

Toronto International Film Festival 2004

Interview with Bahman Ghobadi, director of *Turtles Can Fly*

David Walsh
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At the recent Toronto film festival, David Walsh spoke to Bahman Ghobadi through an interpreter.

David Walsh: There are people who think that art should or must be silent in the face of great human tragedy. This is obviously not your view.

Bahman Ghobadi: What can I say? I went to Iraq two weeks after the war to screen *Marooned in Iraq*, which was being screened in that war atmosphere, in Baghdad.

I took a small camcorder with me. I came back and I reviewed the footage. Somehow the children grabbed me and forced me to go, and I heard this voice telling me, you must go to Iraq, you must say something.

The film was made under very difficult and taxing conditions. It's one thing if someone goes and makes a documentary, but to do a feature-length film under those conditions is very difficult. Any minute I was expecting a bomb or some kind of shooting. The Barzani government gave us 20 bodyguards. They were protecting us throughout the making of the film.

It was after making this film that I truly recognized my love for filmmaking. I never loved my films before. This one I'm in love with. Because it truly reflects life there. I can't even see myself as the maker of the film, I feel distant from it when I watch it. I still have to understand it myself. I can't recall all the tribulations and difficulties we had. All of that is gone.

DW: Was the American army around?

BG: The Americans were there, and through the Barzani government, we managed to get a helicopter for the film.

DW: Why do you concern yourself with children in particular?

BG: It was out of my control. My intention was to

make a movie in the city about adults, but when I went there I saw so many children with such desperation, these children without limbs, I could not deny their cry. And so many weapons, and destroyed schools.

Miles and miles of landmines. Every day children are killed or injured because of these mines. The film is about war. It shows the tragedy of war. Children bring home the impact of war more than anyone.

I also believe that in a sense this film is not about children. It's about these young people who have become adults prematurely, who have never had a childhood. Many adults in Europe and elsewhere have never seen the suffering these children have seen in their short lives.

DW: How did you approach choosing the children and directing them?

BG: If there is no love, no passion for the subject, one would be completely overwhelmed. So the foundation of the film is a passionate feeling. For three months I searched for these performers, and it's not that you don't see many limbless children, you can see many in the first five minutes of your visit, but it was in one way an excuse for me to process the film myself. Also, I wanted to find the best performers, who had all the qualities I was looking for.

Part of getting these children to perform is never asking them to act. I just bring their own reality out and show it on film. What you see is the real life of that person.

To be able to get a blind child to come out in front of the camera, or the child without arms to perform in that way, there's an expression in Farsi, it's like taking your skin off. It's as difficult as that. But when I do that, I don't consider that a difficulty, it's part of what

I have to do to bring this out.

I want to make my films for viewers whom I believe are intelligent, and they're passionate, and they have the power of understanding. And I don't believe they're in the minority, I believe they're in the majority. I want to make my future films for that majority. I'm going to make the leap, and my goal is to make a bigger film, with the same strength, but very lively. And somewhat different from the New Iranian films. I like to give my audiences a shock. The same shock I received from these children in Iraq. I want to reflect that shock to my audience.

DW: Although some of the images that are most memorable are quiet ones, like the girl's face when she's sitting in front of the pile of empty artillery shells. You are rare in dealing with the most difficult and intimate details in a very honest and objective way.

BG: I am a child from that region, and it's a rough region, with rough people, with strong people. And I am one of those people of Kurdistan. My childhood was rough, and I gained my strength from tribal life. I know the people well, I connect with them well. And that strength is part of my own being.

DW: Why are there so few serious films being shown today?

BG: It's the ignorance of the people with money, the producers and the big companies. They are so ignorant that all they see is dollars and how they can make more. They have not used the medium of filmmaking for the benefit of humanity. The content of all these movies is equally empty. Their sex is empty. Their action is empty. Their passion is empty. And all of them resemble one another.

Those who believe otherwise cannot stand still, they have to do their own groundwork, face their own difficult challenges, but they have to say what they have to say, because ultimately cinema will not stay the way it is today. At the moment cinema is primarily a business matter, it's show business.

DW: I'm a socialist and an opponent of the US invasion of Iraq. It had nothing to do with freeing the Iraqi people or the Kurds, in my view, and everything to do with the pursuit of American geopolitical interests. What is your opinion?

BG: I agree that this was not their purpose. Otherwise they would have invaded 40 years ago. Many Kurds had illusions in America. I too perhaps. But their eyes

are being opened. One dictatorship has replaced another.

DW: The Kurdish people will not be liberated by US tanks and missiles. Washington was an ally of Saddam Hussein in the 1980s.

BG: I know. I wonder sometimes if they didn't stage the deaths of his sons. Perhaps they are living somewhere. It's the same show business.

But it's not just the Americans, the Germans, the French, the Italians—they've all been ravaging our region for years. They not only steal, that you can understand—or it's not surprising—but why do they have to destroy everything?



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