

San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 2

“But there is a great deal more to say”

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This is the second of three articles on the recent San Francisco International Film Festival. The third article will be posted next week.

Our Times (*Ruzegar-e Ma*) is a remarkable documentary shot in Tehran during the 2001 Iranian presidential elections. By its sensitivity to the most pressing problems of life and its willingness to grapple with them, the work propels director Rakhshan Bani-Etemad (*Under the Skin of the City*), who has a body of work dating back to 1979, into the leading ranks of Iranian filmmakers. It is certainly superior to recent efforts by more prominent figures.

In an interview posted on the *Northeast Network* web site, Bani-Etemad revealed that most of her documentaries have no exhibition permits and thus have not been shown in Iran, except in bootleg form. “More than anything, it has hardened my mettle and made me more resilient because it just makes me seek ways to transcend the limitations. I believe that freedom is not a gift but something we have to push for.”

In the opening segment of *Our Times*, more than 700 candidates, including 48 women, have applied to be candidates for president during a time, as described in a voice-over, of “fear, hope, doubt and trust.” (In the end, the so-called Guardian Council, in a thoroughly arbitrary and undemocratic manner, permitted only 10 candidates to run in the election, none of them female.) A group of young people decides to set up a campaign headquarters for incumbent president and “reformer” Mohammed Khatami. “We’ll give our lives for reform,” says one of the youth; another has lost an eye in a political altercation. Bani-Etemad’s daughter, Baran Kowsari, is one of the campaigners, who are in constant confrontation with a population increasingly disillusioned by Khatami’s performance in power since 1997.

Khatami’s eventual overwhelming victory (77 percent of the vote) expressed a clear rejection of the most right-wing elements within the Iranian establishment, and at the same time the lack of a progressive alternative. Despite claims in the international media, Khatami does not represent a genuine democratic opposition, but rather the “left” flank of the reactionary clerical regime.

After voting day, the flocks of young people who dominated the streets of Tehran and pro-Khatami rallies disappear. The director’s narration explains: “Young people entered the scene. They spend all their overflowing energy in a social movement and then they’re gone. Elections are a chance to speak out on needs and desires.”

In the film’s production notes, the director elaborates on the role young people played in the elections: “During the presidential elections of 1997 in Iran, more than twenty million people gave their votes to Khatami. Four years later in 2001, lots of them, disappointed with the process of reform, were discouraged from re-voting for Khatami. But in the meantime, Iranian youngsters, forming more than half of the country’s population, participated actively in the elections with the hope that their support would strengthen Khatami against conservative forces.”

The film’s second and more compelling part revolves around the director’s “curiosity” about the female candidates who had sought to run

against Khatami. Most of them are poor, in their late teens and early twenties—the same approximate age, but from a different social layer than the more privileged pro-Khatami supporters we saw in the first portion of the film. They express sentiments, such as “I wanted to see how much courage and how brave I was” or “This is a cold regime, but I have a warm heart and high hopes.” Some of the candidates could not be found or were not permitted by their husbands to be interviewed.

But it is when the filmmaker decides to go back and visit candidate Arezoo Bayat that the film changes direction and almost assumes another identity. Of all the candidates she interviews, Bani-Etemad is drawn to Arezoo because of her statement: “I feel like I understand all the people because I have faced the same situations of poverty, drug addiction and unemployment. We need to raise a voice against injustice.” The sequences focusing on the harsh conditions of Arezoo’s life represent a sharp contrast to (and even perhaps an implicit criticism of) the film’s opening scenes dominated by a largely middle-class group of young people, consisting of artists like Bani-Etemad’s daughter and children of other famous artists.

The filmmaker describes (again in the production notes) her principal motives for making *Our Times* and the relationship between the film’s somewhat disparate sections: “The presence of those who, for the first time, were taking part in a political movement and also Arezoo, a young lady with the highest level of poverty and family problems who presented herself as a presidential candidate, became the reasons that encouraged me to make a film about this period to be recorded in history.”

At the time of the elections, Arezoo is being evicted to make room for the landlady’s new daughter-in-law and now must find a place to live for herself, her 9-year-old daughter and a blind mother. She works until 10 or 11 at night for an insurance firm, but nonetheless is desperately poor and castigated for being unmarried. Two previous marriages ended in divorce—both her former spouses were drug-addicted (Arezoo discovered her first husband shooting up using their daughter’s shirt as a tourniquet). “It’s one thing if bad things happen to me, but when they happen to a child that really shatters me,” Arezoo tells the camera.

Her second husband was 15 years older, and a week after the marriage she learned that he too was an addict: “I hated him so much, but when he went to jail because of his addiction, I hated him even more.” Campaign time for her candidacy is taken up by a desperate house-hunt marked by continuous rejection due to her economic and marital status.

On election day, Arezoo finds a home but receives another body blow when she learns that she has been fired from her office job for the few days she has taken for the search—this, despite having obtained permission from her boss. As she tries to plead her case, Arezoo is prevented from even setting foot on the premises.

Simple existence now strains Arezoo’s physical and emotional being to its limits. The camera zooms in close on her beautiful and prematurely aging face. As the viewer is given time to absorb the visage’s pain and dignity, Arezoo somberly explains: “I am 25 years old and I feel as if I

had lived for 50 years. I wanted people to hear what I have to say because my thoughts are similar to theirs and my experience is similar to theirs. On the day of the elections, in the process of moving, I lost my birth certificate and could not vote anyway. And the president was elected anyway, and you made a film. And I said some things, but there is a great deal more to say and someday I'll write it all down."

