

An interview with Bahman Ghobadi, director of *Half Moon*

“If I only want to say what the government wants me to, then I have to be a government employee, not a filmmaker”

David Walsh
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David Walsh and Joanne Laurier spoke to Iranian-Kurdish filmmaker Bahman Ghobadi at the Toronto film festival

David Walsh: It seems to me the presence of death is everywhere in this new film.

Bahman Ghobadi: I never live in the present. I'm always thinking about the next 10 years or 20 years of my life. I'm just afraid. But the only time I'm not scared is when I make films. In my life so far, I've experienced so many different kinds of death. Private death, and death as the result of political events, of repression. The deaths of my family members. Death in our culture has a magical concept. And at the moment I can see the strength of the Middle Eastern culture. Every day I'm waiting for death and I'm very anxious.

DW: I wonder if artists are especially afraid of death, and art is a way of freezing time, of keeping something alive?

BG: I agree with that. As an independent filmmaker, I also want to look at it in a different light. As an independent filmmaker, I want my film to be seen in the right way. But also when I come to a big festival like Toronto and Cannes and other festivals, I can see the death of independent filmmaking at these festivals. And I'm quite afraid of that. I usually think and ask myself, what should we do? But I also make a lot of points to the audience and try to draw them in. There is a type of death for the audience, if independent cinema dies, that I'm afraid of. And I think if this film does not get the right distribution, the film will be worse than death, for me.

I live cinema, I breathe cinema, all my life is about

cinema. And I haven't really enjoyed my life. And I don't even enjoy filmmaking. Now I feel that I'm an addict of filmmaking. Maybe that is why I'm afraid of death. Maybe I torture myself and have a lot of hardship.

DW: With the increased aggressivity of the United States, is the internal situation of Iran changing? Does the government impose more censorship as the US threatens war?

BG: Obviously, the problems are related to one another. Since the election of the new president [Ahmadinejad], everything is changing and they have started to seize all the satellite dishes in Iran. It's in this situation that three days ago my film was banned. I never expected that. And now they are accusing me of being a Kurdish separatist.

DW: Is it because of the scenes of the brutal Iranian police?

BG: The police, because females are singing in my film, but mostly because of the map that's seen [with "Kurdistan" on it].

DW: The woman in your film is hiding because presumably she could not sing in public.

BG: In Iran, women are not allowed to sing in public. My film is about that. I censored myself and I cut a lot of scenes that I thought the ministry would not have liked. But now that they banned the film, I'm disappointed with myself. I live in a country where we are not allowed to show musical instruments on television.

I made this film for the 250th anniversary of Mozart's birth. And I live in a society in which women

are not allowed to sing publicly. And I could not even show one-third of what I wanted to show. Just because I'm afraid of censorship. And now I'm saying: Why didn't I do it? I should have shown everything.

DW: The scene of the banned women is an extraordinary moment. The film refers in passing to the fall of Saddam Hussein, there is a reference to the Americans "shooting at anything that moves." And of course there's a reference to the Turkish military, there's the Iranian police. All these forces are shown to be brutal and oppressive. It's a sensitive question. There is also the presence of the Kurdish administration in northern Iraq, which in my opinion is a puppet of the US.

BG: I don't want to talk about this because of the situation the Kurdish people are in right now.

DW: What's the relationship between art and music and a very difficult political situation?

BG: Everything is related to everything else. All aspects of our lives. From daily living to the instruments that the artists get. And to the trauma that I have in my head. I have never been so afraid of going back to Iran as I am right now. And I don't know what will happen tomorrow. If they are going to bomb Iran or not.

Instead of thinking about my next film, I'm thinking about how I can get enough food for my mother. We are all waiting for something to happen. The Iran-Iraq war went on for eight years. In those eight years we fell behind more than 80 years. And we can easily envision a more disastrous time. I'm thinking about these things and how I can save my family.

DW: You realize today is five years since 9/11?

BG: That was the worst day of my life. The day that I saw that on the news, I was in the capital of Kurdistan in Iran. I was waiting for the United States to nuke Iran and Iraq at the time. I was afraid for almost two weeks.

DW: Obviously, the US has launched wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and both have been disasters. But precisely because they've been disasters, they're planning some kind of new attack on Iran. What do think would be the consequences if the US dropped bombs on Iran?

BG: It's too awful. I can't think about it.

DW: Why is there a ban on your film, and is there any way to get it reversed?

BG: I called the Minister of Culture personally last

week and asked him please not to seize or ban the film. Just take out what you want, I said. But then he said, even if you take out 20 minutes of it, it won't be helpful because it's the "soul" of your film that is about Kurdish separatism. But I said, it's my baby. It's not about separatism. I'm Iranian. I don't want even this much separatism from the motherland. But do I have the right to talk about the problems that face our society?

If I only want to say what the government wants me to, then I have to be a government employee, not a filmmaker. We are filmmakers. It's my job to film everywhere I want to. The government is not a filmmaker. Our job is to ask difficult questions, the most difficult.

DW: And that's what I think is the strength of your filmmaking, it consistently asks the most difficult and painful questions. The heart of the film is neither separatism nor anti-separatism. The heart of the film is a feel for humanity and a hostility to oppression in all forms.

BG: I cannot stop. I have to make my next film in Tehran. Even if it is made underground. Because I am afraid of death, I have six projects in mind. Before I die I want to have 20 films under my belt.

I'll be in Toronto every year from now on, not every two years.

We have to fight for the rights of female artists. This is the truth of our life. This is reality. It's about self-expression, it's about soul. People in Iran are suffocating. There is little freedom.



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