An interview with Ramin Bahrani, director of Chop Shop

David Walsh
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David Walsh spoke to filmmaker Ramin Bahrani during the Toronto film festival

David Walsh: In 1994 I came to this festival for the first time. I don't think I'd ever seen an Iranian film. I saw *Through the Olive Trees* and I was overwhelmed by that film. I had never seen anything by Abbas Kiarostami, I didn't know his name. I managed to obtain an interview with him, and I asked him the same question I'll ask you, which was: "Why did you choose this subject matter, the lives of ordinary people, poor people, and not the usual fare of high-tech thrillers, super-models and celebrities?"

Ramin Bahrani: The most obvious answer is because that's not the way the world really is. And there's something that I've been talking about here, because it's been bothering me since some of the reviews of my first film [*Man Push Cart*, 2005], and especially after a certain review that came out at Cannes. By the way, all these reviews were positive. But a certain language in them bothered me. The *Variety* review spoke of a 'Third-World style of filmmaking.' What does that mean? First of all, what does 'Third World' mean? Secondly, I didn't know Ken Loach lives in what this person thinks is the 'Third World.' Or Rossellini, Ozu, probably he thinks Kiarostami is in the Third World.

Then you get into, again, very positive reactions to the film, and people saying, "Bahrani is focusing on marginalized characters again.' I think I'm focusing on how half the population of the world lives, at least half, probably far more. While I think Woody Allen is an amazing filmmaker, that's one percent of the population. And I think that 99 percent of Hollywood films and American independent films are about 'marginalized' people, who are privileged and white. And so I challenge those commentators, even though they are very respectful and they like my films. I don't think these people are ill-spirited or they wish ill will, I just don't think they're aware of exactly what those things mean, because those terms are outdated. The same as the conception of 'national cinema' is a bit outdated.

If you look at some of the first writings about *Man Push Cart*, either I'm Pakistani or the characters are Iranian. Read the first little blurb in either the *Hollywood Reporter* or *Variety* when my film was selected for Cannes. My film was about Iranians. So I'm very excited to become Senegalese in my next film. [Bahrani's next film concerns a Senegalese taxi driver.]

DW: This reflects the insularity of those layers.

RB: I don't think they mean to be derogatory, or condescending. This is just what's in their minds at the moment. I'm tired of not saying anything about it.

DW: Absolutely, feel free. As you say, 99 percent of the cinema is about 1 percent of the population.

RB: I think audiences are looking for something else. With the passing of Antonioni and Bergman, you start to wonder about the state of cinema.

DW: How did you come to choose those particular kids and that particular story?

RB: I was editing my first film and my cameraman, Michael Simmonds, had to get his car fixed. And he knew that place, Willets Point, and he was going to go get his car fixed there, and he knew I would be interested in it. So I went with him, and immediately I was struck by it. I had never seen anything like it before. It's a really tough place. It's really hand to mouth. And still there was so much joy in the people, which was really important to the creation of that character of Alejandro, with how slippery he was.

My co-writer is French-Iranian, her parents are architects, intellectuals. But when they left Iran after the revolution they went to France, and they were treated the way the French treat people like that, which is, 'Go clean those floors.' So she grew up with Gypsies, on the streets, and stuff like that, and it was so important to her when I expressed what I was seeing at that location. She said, 'This is what I know, and I'm telling you this boy has to be slippery. He has to survive, so whatever happens has got to slip off him and he's going to come back with a joke.'

You would see at that location, two people might be fighting over a car at 10 a.m., at 4 p.m. they might be throwing a football back and forth across the street, and at 7, they're having a cook-out. By the end of the night, they might be fighting again, over a $20 car repair or whatever. And I liked how much life was there.

Kiarostami told me after *Man Push Cart*, 'I liked your film very much.' I said, 'Tell me what you don't like. I want to make another film and I want it to be better.' And he said, 'You need to have more life.' So that was very important to me, to open my eyes more to what was happening. And you see that in Loach. How much humor they have with one another. How hard their lives are and how light they are on their feet. And I think it's accurate.

DW: How did you find these kids?

RB: It took a long time. Almost four of five months, we saw thousands of kids in New York. We put 650 on tape. Alejandro and Isamar were actually among the first people I saw. And they went to the same school. I learned something interesting later, maybe a few weeks into practicing with them.

