



Lost and Found

Co-directors Aren Perdecı and Ela Alyamac invite *AC* into the grading suite for their historical fairy tale *Lost Birds*.

By Jon D. Witmer



Aren Perdecı and Ela Alyamac are sitting in a digital-intermediate theater at EFilm in Hollywood, very near the finish line of a five-year journey to realize their passion project, the feature *Lost Birds*. The two filmmakers shared directing, producing and writing duties, and Perdecı also served as director of photography for the Turkish- and Armenian-language project, which was shot in the filmmakers' native Turkey and presents a historical tragedy from the point of view of two children, casting the events in a fairy-tale atmosphere.

Against the backdrop of the 1915 Armenian exile in what was then the Ottoman Empire — an event that culminated in what is now, outside of modern-day Turkey, widely classified as genocide — the story follows Bedo (Heros Agopyan) and Maryam (Dila Uluca), siblings whose happy life in Anatolia is torn asunder when their grandfather (Sarkis Acemoglu) is taken away by soldiers. In the days that follow, their mother (Takuhi Bahar) forbids them to go outside, but they nevertheless run away to a secret dovecote, their favorite place to play. When they return, they find their home and the entire village empty. Together with a wounded bird they've been nursing back to health, the children embark on a journey to find their mother.

Alyamac and Perdecı met after they each had a film play at a festival in Hungary; Alyamac's entry was the romantic *Peri Tözu*, and Perdecı's was the drama *Yanlis Zaman Yolculari*.



Alyamac recalls, “We became friends very quickly, and he told me he wanted to make a film about 1915, told from the eyes of two children. I was intrigued, and we started writing.”

Perdeci adds, “People don’t really talk about the subject; they keep the story like a bird in a cage. Our film has these metaphors. The central idea of the film is [about preserving] the purity of childhood, even as this war is going on.”

Unsurprisingly, given the film’s subject matter, there was some concern about making this movie in Turkey. To assuage that anxiety, Alyamac and Perdeci applied for a loan from the Turkish Ministry of Culture’s film fund. But, Perdeci adds, “we said to them, ‘We are not applying for the money. This film is very important to us, we need to make it, and we just want your approval.’”

As they waited to hear from the film fund, Alyamac and Perdeci continued to refine the script, scout locations, and solidify the cast. Finally, after more than a year, the ministry approved the filmmakers’ application. As Perdeci notes, it was worth the wait. “All the resistance was gone with that approval.



Opposite and this page, top: Siblings Maryam (Dila Uluca, left) and Bedo (Heros Agopyan) play in a secret dovecote and its surrounding forest in the feature *Lost Birds*. Middle: The children enjoy Easter dinner with their family. Bottom: Co-directors Aren Perdeci (left) and Ela Alyamac review a shot; Perdeci also served as the film’s cinematographer.

Photos and frame grabs courtesy of the filmmakers.

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Top: The children lead their mother (Takuhi Bahar) into their grandfather's workshop. Middle: The siblings' grandfather (Sarkis Acemoglu) works by candlelight. Bottom: Perdecì had 12K Dinos placed outside this church's windows to bolster the daylight ambience and contrast with the warm candlelight.

After that, all the actors felt it was now possible to make the movie.”

The filmmakers also compiled nearly 100 pages of notes — a “visual map,” as Perdecì describes it — that included storyboards, photo boards, visual inspirations (largely in the form of paintings by artists such as Camille Corot, Velázquez, Vermeer, Rembrandt and de La Tour), and even notes on sound design. Perdecì also prepared a document that comprised 21 guiding principles for the film’s visual style, including:

- Deep focus, high f-stop
- Use natural light
- No zoom
- Never front light
- Mix firelight/candlelight/gaslight with daylight
- Do not hesitate to have lens flares
- Shoot night interiors with candles only

“We tested candles for a really long time,” Alyamac notes, a hint of exhaustion still in her voice. Perdecì adds, “We had more than 2,000 candles, all double-wicked or triple-wicked, and we [pre-cut] the candles in several sizes. House candles were different from church candles, which were different from orphanage candles. And the flickering ones were better for the background, when they were out of focus; the ones that didn’t flicker were very good for the foreground, near the actors. It was all very crazy for the crew!

