "They are capable of doing so again. I think a lot of what was done by the United States when they entered the country served to fan the flames of sectarian division and ethnic division, and allowed people to see it as their chance to gain power based on sects, based on ethnicity instead of encouraging them to develop a government based on actual political parties that had political platforms instead of dividing themselves by their religious affiliations."

Longley laughs when I ask him what should now happen. "I think the United States should leave the country and pay Iraq reparations, in the same way Iraq paid Kuwait reparations after they invaded them. But we all know that the United States is not going to do that so it's a moot point."

'Iraq in Fragments' is released on 19 January





Award winner: director James Longley RICK WILKING/REUTERS



Daily dangers: filmed over two years, 'Iraq in Fragments' portrays a period of war, occupation and ethnic tension as told by the people living through it

