

JENNIFER WOLFE

IN TAHRIR SQUARE

HBO Presents An Immersive, Intimate Recounting of Egypt's Revolution

PHOTO BY MATTHEW O'NEILL/HBO



Jon Alpert, front right, films protesters in Egypt.

HBO's *In Tahrir Square: 18 Days of Egypt's Unfinished Revolution*, directed by award-winning documentary filmmakers Jon Alpert and Matthew O'Neill, follows what began as a peaceful demonstration that quickly grew into the revolutionary movement that would force the resignation of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

On January 25, 2011, mobilized in part by social media and bolstered by similar protests in other Arab countries, thousands of Egyptians gathered in Cairo's Tahrir Square to demand the end to Mubarak's three-decade rule. Hundreds of thousands of Egyptians ultimately participated in the protests at Tahrir Square, with nearly 850 killed. On February 11, the

18th day, more than a million Egyptians joined the revolution in the square and witnessed the surprise announcement that Mubarak would step down.

Watching *In Tahrir Square* is to become immersed in the world of the protesters, from the peaceful first days of the uprising through the deadly battles between pro-

Mubarak forces and anti-Mubarak demonstrators. The film shadows Sharif Abdel Kouddous, a young Egyptian-American journalist who leads cameras into Tahrir Square and provides insightful accounts of those tense days, his tweets and live reporting attracting international attention.

Alpert, co-executive director of New York's Downtown Community Television Center (DCTVC), traveled to Cairo with O'Neill and producer Jackie Soohen to document the uprising, bringing a Sony PMW-EX3 camera to capture footage and a Sony Handycam HDR-CX550V for backup.

"When our executive producer, Sheila Nevins, asked 'Egypt?' we immediately started packing our bags," Alpert recounts. "The EX3 ended up serving mainly as a decoy. Because the government was doing whatever it could to restrict media, we anticipated that our cameras would be confiscated at customs. The plan was to allow customs officials to take the big-chip camera while we slipped the small prosumer camera past them. I had to spend the next five days performing Herculean tasks to get EX3 released from customs, but it was more than worth it."

A fan of the Handycam's versatility, Alpert has used it in a variety of situations and conditions. "That little camera is really capable of keeping up with the big boys," he insists. "We've used it in especially challenging wartime situations and it's been great. We can even pair it with a Zaxcom to record audio if we need to. This little camera is your friend. One of our collaborators had a big-chip SLR camera, and it makes gorgeous pictures, but only as long as the subject and camera don't change their relationship to each other. In the hustle and bustle of revolutionary times, that's not always possible.

"Ninety-nine percent of the pictures we recorded with the big-chip camera were out of focus, and



The production team for HBO's *In Tahrir Square*: (from left) Jacquie Soohen, Matt O'Neill, Sharif Abdel Kouddous and Jon Alpert pictured with protesters in Tahrir Square

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always be circumstances that might get out of control, and there is always danger to your equipment. There were so many brave people recording these events and bearing witness. You protect your equipment before you protect yourself—it's just how we are. You figure out how to shoot, analyze each situation for risks, both personally and to your equipment, and you figure out how to shoot it in such a way that your equipment will survive and be there for you the next day."

Alpert also employed a variety of strategies to keep footage safe once it had been acquired. "Every single night you have to be very careful to download and digitize material because you're wiping the cards for reuse the next day," Alpert explains. "This is also your opportunity to make duplicates and hide materials for later in case there are any problems. We're not going to give away all our tricks, but we found ways to duplicate, hide and protect our media so it wouldn't fall into the wrong hands. It's very important for filmmakers to have a strategy before they actually go out into the field, and to follow that strategy—never get lulled into thinking 'this is not that bad,' because it can get bad really fast." **dv**

of the one percent that were in focus, 99 percent of those had bad audio," Alpert continues. "The little camera is a friendlier, more forgiving tool that allowed us to cast a wider net than its big-chip cousins. If the revolution had taken place in the studio, the big-chip camera would have been fine, but on the street with a million people and projectiles and tear gas, it was as much of a foe as Mubarak's thugs on camelback."

Facing Mubarak's thugs became all in a day's work for the documentary filmmaking team during the 21 days of production. "I've filmed about a dozen revolutions," Alpert says. "There will