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# THE PRISONER

## OR: HOW I PLANNED TO KILL TONY BLAIR

A FILM BY  
**MICHAEL TUCKER AND PETRA EPPERLEIN**

A PEPPER & BONES FILMS PRODUCTION  
Co-Directed and Co-Produced by Michael Tucker and Petra Epperlein

Running Time: 72 Minutes

*"I am not terrorist or monster. I am not Dracula. I am not a monkey or cow. I am a man."*  
-Yunis Khatayer Abbas

[www.theprisoner.us](http://www.theprisoner.us)

## **SHORT SYNOPSIS**

In an absurd comedy of errors, a freedom-loving Iraqi journalist is mistaken as Tony Blair's would-be assassin and sent to Abu Ghraib Prison where he discovers the true meaning of liberation.

## **FULL SYNOPSIS**

Baghdad, September 2003: In a middle class house on a quiet street, a family is fast asleep. Without warning, the front door is crashed and American soldiers storm the house looking for weapons and bomb-making material. Cameraman Michael Tucker documents the event as the men in the house are cuffed and forced to kneel in the garden. A search of the house uncovers no incriminating evidence, however Yunis Khatayer Abbas and three of his brothers are taken and detained.

Bent on forcing Yunis to confess to crimes he did not commit, his captors press him with bizarre questions about music tastes, sexual preferences and Harrison Ford. His intelligence value exhausted, he is then transferred to Abu Ghraib Prison. The charge: Planning the Assassination of Tony Blair.

Among thousands suffering from food shortages, riots and insurgent attacks, Yunis endures by helping his fellow prisoners and keeping a secret diary. He also forges an unlikely friendship with one of his guards, who he calls "The Good Soldier".

Combining Tucker's embedded footage, Yunis' home movies, testimony from former guard Benjamin Thompson and original comic book art, Tucker and Epperlein trace the moving story of an ordinary man trapped in a Kafkaesque nightmare.

Unique in its presentation and unlikely in its very existence, THE PRISONER OR: HOW I PLANNED TO KILL TONY BLAIR details an absurd comedy of errors where one freedom-loving Iraqi journalist learns the true meaning of liberation.

Co- Directed and Co-Produced by Michael Tucker and Petra Epperlein's ("Gunner Palace") THE PRISONER OR: HOW I PLANNED TO KILL TONY BLAIR opens in select theaters starting March 23<sup>rd</sup>.

## ABOUT THE FILM

*A party. Your friends and family are with you. A chance to dance, to celebrate, to live. Returning home, your family settles in to sleep only to be woken up as your house is invaded by armed men. No courts, no process, only endless interrogation and then prison. Armies of men and women insist on your involvement in crimes that would seem comic were they not the reason you were locked in a living nightmare. This is not Kafka. And it isn't 24.*

**Baghdad, September 22, 2003:** Yunis Khatayer Abbas, a freelance Iraqi cameraman, had just returned to his family's home after filming a friend's wedding party. He was happy and tired after a night out with his younger brothers. Meanwhile, Michael Tucker, an American cameraman in Baghdad to document the lives of the American soldiers of "Gunner Palace", was in a convoy headed for a raid on a house where Coalition Intelligence said four brothers were building bombs for a terrorist cell.

At half past midnight, the gate to the house was breeched and Tucker came in behind the soldiers to find five suspects on their knees. As he filmed their arrest, one of the suspects protested, "I'm a journalist, you mistake this," before he was led away in handcuffs. The protesting suspect was Yunis.

THE PRISONER OR: HOW I PLANNED TO KILL TONY BLAIR – a film by Michael Tucker and Petra Epperlein details the life of Iraqi journalist Yunis Khatayer Abbas, as he was incarcerated for eight months wrongly accused of being an insurgent planning to kill Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Yunis had been taken before. In 1998, Uday Hussein's police arrested him for writing a critical poem. He spent three months in Al Radwaniya prison where he was subjected to beatings and electric shocks. Now five years later, as American tanks rolled into Baghdad, he hoped for a better future in a free Iraq. His dream was to be a journalist--"to tell the truth"--something that had always been in short supply in Iraq. He found his chance working as a cameraman for western journalists. No doubt it was dangerous work and Yunis observed, "If the Americans don't kill me, the insurgents will," yet he loved his job and working with foreigners.

