

An interview with Mojgan Khadem

## "Not just to entertain but to take the audience's breath away intellectually"

Richard Phillips  
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*Mojgan Khadem, the 31-year-old director of *Serenades* was born in Iran and lived there until she was 10 when her family was forced to leave the country to escape religious persecution by the Islamic fundamentalist regime. Khadem spent three years in Spain before moving to Australia in 1981. She studied filmmaking at the Australian Film Television and Radio school in Sydney, majoring in directing. After her graduate film *Requiem*, which won the Certificate of Merit at the Chicago International Film Festival, she made several documentaries. *Serenades* is her first feature film. She spoke to the World Socialist Web Site during a recent visit to Sydney.*

*Richard Phillips:* How did you discover the history of the Afghan cameleers in Australia and develop the basic ideas for *Serenades*?

*Mojgan Khadem:* I started research at the Mitchell Library in Sydney and began looking for material on the use of camels in Australia. I knew the Afghans had brought camels here and was intensely interested in the fact that these people were Muslim. Having come from Iran myself, I know that Islam plays a big role in whichever part of the world it happens to be. So I came up with many books and one them was called *Tin Mosques & Ghantowns* by Christine Stevens. I started reading it and couldn't put it down, not only because it told me the history of the Afghans and the camel trade in Australia but because it had many stories about the human interactions of these cameleers, how religion affected their everyday life and what conflicts it produced.

I wanted to discover more about these conflicts and began delving into the subject more deeply to find out how I could write a story within this colourful inter-cultural and inter-religious history. This process began in August 1994, seven years ago, when I was living in Sydney.

*RP:* And through this you met Christine Stevens and began collaborating with her to write the story.

*MK:* Yes. After reading *Tin Mosques and Ghantowns*, I coincidentally came across another book about the history of the German Lutheran missionaries in outback South Australia. The book was called *White Man's Dreaming* about the Killalpaninna mission station, and to my surprise it was written also by Christine Stevens. So I bought this book, read it and decided I had to contact Christine and ask her to assist me with the story that I was trying to devise. She agreed to help and we began discussing how this

story could be told and how it could be true. She provided me with advice on historical authenticity and accuracy. Once we came up with a skeleton beginning, middle and end, I started to write the script and flesh out the story.

*RP:* Why do you think this history is largely unknown to many Australians?

*MK:* Perhaps because the cameleers lived in sparsely populated parts of the country. There were only handfuls of people in the areas where they worked and the interactions were often on a very confrontational level. Maybe that's the reason why it hasn't attracted a great deal of attention. Most people are used to their history being told as vast dramas involving masses of people. The drama in this history takes place through relatively small numbers of people.

*RP:* And yet these people played a significant role in the European exploration of Central Australia.

*MK:* This is true. These men suffered tremendous hardship and sacrifice to help open up this country and provide supplies to the distant outstations. The camels and the Afghans, who were the only men that could handle these very unusual animals, were crucial in these areas at this time. But these people were so unusual in character and so foreign to the rest of the population that they remained very much in their own little clusters of communities and usually on the outskirts of a town. The communities were called Ghantowns—Marree had a Ghantown, so did Leigh Creek, Oodnadatta and many others—but there was a lot of prejudice against the Afghans and not many people mixed with them.

*RP:* The Afghan cameleers were targets of vicious race-baiting during this time, much of it from the union leaders, and some of what became the White Australia policy was directed against these workers. Is there a reason why you didn't feature any of this in the film?

*MK:* I was tempted to use this, and much, much more, but the problem is that there's not enough room in a two-hour film to include everything. I was constantly battling within myself over which aspects of the history to keep and which I would have to leave behind for other filmmakers and storytellers to use. There is rich, rich material there, enough even for an ongoing series.

*RP:* Why do you think so few Australian filmmakers are tackling historical subjects today?

*MK:* Certainly historical issues were more fashionable amongst

Australian filmmakers in the 1970s. There were films like *Breaker Morant* and *Gallipoli* that dealt with important historical events. It's true that recent films tend to only deal with contemporary issues.