“We didn’t have much money for this project, but we had a lot of time, and we gave a lot of importance to the little details,” Perdecì continues. In addition to the candles, he says they spent “two or three months testing every gas lamp,” each of which was period accurate. Indeed, as the filmmakers collected their props during *Lost Birds*’ extended preproduction, Alyamac recalls, “people would give us real props to use in the film — a nightgown from their great-grandmother, a doll, a camera, everything.”

Perdecì opted to shoot with a single Arri Alexa XT. Given their use of

candlelight, the filmmakers especially benefitted from the camera's native 800 ASA. For inspiration and guidance, Perdecì says that he and Alyamac closely studied the candlelit scenes in Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon*, photographed by John Alcott, BSC (AC March '76). The cinematographer notes, "Our advantage is that we could shoot 800 ASA with [Arri/Zeiss] Master Primes. Our practical candles' luminance allowed us to shoot between T1.3 and T2.8, and the 800 ASA of the Alexa doesn't have the grain of 800 ASA film."

The production's lens package also included a 100mm Arri/Zeiss Master Macro. "We used the Master Macro for the children's state-of-mind shots, even in dialogue scenes," Perdecì explains. "When you use a normal 100mm, you don't get that kind of detail on the eyes."

Perdecì often aimed for a T-stop around 5.6, and on day exteriors would sometimes shoot as high as T11. He occasionally used a polarizer to enhance the contrast in day exteriors, but mostly eschewed any other filtration, including NDs except when a shallower depth of field was desired to help focus the viewers' attention. He adds that he relied on natural sunlight for the film's day exteriors, and he and Alyamac scheduled the shooting based on where the sun would be in the sky. "We just tried to make it with less lighting and more waiting for the sky and sun," he notes.

"We very much like the classical filmmaking of William Wyler, Billy Wilder and Orson Welles," Perdecì continues. "And Gregg Toland [ASC] — that's why we chose to have deep-focus photography. But we also tried to [incorporate] a modern feeling, and that's why we sometimes chose longer lenses. Our technical idea was to make a modern version of an older film, but it was a difficult balance."

Both the film's camera and lighting package came from Sinema Teknik Malzemeleri (STM), the company that was co-founded by Ali Salim Yasar, who served as gaffer for *Lost Birds*. "I found



Top: Bedo and Maryam spend a night under the stars after their family vanishes in the exile. Middle: Maryam searches for Bedo after the two are separated. Bottom: Gaffer Ali Salim Yasar positions a bounce board from atop a horse.

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Top: Maryam finds shelter in an orphanage. Bottom: Practical candlelight and the stone-oven fire provided a base layer of smoke that the filmmakers supplemented with a smoke machine for this orphanage interior.

[Yasar] from *American Cinematographer*,” Perdecì says. “He’d worked on *Argo* with Rodrigo Prieto [ASC, AMC; *AC* Nov. ’12]. He normally doesn’t work on Turkish films; he does the Hollywood films that come to Istanbul. But he liked our film.” The cinematographer grins and chuckles, then adds that given the planned natural and practical lighting, Yasar “first saw me as a fool, but on the first day [of production], he understood that everything was going to be fine.”

The story begins during what Perdecì’s notes refer to as the “happy period.” Although there are references

to war — Bedo and Maryam’s father is off fighting for the Ottoman Empire — life continues more or less normally in the village, which is introduced in the film’s opening minutes. A Steadicam shot, operated by Ercan Yılmaz, begins close to Bedo, who steals a snack from a baker’s shop as his sister distracts the vendor; the Steadicam pulls back to a wide shot and moves parallel to the children as they proceed down the street.