That night in September 2003, he told his three brothers that their arrest was just a mistake and not to worry, they would be released once the Americans found out who they were.

The next day, as he sat in a chair in the Baghdad Police Academy, an American interrogator demanded, "Tell me the plan. Tell me the truth." Yunis didn't know of any plan. He asked for mercy. He was told that there "was no mercy for terrorists". Day and night he was questioned until they finally told him why he was there - "You are planning to kill Tony Blair." Yunis laughed, but no one laughed with him. He spent the next eight months in detention at two locations, including Abu Ghraib prison where he wrote a secret diary on the inside of his boxer shorts--a diary that reveals, beyond the infamous pornographic abuse at the prison, a climate of systematic indifference.

While imprisoned, Yunis befriended one of the guards, Army Specialist Benjamin Thompson, who he calls "the good soldier." Thompson, unlike so many other American military personnel Yunis had encountered dared to treat him like a human being. He realized early on in his tour of duty at Abu Ghraib that the conditions in Camp Ganci (the section of Abu Ghraib where prisoners with "no intelligence value" were held and Yunis was interned) were inhumane. Thompson, along with other members of his MP company, did his best to improve conditions in the camp and to respond to the

humanitarian needs of the prisoners. After finishing his tour and returning to America, Thompson often “googled” his friend Yunis’ name curious to find out what had happened to him. Eventually he discovered that Yunis was the subject of a film project. He contacted the filmmakers and agreed to participate.

Using recently declassified documents on Abu Ghraib combined with interviews with post-incarceration Yunis and post-tour Thompson, the filmmakers’ create a moving story of an ordinary man who maintained his dignity despite the mad accusations and harsh treatment of an absurdist security apparatus.

In the end THE PRISONER becomes a story of hope: the hope of a captured journalist who believes in the power of truth and the hope of the soldier, pressed into service as a jailer, who fights his own private battle to hold back the forces of degradation.

THE PRISONER OR: HOW I PLANNED TO KILL TONY BLAIR is co-directed and co-produced by the husband and wife team of Michael Tucker and Petra Epperlein for Pepper & Bones Films.

## FILMMAKERS STATEMENT

On September 22, 2003, the unit I was with while filming GUNNER PALACE, 2/3 FA, received orders from Brigade intelligence to do a "hit" on a house in Baghdad's Adhamiya neighborhood. The operation order stated that the "target" was a bomb-making cell comprised of brothers who were building explosives to be used in an attempt on Tony Blair during an upcoming visit to Iraq. I had gone out on a dozen late night operations with 2/3FA, but this raid had the most specific intelligence of any I had experienced. Intel knew how many weapons they would find (two) and 2/3 FA was told to look for videotapes and CDs. The brothers shared the family name Abbas, so 2/3's commander, who had a habit of giving every raid a sophomoric handle straight out of ANIMAL HOUSE, dubbed the raid "Operation Grabass".

At half past midnight, I jumped into an open backed Humvee with 2/3's breach team. At 1230, we arrived at the target. The breach team formed two stacks and went in cautiously through the front gate. By the time I was in the yard, five suspects were subdued. I followed the MPs into the house and started filming the search. The women of the house were in the living room busy covering themselves. The soldiers asked for names.

Outside, one of the men claimed to work in a hospital. Another, on his knees, looked at me and told me he was a journalist. I kept filming as he said, "You see that in the camera, this is a mistake." The soldiers yelled for him to shut up. He turned to me and said, "I know that shut-up. Just shut your mouth in Iraq."

The women wailed for the men. They took four brothers from the house and a lock box with cash. Their elderly father was released. No concrete evidence was found in the house. One large ammo crate contained party decorations and shampoo (of all things). The MPs took an ammo can full of U.S. dollars and Iraqi dinar. A handgun and an AK -47 were found (the exact weapons that they knew were in the house). Along with the suspect's claims of being a journalist, the lack of solid evidence caught my attention.

Questions still burned: was it a successful raid that prevented Tony Blair from being killed in Basra or was it the wrong house? They didn't look like terrorists to me, but who does? They could have been school teachers, merchants and doctors; or they could have been members of Mohammed's Army or a fledging Al Qaeda cell.

