

An interview with Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, co-director of *Gilaneh*

3 October 2005

Joanne Laurier and David Walsh spoke to Rakhshan Bani-Etemad in Toronto

WSWS: What have been the long-term consequences of the Iran-Iraq war, economically, morally, psychologically?

Rakhshan Bani-Etemad: A combination of all them, mentally, culturally, and I think the immense impact of this destruction will reveal itself in the course of time.

WSWS: What is the worst consequence?

RBE: I think the worst consequence has been the destruction of national resources, financially, physically, and, most importantly, the death of many young people, either those who were killed or those who were damaged.

WSWS: Have there been many Iranian films about the war? Critical films?

RBE: There have been many critical films, but none precisely resemble *Gilaneh*. War veterans when they watched the film said that this is the only film they could really connect to and that has truly revealed their feelings.

Maybe the difference is that my film is not just about the war between Iran and Iraq, it was mainly a film about peace and that was my viewpoint.

WSWS: Why did you choose the countryside, instead of Tehran, as the home of the family?

RBE: I wanted it to be as remote as possible from the immediate reality of the war. The village in which Ismaeel lived was so far from the realities of the war, not even a gunshot was heard in that village during the war; but even 15 years after the war, you can still see the repercussions of the war in that village.

And I felt that this would be the perfect place to portray the loneliness of Ismaeel, the fact that he has been deserted and left behind. I thought using this beautiful landscape as a background would bring this isolation to the fore even more intensely.

During a year and a half I lived with the people in this village, I could observe their lives on a day-to-day basis, so I can say that I could sense what they were going through during this period.

And usually when I do research I don't go and look for facts, because I already know the facts, and I know the general dimensions of a situation, what I do is go live with these families so I can put myself in their shoes, to be able to know what they are experiencing, or have experienced.

Usually what I do is that I grasp the realities of the society—of course I dramatize it, but in the process of dramatization I will try to make it as close to the documentary style as possible, so that it will reflect the reality intimately.

WSWS: Is there much government assistance for the veterans?

RBE: There is assistance, but, in my opinion, it is not at all enough.

This probably happens everywhere, but in Iran the veterans are more

ignored than other places.

It is a very saddening experience when I invited one of the veterans to watch the film and he asked me which movie theater it was showing at. I asked him why he cared. Because, he said, there are very few movie theaters that have wheelchair access. I think this is a very basic issue for the veterans of the war, many of whom are quadriplegic or paralyzed. This is a basic right they should have. And this is a very small example, and it simply shows how they are denied basic rights.

WSWS: The first part of the film is set during the war, but it shows much more human solidarity. The second part, although set in peace, is much more isolated feeling, much more alienating. The film implies, whether it means to or not, that there has been a growth in alienation in Iranian society during those years.

RBE: My intention in the second part of the film was to show, above all, the amnesia that has been prevalent in the entire society, and the loneliness of people like Ismaeel. He is observing the outside world through these passers-by, who just pass him without even seeing him.

I always thought that if I showed Ismaeel in an urban setting I would not be able to portray him as a universal victim of war, he would be more depicted as a victim of the specific war between Iran and Iraq. But when I set him in that beautiful scenery, that village, in nature, I thought he could more of a universal figure. He could be a young American who goes to war and is a victim, he could be an Iraqi soldier, a Palestinian, an Israeli soldier, for that matter. *Gilaneh*, for the same reason, could be the universal mother figure, she could be an American, Palestinian or Iraqi mother. This is how I wanted to show my hatred for war, and my sorrow that we, in the twenty-first century, should be going through such horrific experiences.

WSWS: We are used to a certain style among Iranian directors—long takes, non-professional actors—your approach seems to be more emotional, more theatrical.

RBE: I think cinema is cinema. For me cinema has a definition based on which I try to portray my beliefs and thoughts. It is always the subject matter and the theme of the film that will determine the structure and technique, as well as the cast.

It happened in one film I used non-professional actors, but that depends on the film.

Having said that, using the cinema techniques, the logic of cinema, it's my heart that leads me to make films, it must touch the hearts of the audience.

WSWS: What is the relationship between fiction and documentary in your work?

RBE: I feel they are closely interwoven, sometimes I find it hard to separate them. I can say that while I am doing the research and the shooting that is when the documentary part comes into the picture. Although I take advantage of all the cinematic and dramatic

techniques, I put all my effort to make it as close as possible to the reality of the society. Maybe that's the reason why many people think that *Gilaneh* is played by a non-professional—despite all the directing, make-up, etc., there are still people in the audience who think that she is non-professional.

