

Basir Beria, who fled Afghanistan in the early 1980s, taught the art of kite fighting to the young protagonists in *The Kite Runner* (below).

Come fly with me

A highly skilful Afghan sport is the backdrop for Oscar-nominated film *The Kite Runner*. **Griselda Molemans** meets the asylum seeker who passed on generations of expertise to Hollywood and who hopes audiences will become more aware of the complex issues in his troubled homeland.

Smokehouse & Magazines, on Los Angeles' Lankershim Boulevard, opens early in the morning to sell coffee, snacks, cigarettes and magazines, but at 9am, proprietor Basir Beria steps out from behind the counter. He is going outside to fight.

Beria is the master who taught the two young stars of the movie *The Kite Runner* – Zekeria Ebrahimi (who plays Amir) and Ahmad Khan Mahmizada (who plays Hassan) – the finer points of kite fighting in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, in western China. Now he is explaining the basic principles of kite flying on the street in the arts district of North Hollywood.

Beria, who was born in Kabul in 1961, has chosen to use a beautifully decorated wooden drum (*charkha*) and spools the wire back and forth at breakneck speed.

“Look, the trick is to roll back the kite wire as far as possible to be sure you can use the full 800 metres of wire to keep your kite as high as possible in the sky.”

Beria prepares the razor-sharp string, the foundation of kite fighting, himself. “It takes me three days to grind down the glass and stamp it to a fine powder,” he says. “I mix that powder with a secret ingredient then cook it with rice into a sort of paste. I also add colouring, preferably pink or yellow, which is very popular among Afghan kite flyers. I rub the paste onto the string until every millimetre is covered. It is very precise work but it protects your string and stops your opponents from cutting it.

He grins as he refuses to reveal the the secret ingredient, then walks over to a large cardboard box of kites. “It is a family secret I learned from my father. It is the secret behind the Basir lines. Here, in the LA region, you can buy kite wires ranging from US\$25 to US\$800. Often customers call me asking if I can prepare a good drum of line for about US\$400. Those orders are usually for tournaments and festivals.”

Beria he receives requests from far and wide for his lines and the fancy kites he designs,

decorated with women's faces and dancing dervishes. “The Afghan communities of Los Angeles and San Francisco are very keen to maintain their culture and traditions. Of course, we are part of American society now, but kite flying belongs to our own culture. That is why we fly our kites with real Afghan cutting lines. A nylon line has been introduced to the market now, but that's for cheaters. It's an unwritten rule for Afghans: you don't fly with chemical lines. It only shows you have no talent.”