When I returned to Baghdad later in February 2004, I followed up with the intel section and inquired about what happened to the brothers, who I only knew under the name Abbas. A young specialist looked in the system and said that they were still being held, most likely at Abu Ghraib. Fast forward to March 2005: I receive an email from a young American journalist who tells me that a friend of his saw our film Gunner Palace and identified the "journalist" in the film as an Iraqi cameraman named Yunis. We traded calls and it all checked out. It was him. Yunis, the journalist I had filmed, spent nearly 9 months in detention--most spent in Abu Ghraib Prison--before he was released without charge.

Two months later, with the aid of the journalist and his Iraqi fixer, Yunis reluctantly agreed to meet me in Baghdad at a safe location. When we met, Yunis apologized for his English. He stated that before the arrest he could speak English well, but now it made him uncomfortable. He explained that on the night of his arrest he and his brothers had just returned from a wedding party. An hour before the raid he had called his fiancée. He told me that his mother was very sick at that time and now she is worse stemming from the stress of his arrest and subsequent raids.

He talked about Abu Ghraib and how he lived with 4,000 men in the most primitive conditions and how he watched as friends died from neglect, mortar attacks and from gunshot wounds received during the demonstrations the detainees staged to protest conditions. Clearly, beyond the pornographic abuse of the Hard Site that most of us have seen, the detainees in the prison suffered from systematic indifference where all were presumed to be guilty.

Talking to Yunis, I realized that his story was about far more than Iraq. It was about our fundamental definitions of freedom and liberty. Months later in Amman, when I sat with Yunis and his brother Khalid in a safe house, Yunis told me, "Before my arrest, I had never evaluated freedom before." Those words gave the film a *raison d'être*.

There is a directness about Yunis that is impossible to ignore. During our interviews, Yunis, said something repeatedly that struck me as essential to understanding the Iraq experience. Simply he said, "This is my country."

From the night of his arrest until his release, those words framed his disbelief and disappointment. In Yunis' mind, words like freedom, liberty and justice have become reduced to the level of the slogans used to sell more laundry detergent. It's the same old soap, only new and improved. Since his arrest, nearly three years ago, not a day has gone by without Yunis asking "why me?".

Was he arrested because of his association with Western journalists who were off-message? Was a telephone conversation intercepted and misinterpreted? Did an informant sell false information to the coalition? Or was he simply in the wrong place at the wrong time--a case of mistaken identity or worse, the victim of a tragic bureaucratic blunder? After making multiple Freedom of Information Act inquiries to the Army and perusing thousands of pages of declassified documents, we still don't have an answer. The Army claims that Prisoner # 151186 does not exist.

As we were readying "The Prisoner" for the Toronto Film Festival in 2006, I received the following email from a young American soldier:

*Mr. Tucker*

*I am looking for you....*

*Last week I [read about an Iraqi prisoner named] Yunis being captured [by U.S. troops] in [your movie] Gunner Palace. I ... rented it and saw that it was the Yunis I know.... I served at Abu Ghraib from February 2004 [to] February 2005 at Camp Ganci, the enclosure where Yunis was my detainee.... I've been typing his name into google since I [returned to America from] Iraq.... I was very close with Yunis [and his brothers], Khalid [and] Abbas.... Obviously you can never tell for certain in such a crazy environment what is really going on, but I felt that these people were my good friends and that we survived that hell together with support from one another. I truly love these people....*

*Benjamin Thompson*

After receiving Thompson's note, I went back to our interviews with Yunis and discovered --upon careful listening--that he spoke about the humanity of Thompson and a handful of other guards in Camp Ganci. He called Thompson "The Good Soldier".

With that, we realized that Thompson's story was essential to understanding what Yunis and his brothers experienced in Abu Ghraib. We asked Thompson for his cooperation and a month later began production on a feature length version of the film.

During nearly two years of production--and in the three and half years since his arrest--the situation in Baghdad has only gotten worse. The promises of Bush and Blair in 2003 and the future Yunis dreamt of in a free Iraq are just that, dreams. His nightmare--the Iraqi nightmare--continues. Yunis hasn't made any demands in regards to his case, but I sensed more than anything, that he would like to have his dignity and his honor back. We are hopeful that through this film, we will be able to help accomplish that.