WSWS: *Our Times* begins as a film about your daughter and her friends campaigning for Khatami in the presidential election, then it changes course and becomes a film about an oppressed woman. It seems as though you had found a more tragic story, a more crucial story.

RBE: Exactly. There are many ways to look at the election. I chose to look at it from the point of view of youth and women. It was in the course of pursuing that this structure almost imposed itself on me, I decided to take a different direction.

It was a matter of luck.

WSWS: It was a matter of luck to meet her, but not to follow her situation. That was a moral and artistic choice. Are there special difficulties facing women directors in Iran?

RBE: It's still to speak about the new government, because we are unsure how they are going to deal with cultural issues yet. This transitional period is difficult, as we wait for the changes to make themselves felt.

I would say that women filmmakers don't face any more problems than men filmmakers.

WSWS: What is your opinion of the present state of Iranian filmmaking?

RBE: The best way I can describe the current status of filmmaking in Iran: I would say that we as filmmakers in Iran are swimmers in a huge ocean who are struggling very hard to keep afloat. The independent filmmakers, that is. Because the commercial filmmakers are not facing very many difficulties, but the independent filmmakers, on the other hand, are the ones who have to struggle really hard, those who respect the essence of cinema and who respect thought.

There are financial hardships that they face and, naturally, a cultural side as well.

WSWS: Iranian filmmaking has had a significant impact on the world over the past 10 or 15 years. Do you have any thoughts on why this is the case?

RBE: One reason is that probably the international audience is curious to know about these countries like Iran, or other countries in the region, but, more importantly, is that the viewpoint of the Iranian filmmakers on issues is not simply individualistic, they try to put things in a broader perspective and look at human relationships in a different fashion.

WSWS: How did you become a filmmaker?

RBE: The fact that I became a filmmaker was not a matter of luck, nor was I forced to become a filmmaker. I started at a very young age. I was a teenager when I decided to study cinema and it is almost 32 years now since I took this path. During this time I have worked very, very hard in this field, and I would say that cinema is not my job or my career, it is my life.

WSWS: In the second part of the film the American invasion of Iraq is beginning—an illegal war, an imperialist war. There's a suggestion in the film that certain Iranians thought, "Oh, Saddam Hussein is gone, good riddance, maybe it will be better." I wonder if that mood existed, and if it still exists.

RBE: Yes, there was a minority who held that opinion. But I think if there is going to be a war against Iran by the US, those people would be the first to defend their country and turn against this war.

Because it's true that there are many problems in our country, but welcoming a foreign, occupying force into one's country is something that is absolutely unacceptable in our culture.

WSWS: In this controversy over Iran's nuclear program, the US is preparing new provocations. The American authorities certainly have plans for a war against Iran, sooner or later.

RBE: I hope the US does not make that mistake again. Two years ago when the invasion of Iraq took place I was on my way to the States. While I was in the airport in Iran there was a "shipment" of corpses of Iranian soldiers from the Iran-Iraq war who were arriving. When I arrived at an airport in Texas I saw a group of American soldiers who were heading in that direction. I couldn't hold back my tears, because at that moment I wasn't thinking whether these soldiers were American, or what their nationality was, because I could only imagine the dangers they were facing and the image of the dead bodies of the Iranian soldiers coming back to the country rushed into my head.

I can never understand why people living in the twenty-first century cannot find a civilized way of talking to each other, why can't people find a better solution than waging wars against each other and killing each other like savages, like primates?

WSWS: My answer is that we don't yet have a rational social system.

RBE: I always wish that governments would let the people alone and simply deal with each other.

WSWS: The US government has the same policy for Americans and people all over the world, as we see in New Orleans. Their policy is war and the destruction of rights at home. Do you know about Cindy Sheehan? She's the mother of a dead soldier who started protesting outside Bush's ranch.

RBE: Oh, yes, I know her! I hope that *Gilaneh* will be shown in the US. Because I think she speaks for many American mothers.

WSWS: May I ask which filmmakers have inspired you?

RBE: The fact is that I always have been inspired by society itself, there is not one filmmaker that I have been inspired by. It's true that I have always been touched and inspired by filmmakers who deal with social issues, different films by different filmmakers, but my inspiration always comes from society itself.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact