THE STRUGGLE AND RESILIENCE OF IRANIAN FILMMAKERS

By Geoffrey Macnab

Actress Baran Rasoulof accepted the Berlinale 2020's Golden Bear on behalf of her father, Mohammad, who shared the moment by phone link. Photo courtesy of Berlinale

You could easily think that Iranian cinema is in the midst of a prolonged golden age. Mohammad Rasoulof won the Golden Bear at the 2020 Berlinale for THERE IS NO EVIL a few weeks after Massoud Bakhshi's YALDA, A NIGHT FOR FORGIVENESS won the World Cinema Grand Jury Prize: Dramatic at Sundance. Asghar Farhadi's A SEPARATION (2012) and THE SALESMAN (2016) won a slew of prizes. Jafar Panahi won multiple awards in Cannes, Venice, Berlin and Locarno. Samira and Hana Makhmalbaf, daughters of the revered Mohsen Makhmalbaf, were acclaimed as young prodigies on the international festival circuit. The former won the Jury Prizes at Cannes for BLACKBOARDS in 2000 and for AT FIVE IN THE AFTERNOON in 2003; the latter made documentary JOY OF MADNESS (2003) when she was only 14. Bahman Ghobadi won the Camera d'Or at Cannes for his debut feature, A TIME FOR DRUNKEN HORSES (2000). Abbas Kiarostami, who died in 2016, is regarded as one of the towering figures of world cinema, and was a Palme d'Or winner.

What that list of international successes achieved by Iranian auteurs does not reveal, however, is the circumstances in which their films have often been made. Many of the country's best known directors have faced censorship, travel bans, harassment and imprisonment. Several – the Makhmalbafs, Ghobadi and Amir Naderi among them – are now living and working in exile.

Currently, because of international sanctions against Iran, and the COVID-19 crisis, public support for the film sector is drying up. Not that that support would find its way to dissident filmmakers like Rasoulof and Panahi, anyway.

Rasoulof's recent experiences provide a potent example of the predicament some directors face. He was prevented by the authorities from attending the Berlinale this year. Shortly after winning his Golden Bear, he was given the summons to serve the one-year jail sentence that the Iranian Revolutionary Court imposed on him (along with a two-year ban on travel). "I have not complied due to the outbreak of the coronavirus. The current situation is utterly vague," the director tells EFAs Close-Up in early May.

The local media "renounced the artistic value of the Golden Bear and politicised the award." Only on social media was his achievement acknowledged in Iran.

THERE IS NO EVIL

PERSEPOLIS

As Rasoulof explains, the circumstances in which he made THERE IS NO EVIL were also Kafkaesque in the extreme. "The situation is so unpredictable. The system I am confronted with is so irrational that you can never foresee what is going to happen to you next."

In theory, it is almost impossible for Rasoulof to continue directing films given the curbs placed on his personal and artistic freedoms. In practice, he has turned the problems to his advantage. "When you live under such pressure and such restrictive conditions, you must always find creative ways," he says.

The director acknowledges "the fear and anguish" in his situation but still works on. "I must pretend that there are no restrictions and that I am free to do whatever I want. This is the only way for me."

Rasoulof divided THERE IS NO EVIL into four sections, all of which were submitted as separate short films which would be shot by four different directors (all of whom were actually his assistants). He realised the officials were far less concerned with shorts than they were with features.

"We pretended each of these films had nothing to do with the others. They were shot in different locations, at different moments, with different crews," Rasoulof explains. His name was never mentioned on the crew lists and production schedules. He wouldn't be on set himself during shooting but would give his assistants storyboards and very precise shot lists. "I was in kind of remote control of the situation," is how he puts it.

All the stories touch on capital punishment. The protagonists, often ordinary Iranians, have to commit executions of their fellow citizens.

"What was important for me was to point to the issue of personal responsibility. When you are living in a despotic system, do you as an individual take responsibility for your acts or do you consider responsibility is only in the hands of this system?"

Human rights organisations, festivals and film bodies – including the European Film Academy and the new International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk – have protested against Rasoulof's treatment. "We need voices like that of Mohammad Rasoulof, voices defending human rights, freedom and dignity," EFA President Wim Wenders said in early March.

"The call from independent film institutions, filmmakers, artists and audiences for the human rights situations in Iran is very effective. I wholeheartedly believe that people like me would definitely be in a much harder situation, had it not been for their support," Rasoulof says.

The diversity of Iranian filmmaking voices

Iran-born filmmaker Marjane Satrapi is frustrated about the preconceptions that international audiences can still have about Iranian cinema.

"The Westerners, they love, 'Oh, this is this little girl. She is so spiritual and she is holding an apple and she is on the back of a donkey,'" Satrapi caricatures a folkloric style of Iranian filmmaking tailored to appeal to festival programmers' tastes.

"It's not that because we're Iranian, that means we only have three subjects to talk about and can't talk about anything else."

Satrapi expounds that Asghar Farhadi's A SEPARATION "is a John Cassavetes film. Something is going wrong in a relationship between a couple. How do they deal with it? You forget they're actually in Iran. That's what I really love about his cinema."

In her own career, Satrapi has deliberately made films like American serial killer drama THE VOICES and 2020's Marie Curie biopic RADIOACTIVE that have nothing to do with her Iranian background.

Satrapi first left Iran when she was 14, going to Vienna to study, and then she left her country for good when she was 24. Her experiences and those of her family are chronicled in her graphic novel and film PERSEPOLIS.

Under Iranian law, women are treated as being worth half a man. Satrapi's reaction to such overt sexism was to make sure she worked twice as hard. "When you live in a country where you're considered half of a man, then you have to try two times harder and become louder…you have to be bold, you cannot be scared," she explains.