“In Turkey, we tend to only use Steadicam for big shots,” Perdecì explains. “I would have liked some more Steadicam [in the film], to give

close-ups that feeling of breathing, but Steadicam doesn’t come out for that in Turkey.” Sercan Sert served as the production’s primary camera operator — assisted by focus puller Yakup Algol — but Perdecì often grabbed the Alexa for handheld and dolly shots.

The row of shops that represents the village square was built based on period photographs. Astonishingly, Perdecì and Alyamac worked without a designated production designer, essentially adding those responsibilities to their list of duties on the film. They did receive a helping hand, however, from Alyamac’s parents, who renovate old homes for a living. Those skills proved particularly helpful in preparing the real house that the filmmakers chose to serve as Bedo and Maryam’s childhood home.

When the siblings return home after their misadventures outside — during which they also rescue the wounded bird, whom they name Bacik — the house is revealed in a wide, locked-off shot, and then a handheld camera follows the children to the front door. The filmmakers first envisioned *Lost Birds* as a widescreen movie, but given the vertical elements present in the house and other locations, they opted instead to frame for a 1.85:1 release. “For our house, we needed to see the chimneys and the smoke in the wide shots,” Perdecì notes. “With 2.35:1, even with a 25mm [lens], I would need to go very far back [in order to see those elements], and the house would be too small in the frame.”

The family’s Easter dinner illustrates Perdecì’s desired mix of warm and cool light. “We only have a few moments to tell the story of the family all together before the children are alone,” Perdecì explains, adding that he and Alyamac wanted this scene to feel “very warm.” All of the interior lighting comes from candles and gas lamps positioned on the dinner table and throughout the room. Additionally, blue “moonlight” is visible outside the windows, courtesy of a 4K HMI Par.

A day scene in Bedo and Maryam’s grandfather’s workshop also

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Top: After they're reunited, Bedo and Maryam sneak away from the orphanage to return to their family's home. Middle: Mahmut (Ahmet Uz) returns to the orphanage at dusk after searching in vain for the missing children. Bottom: The scene continues as Mahmut walks inside; this interior was shot in the summer and had to match the exterior, which was shot the previous winter.

illustrates the desired color contrast in the lighting. A 4K HMI Fresnel diffused through $\frac{1}{4}$ White Diffusion simulated daylight that enters the workshop from frame left. In the background, through a doorway, the firelight from the family's rock stove plays on the wall. (For a night scene in the same location, a 1.2K HMI Fresnel through Full White Diffusion provides a moonlight effect from frame left that contrasts with the warmth of the candle on the workbench.)

Likewise, when the family attends the local church, the interior contrasts warm candlelight with daytime ambience that enters through the windows that line one wall. "Every window had a 12K Dino light with Half CTB gel," Perdecì explains. Additionally, to backlight the parishioners, a 6K HMI Fresnel was positioned toward the back of the church, and to bolster the candlelight effect at the front of the church, the crew rigged three 300-watt tungsten Fresnels wired through a flicker box.

To maintain his desired balance between warm and cool tones, Perdecì explains, the camera's Kelvin setting "was never 'normal.' Sometimes it was 4,800, sometimes 4,200, sometimes 4,600. We wanted different levels of orange and blue in different scenes, so we monitored in Rec 709 and changed the Kelvin [accordingly]."

Soon thereafter, soldiers begin taking away the men of the village, including the siblings' grandfather. Bedo and Maryam are told not to venture outside the house, but they sneak away to their secret dovecote and its hidden valley. "We wanted the whole sequence to look like a paradise for them," says Alyamac. The sequence begins with the children rounding a path into a clearing among the trees; they run in slow motion, and closer shots reveal backlit dust floating in the air and out-of-focus grass waving in the foreground. "At this moment, we are entering into their deep psychology," says Perdecì. "It's like a ritual for them, with nature.