My approach has always been that it's necessary to go back and review various historical periods in order to understand the foundation of certain conflicts. We cannot really find answers today unless we go back and find the very roots or beginnings of those interactions. If this is done then maybe it will be possible to move on, not repeat history or at least the mistakes. I wanted to explore the issues in *Serenades* on an individual level but in order to understand these individuals you have to know their history and the society they emerge from.

**RP:** One comment I read in the film's production notes says that *Serenades* transcends racial and religious identity. Can you elaborate on this?

**MK:** Based on historical research and some artistic license, I've created Jila, a character who is torn between three very influential cultures and religions. She is personally linked with the Aborigines, the Afghan Muslims and the German Lutheran Christians. Her mother was an Aborigine and she can't deny that lifeline; her father was an Afghan Muslim and she can't deny that; and yet the love of her life is a German Lutheran boy and in line to become the next pastor at the mission. She is connected to these cultures on a very personal level but in order to find her identity she has to deny one or two of these influences and embrace a third one, or she must deny them all because they are all in conflict with each other.

In order to remain true to herself, Jila must search for truth and this is very painful for her. On one level, the different cultures seem to be in conflict and yet in one way or another they are all attempting to bring about a fulfilling existence. The word transcendence comes into play because if you can't reconcile these differences then you have to rise above them in order to reach a level of fulfillment.

I believe that the answer for Jila lies in recognising the essential unity of humanity. Human diversity is truly beautiful but it must not be judged or used as a means for inciting war as it has been in the West Bank, the former Yugoslavia and in parts of Africa. This is what I am attempting to get people to think about through this film. So I had to create a hybrid sort of character, someone directly involved, rather than being detached on a political level.

While people are made of different traditions and religions, rather than identifying ourselves as Aborigine, Muslim, Christian or whatever, it is necessary to identify ourselves first and foremost as part of the human race.

**RP:** You make a number of pointed references in the film to the destructive role played by religion. One of the characters, I'm not sure who, shouts out "I hate all Gods" at one stage during the film.

**MK:** Religion has got a lot to answer for as far as creating barriers between people. It has created disunity and division between people. These barriers must be questioned. I am not saying religion should be done away with—I have a lot of appreciation for the good literature, art and music inspired by religion. But much persecution has taken place in the name of religion and I think enough is enough as far as warfare on these

issues is concerned.

**RP:** Your family was forced to leave Iran for religious reasons. Can you explain what happened?

**MK:** My family happens to be Bahai, a religion that emerged after the establishment of Islam. Muslims believe that Mohamed was the last of god's prophets to come to earth and so they are opposed to the Bahai faith, considering it to be blasphemous. Bahais believe that religion has a role to play as long as it doesn't bring about warfare and prejudice. My family came under threat in Iran because my mother was serving on a committee for the advancement and equality of women, which the Bahai religion believes in. This was opposed the Iranian government and it became quite dangerous for us. We left Iran and went to Spain for three years and then came to Australia.

**RP:** We have run out of time but could you comment on some of the filmmakers that have influenced you and your opinion about contemporary cinema?

**MK:** In general, I'm fascinated by myths and legends. Ultimately, I try to tell stories that have a universal scope and appeal. I particularly like many of the films being made in Iran at the moment. I like Abbas Kiarostami's films, which are very eccentric and beautiful. I also like Majid Majidi, who made *The Color of Paradise* and *The Children of Heaven*, and Moshen Makhmalbaf, particularly *Salaam Cinema* and *Gabbeh*.

My influences, though, are very diverse. I am a fan of Wim Wenders, who makes very unique films, and I like early Italian films, those by Vittorio De Sica such as *The Bicycle Thief*, and I am fond of Australian filmmakers like Peter Weir. I also like Hal Hartley's work and his ability to create very deadpan characters who make you think about things in a very straightforward manner.

Film is still a young medium and I believe it is still developing. Yes, it is a means of commerce, and is being used as such, but there is plenty of room for engaging masses of people with work that attempts to promote higher aspirations. There has to be much more consideration given to this and films created that encourage masses of people to think beyond their immediate daily existence.

We should be asking ourselves how to tell stories that take our audience's breath away intellectually, rather than just entertain them on a superficial level. Filmmakers that have done that in the past in a very unassuming and humble way inspire me the most. These basic ingredients seem to have been forgotten by many, many filmmakers and producers and funding bodies. This is a great tragedy.



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