Westerners only know Iranian films from after the Islamic revolution in 1979. This was a period when cinema enjoyed an unlikely boom, ironically partly because of the censorship. "Anything that is forbidden becomes extremely appealing," Satrapi remembers. "We had people coming like drug dealers with bags full of VHS films. We could choose our films, like choosing cocaine or ecstasy. We saw all the films coming out. That was our way of keeping up with what was going (on) in the world. With a government that wanted to close the country, that was our way of escape."

The Iranians who left the country after 1979 were often highly educated. They were not poor economic migrants. "Obviously, when you have the education, it is easier to reach things like art and cinema," Satrapi explains why so many among the diaspora have become successful artists and filmmakers.

Alongside so many powerful diaspora voices also including Babak Anvari, Ali Abbasi and Anahita Ghazvinizadeh, there are the second and third generations of Iranian immigrants like Maryam Keshavarz, Ramin Bahrani, Shirin Neshat and Ana Lily Amirpour who have made exceptional movies everywhere from Scandinavia and the UK to the US.


Keywan Karimi

Working in or out of the system

As Tehran-based producer and sales agent Mohammad Atebbai, founder of Iranian Independents, points out, several different kinds of filmmakers are active in Iran.

There are the so-called "circle of insiders" who make propaganda and neutral films, always staying on the right side of the authorities in order to secure state funding. They don't get into trouble with the authorities and "grow fat" on the economic favours bestowed on them by both government and non-government sources. When public financing is available, they are first in the queue.

Then there are the mainstream commercial directors who make populist movies, generally comedies, aimed at local audiences.

Leading a much more precarious existence, are the independent filmmakers who try to make films through the official channels. Often from the younger generation, they face daunting challenges in securing permits and approval for their scripts. The best of them, though, have achieved significant success at home and abroad. They include Farhadi, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, Saeed Roustaie, Shahram Mokri, Nima Javidi, Behnam Behzadi, Ida Panahandeh and Reza Dormishian. These filmmakers tend to look for financing from the private sector.

Also continuing to work, often in the face of enormous obstacles, are the underground filmmakers like Panahi and Rasoulof. On one level, these directors have an advantage over their colleagues. Operating outside the official system means they do not always need permits. As Rasoulof explains, independents have benefitted hugely from the move from celluloid to digital shooting.

The government has a monopoly over 35mm production and directors formerly struggled to find the cameras, the film stock or the labs to make their films without "coming under the absolute control and influence of this censorship apparatus," Rasoulof says. Now, though, they can often shoot on lightweight digital cameras and edit their movies on computers at home.

"Yet these filmmakers will not really have the chance to connect directly and widely with an Iranian audience," Rasoulof acknowledges.

Life after imprisonment

In 2015, Iranian director Keywan Karimi's documentary WRITING ON THE CITY, looking at graffiti in Tehran, landed him a prison term for "insulting the holy sanctities." His case became a cause celebre, with organisations like PEN and Amnesty International campaigning for his release (which came in 2017).

Speaking from Paris, the filmmaker is philosophical about his experiences behind bars. "I have a different understanding about freedom of speech, about censorship, about everything," he says.

Karimi had faced problems with his earlier films. From 2013 onward, he had been forbidden to travel, his passport had been taken away and he had been under house arrest.

"I know Iran. I grew up in this country. I grew up in this system," he says. Karimi realised his documentary's references to the political protests of the green movement might anger the authorities but did not expect a six-year sentence. Five years were eventually suspended. He was sent to Evin Prison in late 2016 and was released the following year.

One of the director's toughest challenges was coping with the lack of support after his release.

"When you are in prison, you are a case of human rights. Everybody pays attention, everybody calls you and everybody is writing about you," he notes. "When you come out of prison, that's the time you need attention."

The international interest in his case helped secure his release but, in 2017, once he was out of jail, that interest quickly dwindled. Invitations to festivals dried up.

Karimi came to Paris in 2018 for a two-year residency and is re-building his career, taking bar jobs when he needs extra money. He has an official visa and will eventually return to Tehran but is currently working on a new project, DO YOU KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT OMID?, which is part of the prestigious La Fabrique Cinéma 2020 programme.

Showing resilience

Most Iranian directors – with the exception of Farhadi, Panahi, Rasoulof and one or two others – struggle to sell their films internationally. And if they fall foul of local censors, they have limited chances of reaching Iranian audiences.

As the coronavirus continues to rage in spring 2020, the situation for the sector looks bleak. "There is no support by the government, all the cinemas are closed and all the projects are cancelled. The future seems very frightening," Atebbai warns.

However, Iranian filmmakers show extraordinary resilience. They persevere, whatever harassment or censorship they have faced. Rasoulof is the perfect example of this. At the end of one project, he always asks himself how he will be able to make another.

"To be honest, I have found a solution in my mind for the next film. This mental idea comforts me. I am optimistic and hopeful for the future," the defiant Golden Bear winner declares.

London-based Geoffrey Macnab writes for The Independent and Screen International. His books include Stairways to Heaven: Rebuilding the British Film Industry, Ingmar Bergman: The Life and Films of the Last Great European Director, and the forthcoming Dennis Davidson: A Life in Cinema and British Cinema in 25 Careers.

"WHEN YOU ARE IN PRISON, YOU ARE A CASE OF HUMAN RIGHTS. EVERYBODY PAYS ATTENTION, EVERYBODY CALLS YOU AND EVERYBODY IS WRITING ABOUT YOU. WHEN YOU COME OUT OF PRISON, THAT'S THE TIME YOU NEED ATTENTION."
Keywan Karimi