"We needed to be in a good posi-

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Top: Smugglers lead a group of displaced children through a cave, the beginning of a journey to reunite the children with family members in Aleppo. **Middle:** Mahmut leads Bedo and Maryam through the same cave. This shot was lit solely by the match, which the filmmakers had specially made for the film.

tion to see this dust,” he continues. “It was impossible to take any lights into this valley, so our lighting chief [bounced the sunlight] with mirrors.” This sequence marks the culmination of what Perdecì describes as the “shinier” lighting of the happy period. “When [the grownups] are gone,” he notes, the visuals become “more depressed.”

When the children return from the dovecote, they find the entire village devoid of life. Taking Bacik with them, Bedo and Maryam go in search of their mother, setting off into the countryside, where they sleep under the stars and forage for what sustenance they can find. One morning, Bedo wakes early

and goes exploring, only to be discovered by soldiers who place him in the care of a nearby farmer. All alone now, Maryam hides in a horse cart that belongs to Mahmut (Ahmet Uz), who discovers her when he returns to the orphanage where he works.

The siblings reunite when Maryam joins Mahmut on an errand that takes them past the farm where Bedo works in the field. To capture Bedo’s point of view as he sees Maryam, key grip Mustafa Boduroglu’s crew laid approximately 100 meters of dolly track parallel to the path Mahmut’s cart would travel, and the production’s MovieTech Magnum dolly, operated by

Soner Soysal, was pushed at speed with the moving cart. Perdecì was on the dolly with the camera, which was fitted with a 300mm Cooke S4. “That was a difficult shot for focus,” he offers.

Bedo joins Maryam at the orphanage, but as Christmas approaches, the siblings sneak away to return home, convinced that their mother will be there for the holiday. They arrive at the house at night and find it alive with light in the windows and smoke billowing out of the chimneys. The shot structure echoes the house’s first appearance: The home is first seen in a wide, locked-off shot, and then a cut takes the camera handheld, following the children as they run toward the front door.

“We wanted to make it very magical,” says Alyamac, a feeling that is bolstered by gently falling snow. Not unlike the film’s candles, a great deal of research went into getting just the right snow for the scene. “We didn’t like [the snow produced by] snow machines,” says Alyamac. “But we watched Ernst Lubitsch’s *The Shop Around the Corner*, and it had the perfect snow. We wrote to places in Hollywood to ask their opinions, and we sent them the scene.”

Ultimately, they found a comparable snow that’s made from the same paper that goes into baby diapers, and they were able to find a company in Turkey that could provide the material. “They cut it up for us, and we put it in big sacks and brought it [to the house location],” Alyamac continues. “With three cherry pickers, we threw the snow by hand.” Each cherry picker was also equipped with a fan to help spread the falling flakes.

Another cherry picker held a 6K HMI Fresnel, which provided the base ambience for the exterior, while small tungsten units were placed inside the house for a warm glow from the windows. Perdecì also placed a 1.2K HMI on top of a building behind the house in order to backlight the chimney smoke. “The smoke of the chimney was very important to make it like Christmas,” he explains.

The siblings' hopes are dashed, however, when it becomes clear their mother has not returned. Meanwhile, Mahmut has searched for the children to no avail, and he re-enters the orphanage at dusk. As he steps inside, the camera pans to reveal a large, candlelit room; the orphanage's administrators gather around a table at the far end, with news that displaced families from Bedo and Maryam's village have been resettling in Aleppo with the help of their village's priest, Father Mesrop (Arto Arsenyan), and a band of smugglers.

In total, Perdecì estimates this orphanage interior required "more than 120 candles. There's no additional light." Complicating the sequence, the dusk exterior was shot during six days of principal photography in the winter, but the matching interior was shot months later, in the summer, during the production's remaining 24 days of photography. "We did all the [film's] interiors in the summer," notes Perdecì. "We needed to note everything, because the blue sky and orange light in the windows [in the exterior shot] had to match the blue light from the door and orange light [from the candles] when we got inside."