-Michael Tucker

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATIONS

Upon meeting with Yunis and hearing his story, Mike Tucker and Petra Epperlein faced a challenging question. How to represent Yunis' prison experience in a visually interesting way when no footage of it exists?

They realized that there were a few possible ways to go. One would be to use archival footage. They ruled this out as too impersonal as it would have no direct connection to Yunis or his actual story. Another way would be through reenactments. This too was ruled out as not right for a documentary. "Reenactments often blur the lines between what's real and what's pseudo-real far too much," says Epperlein. The answer stemmed from the long and much beloved American cultural tradition of comics.

"Many famous comics traditionally tell stories of power and freedom, good vs. evil, and overcoming impossible, sometimes violent circumstances." says Epperlein, an architect by trade, "The comic tradition seemed to be the perfect metaphor for a real life story about a man being trapped in the prison system not only of the brutal dictatorship he spent all of his life under, but also of his and his country's supposed liberators."

"Yunis had a real appreciation for American culture," adds Michael Tucker. "A lot of what he said really felt cartoonish or comic-like especially when he would describe how he was interrogated and reference figures like Rambo, Clint Eastwood and James Bond. Illustrations seemed like the perfect fit."

Once the motif was decided upon, the filmmakers faced the questions of "what" and "how." Says Epperlein, "The challenge we faced was in how to counter the overpowering ever-present pornographic images of the prison abuse scandal that automatically come to mind first, when the words Abu Ghraib are mentioned. Yunis' experience was different than the abuse stories we all know and have seen pictures of, yet his experience is equally unsettling." She settled on a style that is somewhat abstract – intentionally creating a world not unlike something found in a Frank Miller graphic novel, where light and shadow play off each other to reveal forces of good and evil in conflict.

In bringing Yunis' words to cinematic life, Epperlein and Tucker fell into an organic process of working together. Epperlein created each of the more than 150 illustrations by hand with pen and ink. A computer was then used for coloring. Afterwards, Tucker added sound design and effects behind them to help define the mood.

These illustrations were then combined with all the other elements they were working with and had collected. The list of elements represents both sides of the story and buttons both sides of Yunis' time in Abu Ghraib:

- Michael Tucker's war footage from Baghdad and the night raid which led to Yunis' arrest.
- Yunis' own footage from that very night prior to his arrest of him and his family at a party.
- Home movies of Yunis, Khalid and Abbas the night they return home from Abu Ghraib.
- Interviews with Yunis
- Interviews with former guard Benjamin Thompson.
- Photographs and video footage from Yunis' childhood and his work as a journalist working in Baghdad.

THE PRISONER OR: HOW I PLANNED TO KILL TONY BLAIR blends all of these various elements to detail, with stunning clarity and gripping narrative, an intimate and powerful story as unique as it is unreal.

## **BIOS**

### **MICHAEL TUCKER & PETRA EPPERLEIN**

Co-director and co-producer Michael Tucker was born in Honolulu, Hawaii in 1966 and worked for two years as a commercial fisherman in Alaska until an accident on a factory trawler led him to pick up his first camera.

Co-director and co-producer Petra Epperlein was born in Karl Marx Stadt, GDR in 1966. After two years of work as a bricklayer, Epperlein studied architecture in Dresden where after receiving her diploma in 1991, she headed west to America.

Epperlein and Tucker met in New York in 1994, where she was pursuing architecture and he was developing a television series called THE END OF THE WORLD.

In 1995, they relocated to Berlin for the birth of their daughter. They then launched Nomados Films, a production company which focuses on humanitarian issue reportage. Between 1995 and 1997 they produced media for humanitarian groups in Vietnam, The Philippines, Bosnia and Croatia. In 1997, Tucker and Epperlein produced the short film THE LAST COWBOY, one of the first films to be shot on the new DV format and the first film to be designed specifically for DVD. The film brought their two world views together; telling the story of an East German raised on Karl May-inspired Indianer films who dreams of the American West.

In 2003, the outbreak of the war in Iraq pulled Tucker to Baghdad, where he followed an armored car salesman making sales calls for the road movie, ALI BABA AND THE MERCHANT OF BAGHDAD. While filming ALI BABA, Tucker took interest in the story of US soldiers deployed in Baghdad and began to work on GUNNER PALACE in August 2003. After the critically acclaimed release of GUNNER PALACE in the spring of 2005, Tucker and Epperlein began work on THE PRISONER: OR HOW I PLANNED TO KILL TONY BLAIR.