These final moments are almost unbearably wrenching and impart to the movie a great depth, a genuine sense of a universal and all-consuming state of injustice. Although the politics of *Our Times* remains at a relatively low level, this last scene strikes a profound note of protest.

Set in West Bengal in 1969, Indian director Buddhadeb Dasgupta's *A Tale of a Naughty Girl* is a slightly naive, lyrical story, replete with colorful imagery, that centers on a bright young village girl, Lati, struggling against a life to which she seems doomed.

Based on a short story by Bengali writer Prafulla Roy, Dasgupta's script incorporates three of his own poems in the tale of Lati's escape from being "sold" by her prostitute mother to a rich, lecherous businessman. The repeatedly referenced event that inspires Lati to thwart her mother's plans is the first moon landing in July 1969, commemorated in the director's poem, "Neil Armstrong Peeps In."

The film's first image is jarring: a slovenly elderly man sits alone in a darkened movie theater watching a film loop of a woman being attacked, Bollywood-style, by a group of men. The reprobate is Badu, the cinema's misogynistic owner and the richest man in the provincial town of Gospira—where women must prostitute themselves to survive. As a psychological barometer of his physical and moral decay, Badu is periodically seen obsessing over a tree being disfigured by termites.

Next, Ganesh the cab driver stops himself at the last minute from having sex with a destitute young girl (a new recruit to the ranks of the prostitutes) as payment for a ride to Gospira. Slightly chastened by the experience, Ganesh finds himself saddled with an old, sick couple looking for a hospital, who have been abandoned by fellow villagers. Growing progressively more sympathetic, Ganesh scours the barren landscape in his vehicle, with the half-dead couple in the back seat, in search of the non-existent hospital ("God never comes to this neighborhood").

He eventually deposits the couple beneath a great tree under an evening sky, a setting that has the look and feel of a promised land. Ganesh has been transformed from a grasping, selfish, small-time operator into a decent fellow who now plays a game of ludo with the rejuvenated elders. Along the way, his character provides some comic relief, as well as something of a framework for the film. Ganesh also functions, in some respects, as the film's guide.

The cabby's story intertwines with Lati's as Badu, Ganesh's boss, is the "patron" who wants to marry the 14-year-old. Lati's mother, Rajani—Gospira's leading lady of the night—is willing to trade her virginal daughter to the town's big-shot in return for a big house full of servants.

Lati's teacher, however, has filled the girl's head with far bigger ambitions, symbolized by the great feat of the astronauts' walk on the moon. Just as the cabbie discovers a lost innocence through his interaction with society's less fortunate, Lati refuses to surrender her innocence to the rich Badu and flees—with Ganesh's help—in search of a more educated, cultured existence. As Lati boards a train leaving Gospira with her mentor-teacher, Neil Armstrong is talking his first steps on the lunar surface.

In an interview that appeared in *The Hindu*, director Dasgupta comments on the film's final sequence: "It may be a happenstance that the day Lati makes her journey to Kolbata with her teacher, who gave her the first taste of wisdom, man first steps on the moon. Both journeys are vital, one for America and another for the daughter of a whorehouse."

Offering mankind's reaching up into the stars as the source of Lati's aspirations and subsequent opposition to her circumstances is valid and original. However, the motif serves a little too much as a substitute for showing the inner workings of the complicated social and emotional

processes involved. It is something of a short-cut, even a little pat.

Dasgupta is quoted in another article, *The Poetry of Cinema* by Subir Ghosh: "When I make a film, my only desire is to produce those very non-static images that I had seen behind closed eyes." With *A Tale of a Naughty Girl*, the director has created a work that is non-static, containing imagery that appears to be generated by the imagination (behind closed eyes?). It does not, however, essentially succeed in accomplishing the filmmaker's stated goal of uncovering "the inner laws of the form," such as "seeing beyond" the lines of a painting or "perceiving a pattern arising from the verbal signs" of a poem. Despite these somewhat extravagant claims, Dasgupta's latest work for the most part remains rather mundanely on the Earth's surface, but it does tell a direct story, with a strong element of protest, in an imaginative and well-executed manner.

Present in this latest work, is an important idea for Dasgupta: "We have reached a time when we must open warfare on mediocrity, greyness and lack of expressiveness, and make creative inquiry a rule in cinema."

One might summarize Respiro as follows: pretty scenery, pretty people...and pretty thin as a film. Set on Lampedusa, a remote island off the coast of Sicily, director-screenwriter Emanuele Crialesse tells the story of Grazia (Valeria Golino), part emotional instability and part free spirit, whose nonconformist behavior unbalances the community. She is like one of the stray dogs that the townspeople despise and have locked up. It becomes the consensus that she should be incarcerated too, in a psychiatric institution in Milan.

Grazia runs away and feigns a suicide, causing her husband and the villagers to feel remorse for their treatment of her. When she resurfaces (literally—from the ocean), all have learned a lesson. Surrounding her in the water, the community embraces her and her oddities. The film starts off as a conventional, realist work and shifts awkwardly onto the path of a trite fable. One point of interest is that actress Golino is the only professional in the cast and some of the performers, particularly Francesco Casisa as Grazia's eldest son Pasquale, are engaging.



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