Remembering that Maryam had once mentioned the secret dovecote, Mahmut at last finds the children, and he races to deliver them to Father Mesrop. Mahmut leads Bedo and Maryam through a cave, striking a match to light their way. "This scene is lit with only the single match," Perdecì explains. "We went to a match factory and made our customized matches. We shot 800 ASA with a 35mm Master Prime, and I think it was more than T1.3 because the match was so good!"

Bedo and Maryam set Bacik free on their way to Aleppo, where they will meet their fellow villagers — and, they hope, their mother — at a church that sits high atop a hill. The crew had a day off before shooting outside the church, but Alyamac and Perdecì nevertheless decided to make one last scouting trip. Perdecì recalls crewmembers saying, "Don't go, please. You've already been there eight times." ➤



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The crew prepares its MovieTech Magnum dolly for a tracking shot alongside the smugglers' covered wagon.

“But,” Alyamac adds, “we said, ‘We only have one chance to make this film.’ And thank God we went, because we found an angle we hadn’t seen any of the times we’d gone before.”

“Shooting that scene was very emotional for all of us,” she continues. “Something magical yet so real was captured. After we wrapped the scene, we just sat there unable to move. A

sense of calm had taken over — we had captured the heartbreaking beauty of love and loss.”

Lost Birds concludes with a flashback to the Easter dinner from earlier in the film, before the family was separated. This time, though, “it’s a single shot, and we only pull back, where before there were separate shots,” Perdecì explains. “They had this time before, but it’s never going to be like that again. This is the moment the children realize their childhood is gone.”

All of the film’s locations save the orphanage were within approximately 30 miles of Ürgüp, in the Cappadocia region of central Turkey. The filmmakers therefore made Ürgüp their base of operations, and digital-imaging technician Müge Alper’s station — which included equipment rented from Arttek — was set up in one of the production’s hotel rooms. On set, the Alexa recorded ArriRaw files to internal Codex Capture Drives; the production carried four



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drives, which were turned over to Alper at the end of each shooting day. At her station in the hotel room, Alper utilized a single-dock workflow to back up each file to an external hard drive and two LTO-5 tapes; working with Blackmagic Designs' DaVinci Resolve, she also produced dailies, which Alyamac and Perdecı reviewed in batches every three days.

By the end of the 30 days of principal photography, the filmmakers had amassed 60 LTO-5 backup tapes, which they kept safely stored in Turkey. "Mehmet Eser, our Flame operator, helped us with our offline postproduction workflow and the technical requirements for transporting the entire project from Istanbul to Los Angeles," Alyamac notes. She and Perdecı traveled to Los Angeles with their external hard drive protected in a custom carry-on bag.

"When we started to make this film, we couldn't even dream that we'd

be here at EFilm," Perdecı enthuses. The impetus to try the facility, he adds, came from Roger Deakins, ASC, BSC, whom Perdecı had befriended over years of correspondence. "I asked him where to go, because on our first films in Turkey, postproduction was a disaster. And he just said, 'Go to EFilm.'"

The filmmakers have now spent the past five days finessing the movie with colorist Joel McWilliams, who's using DaVinci Resolve, working with the native 2880x1620 ArriRaw files. Perdecı's careful attention to the camera's Kelvin setting throughout the shoot, McWilliams says, "made everything very balanced. When we came in to do the grading, there was no limit to what we could do because it was so well shot."

Perdecı adds, "Joel did a very good job of making the blacks more black. We made dynamic, tracking grades through every frame. Joel took really good care [of the film]."

With the DI complete, Alyamac and Perdecı just have to review the final 2K DCP, which they'll carry back to Turkey for *Lost Bird's* theatrical release. "The journey continues," Perdecı muses. "And we are very happy on this journey. It's the most important thing, after all." ●

◀ TECHNICAL SPECS ▶

1.85:1

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