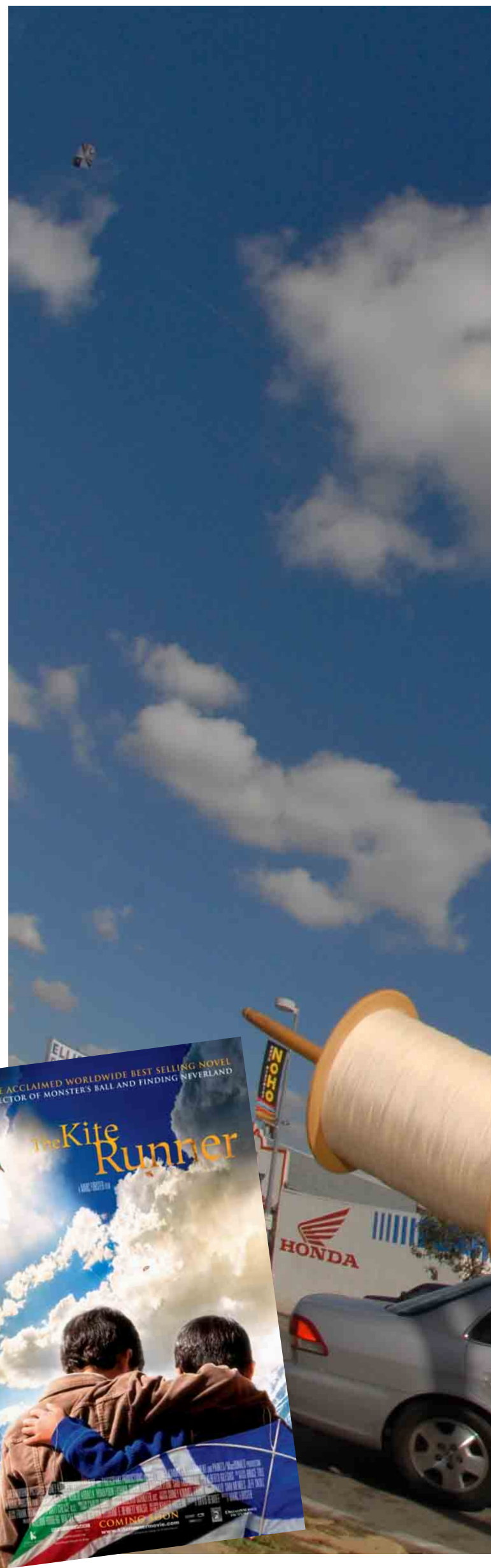
From his large collection, he picks a kite that incorporates the colours of the Afghan flag (red, green and black). “This is the kite you see in the movie and that I have hanging on my wall in the shop. I am very proud that [film studio] DreamWorks approached me to be their kite master because they felt I was the best man for the job,” he says.

“In total I worked for two months on the film set, in Kashgar, a city in western China, close to the border with Afghanistan. I had three weeks to teach the two young Afghan stars and 148 Chinese boys from the area how to fly kites. The main thing was getting the body language just right.

“Zekeria and Ahmad had already had lessons in Kabul before they came to Kashgar,” he says. “All Afghans can fly kites; it's in the blood.” He tosses his kite up a few times to catch the wind.

“The two young actors are 12 years old,” he says. “They are used to running after the kite flyers in Kabul, but not to letting the kites up themselves. Actually, it is the older and more experienced men who let up the big fighter kites. When I was that old and living in Kabul, that's how it was. I discussed it with director Marc Forster, but his response was, ‘We're sticking to the story line of the book by Khaled Hosseini.’

“So then I concentrated on teaching them the right posture, the movements and the use of correct kiting terminology, such as *shorto* >>



Right: Beria sells drums of hand-made kite line for up to US\$400 to fellow countrymen in Los Angeles and further afield. Below: with the film's director, Marc Forster, in Kashgar. Far right: the two young actors prepare to put their newfound skills to the test.



“IF YOU WANT TO STAND OUT, YOU BUY AN EXPENSIVE KITE. THAT’S WHAT WE AFGHANS DO. IF YOU WANT TO STAND OUT HERE IN LA, YOU BUY A HARLEY-DAVIDSON”

paneer, that is the essence of kite fighting. It literally means ‘cut the cheese’, in other words, ‘cut the line of your opponent’.”

Beria’s kite is now airborne. With subtle movements, he lets out more of the line. Holding the drum in his left hand as he slowly unwinds it, he twists the line around a finger of his right hand. “That’s how I keep the line locked,” he says. “The more wind the kite catches, the more I let the line go out.”

The Afghan flag dances in the wind and draws the attention of passers-by in the busy shopping strip. “Hey, kite man, how’s it going?” several people inquire cheerfully. Drivers halted by a red traffic light crane their necks to watch the kite more than 100 metres above their heads. With enviable ease, Beria controls its movements.

“When you’re talking about real kite fighting, you’re competing with about 50 fliers. On average, a contest takes an hour, but if real kite pros are involved it might take longer. You need to be patient to take out the kites of your opponents. You have to keep avoiding their attacks and keep control over your own kite, because just one mistake and your kite is cut down. If a big competition is not decided after three hours, the kite fighters bring their lines close together and pull down their kites as a sign of good sportsmanship.