In the field, Epperlein does sound; Tucker does camera. In the studio, they share editing tasks. They live and work between Berlin and New York, where Epperlein is currently working on a graphic novel about her childhood in Karl Marx City and Tucker is working on his first narrative screenplay.

**BENJAMIN THOMPSON**

Benjamin Thompson was born in November of 1980 in Beaver Dam, Wisconsin. He joined the army in February of 1999 while still in high school in Delaware, OH.

Thompson completed Basic Training at Ft. Leonardwood, MO and was assigned to the 391<sup>st</sup> MP Battalion, Army Reserve, in Columbus, OH. Deployed at the onset of the war to Ft. Campbell, Thompson and the 391st trained and were stationed for three months, eventually being deactivated when their mission was cancelled.

The 391<sup>st</sup> MP Battalion was called up again in December of 2003 and left for Iraq on February, 2004. Thompson served as a compound guard at Abu Ghraib for his entire yearlong tour.

Currently a Comparative Cultural Studies major at Ohio State, Thompson hopes to go on to grad school to pursue a social work degree. He would like to work with returning veterans in their readjustment to this world, and is also interested in hospice care.

## **ABOUT RED ENVELOPE ENTERTAINMENT**

Having given audiences a first, and sometimes exclusive, peek at nearly 60 films since its original content initiative launched in 2000, Netflix has taken its commitment further with the establishment of Red Envelope Entertainment. Red Envelope Entertainment is a division of the Netflix content group overseen by Chief Content Officer Ted Sarandos.

The Beverly Hills-based division of Netflix seeks to acquire and fund original content -- with a focus on independent film, foreign-language features and documentaries – and distribute them through the company's online DVD subscription service as well as other channels that may include theatrical, sell-through, rental, television, download and international.

Red Envelope Entertainment works to “democratize” film distribution by giving films and filmmakers equal access to Netflix subscribers across the U.S. The division's name and logo were inspired by the company's iconic red mailers.

“Our subscribers enjoy deep and varied content, and we are adept at promoting smaller, unique films along with large blockbusters,” said Bahman Naraghi, head of Red Envelope Entertainment, who previously served as a top executive at Intermedia Films, Miramax and Universal Studios. “We look forward to benefiting both makers and lovers of great films – wherever they may be and whatever their tastes may be.”

Through its original content initiative, the company has partnered with a variety of studios and production companies including HBO, Showtime, IFC, Think Film and Big Beach Films. Some of its projects during the last five years include the Oscar-winning documentary *Born Into Brothels*, Tim Robbins' scathing anti-war satire *Embedded/Live*, Michele Ohayon's quirky documentary *Cowboy del Amor* and the 2005 Sundance Film Festival favorite *The Puffy Chair*. Among its recent projects are Sundance-acclaimed post-prison drama *Sherrybaby*, starring Maggie Gyllenhaal, who received a Golden Globe nomination for her performance, Kirby Dick's controversial *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*, and the upcoming *2 Days in Paris*, a Julie Delpy film jointly acquired with Samuel Goldwyn Films.

Netflix is committed to providing consumers with access to the widest variety of films available. With over 70,000 titles, the Netflix catalog spans every major genre, from documentaries and dramas to comedies and how-to. To that end, Red Envelope Entertainment is acquiring and funding original content projects to increase consumer options and provide an innovative method for film distribution. While giving filmmakers a platform to expose less commercial projects to a broader audience, Red Envelope Entertainment looks to leverage its proprietary technology to offer subscribers unique and original content to which they wouldn't otherwise have access. The original content initiative creates a national distribution channel for films and entertainment programming otherwise not available to broad audiences. For more information, visit [www.netflix.com](http://www.netflix.com).

## **CREDIT LIST**

Written, Produced and Directed by: Michael Tucker and Petra Epperlein

Art Direction: Petra Epperlein

Photography: Michael Tucker

Additional Photography: Yunis Khatayer Abbas

Editing: Michael Tucker

Sound Editing: Michael Tucker

Sound Mix: Chris Müller

Location Services: Alaa Majeed

Special Thanks:

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David Friend, David Magdael, A. Majeed, Dana O'Keefe,  
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