“If you want to stand out, you buy an expensive kite,” he says, as he skilfully brings down his own. “That’s what we Afghans do. If you want to stand out here in LA, you buy a Harley-Davidson,” he says, laughing.

Beria is a certified kite pilot, a member of the American Kitefliers Association. “Here in the United States you need a licence to go out and fly a kite in the street. That is typically American, based on fear of

litigation. If you want to fly your kite around electricity lines [in Afghanistan], it’s your own business.”

He has nostalgic memories of early 1970s Kabul, where he grew up in a house with seven bedrooms and four bathrooms. “Almost daily I went with my older brother, Masir, to watch the kite flying in our neighbourhood. The famous kite masters then were men such as Bejo, Schichlang and Asef, who must all be old men by now.

“One time we witnessed a fight where the kites flew so high no one could see them any more. People were making bets among themselves on how the fight would end. That also is part of this sport and something friends do together. We didn’t know who had won until we heard the yelling of the people who had gone running to find the cut-down kite.”

Beria’s Kabul was transformed from a paradise to a battle zone when, in 1979, the Soviet Army marched in. After graduating from the Lycée Française high school, he was taken prisoner by the KGB, the Soviet Union’s secret police and security agency, because of suspected subversive activities. After 18 months, he was released and fled by foot through a mountain pass to Pakistan. “My father did not want me to be involved in the resistance movement against the Russians, so I ended up going to Germany,” he says.

After living in Bad Homburg, near Frankfurt, for four years, he emigrated as a political asylum seeker to LA, where he was joined by his parents a few years ago. “When the situation became worse under the repressive Taleban regime, they left everything behind. My home base in Kabul is completely gone, but I still feel *hadzrak*, the wish to return to my homeland.”

He often telephones aunts and uncles who are still there. “What they tell me is that they receive so much aid from all over the world, but the aid supplies keep disappearing. After all these years of occupation, Afghanistan has become the victim of an international power struggle,” he says with a sigh. “The big political powers have made it into their own playground, but does that help the people who live there?”

During filming, Beria talked to Hosseini, who followed up *The Kite Runner* with the book *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, about the situation in their home country. “His book appeared at the right moment,”

says Beria. “Over 2.5 million Afghans have been killed in the ongoing war, so it is terrific that a story like this puts Afghanistan back on the map. I bow deeply to Khaled as a writer and he bows to me as a kite master.”

There is a hint of disappointment in his words, though. After some hesitation he says, “Some parts of the book you had better discuss with Khaled. I think he is one of the best writers because he takes you away to a completely different world. But when I asked him in Kashgar if the story was true, he said, ‘No, only 2 per cent.’ I was so disappointed I almost left the film set.”

And then there is the infamous rape scene. “I am not at all surprised the movie is banned in Afghanistan and the two young actors had to be taken to a secret hiding place in the United Arab Emirates as a precaution. I told Marc Forster during the shoot that scene would lead to protests. First they weren’t going to film that scene, but they did anyway. Even though it [wasn’t real], Ahmad Khan cried terribly afterwards.

“The scene is very hurtful to many Afghans. Rape is something you are ashamed of; people don’t talk about it. It is too painful. The reality in Afghanistan is that your father will kill your rapist as well as you. DreamWorks could have thought that through better.”

Following the premiere of *The Kite Runner*, in the Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood, Beria has had no further contact with the production team. “That’s how it goes. For weeks you have great fun together and after that everyone goes their own way again.”

For Beria that means tending to his humble store and his family – and biding his time. “Since 1980, I have been waiting for the time when we can return, but when I see what is happening there my heart cries. I have many dear memories of the paradise where I grew up.”

Until then, he flies his kite in Hollywood, where it dances in the wind surrounded by pigeons. The symbolism is not lost on him. ■

The Kite Runner, which has been nominated for the achievement in music written for motion pictures Oscar at tomorrow morning’s (Hong Kong time) Academy Awards ceremony, is showing in local cinemas.