These were extended auditions, they would come every Saturday, to the point where Alejandro's mom said, "Ramin, how many times do I have to come here before you give him the part?" And I'd say, "I don't know, come back next Saturday."

It turned out that Alejandro has a real sister, Cristina, a really sweet girl, and really tiny like him—even though she's a few years older, she's almost smaller—and she was getting picked on at school. Isamar stood up for her, so Alejandro already really liked Isamar. So that was a blessing. Such an expressive face, so charismatic, so tough, and sweet at the same time.

I was really interested in what just a face can express, and he had all of it. Youth, adult, childish, humor, sweetness, vengeful, jealous, anger, he had all of them in his face, which is great. And he was very good at improvisation. After casting him, I made him work. I made him work in the garage for 4, 5 months. He worked for Rob, who was the real garage

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owner. When Alejandro was in school, he would go after school, and on weekends. When summer started, he was there almost every day. And Rob would pay him $5 for every car he brought in, which was great because Rob was able to fund the rehearsal! That's how he came to get ready for the film.

Then Michael Simmonds and I shot the entire movie on a handicam in advance, making the film with the actors on location, take after take after take, rehearsing. So that they would become familiar with the camera. Shooting right in their faces, so they would never think about it. Then we would do the same thing with the workers around Rob's garage, or anyone else who was going to be in the film. We would just shoot them. A lot of times I would come with my assistant director and sometimes with two interns, even if they had nothing to do, I'd bring them. So that little by little ... I had been there for a year. But then I started coming with two people, three, four, five, so they would see and think 'Oh, they're coming to work.' So when we made the film and went from five people to fourteen people, the camera went from being this big to *this* big, suddenly there was a boom guy, and a truck would come ... to the people in the neighborhood, it was just, 'Oh, they're coming to work.' And that helped a lot.

DW: It requires a great deal of work and foresight. Laziness is another problem in cinema today.

RB: It took a lot of work in advance. Making a film is hard, I don't care what anyone says. I almost make it a requirement now that people watch *Burden of Dreams* [about the filming of Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo*], or the film about the making of *Apocalypse Now* [*Hearts of Darkness*]. So they come on my set, I say 'This is easy compared to that!' Making a film is hard.

What you're looking at now on screen is almost exclusively take 30. It's not a documentary film. It's incredibly complicated *mise en scène*, very complicated blocking, in-one-shot acting. Between a non-professional actor and an actor, what is the difference? One has done before it, one hasn't. Alejandro is an actor, he's just never done it before. I challenge an actor to do that stuff in one shot.

We were very lucky. Now that you mention Kiarostami. He was in Cannes, he was sitting right behind me, it was amazing. He responded very strongly, it was very important to us.

DW: The result of all that, is a certain relaxed quality, a certain effortlessness. Enormous effort has to go into that, to create that sense of life. A relaxed, fluid quality requires enormous effort, particularly with non-professionals.

RB: It's not easy. You're asking people to do one scene in one shot, it's not easy.

DW: And heightened emotions.

RB: Yes, I don't know why more people don't talk about this kid, as a nonprofessionally trained actor. He's going through hundreds of emotions, very complicated stuff. *Screen* wrote an incredibly positive review of the film out of Cannes and said, 'The acting overall is impressive, even if the kid feels like he's being himself.' I'm happy that the critic has been fooled, but of course Alejandro's not being himself. This is complicated stuff. Stealing his sister's money, discovering she's a prostitute. And his reaction as he's running back ...

DW: To treat these problems, that enormous numbers of people have, in a poetic and artistic manner seems to be one of the most difficult challenges today. To bring everyday life and poetry together is rare.

RB: I appreciate it. A lot of it is in the preparation. I was there for a year and a half. As a filmmaker I'm not interested in big moments, in scenes that are amazing, I'm not interested in 'meaningful' dialogues or 'meaningful' art direction. I'm interested in the accumulation of moments and in the accumulation of scenes that seem like nothing, but add up to something very important. By the end, you go, what?, I just had *that* feeling, where? When did I really get involved in this film? How? Sometimes I think it works. Between *Man Push Cart* and this film we tried to get better. We'll try to get better in the next one. It's not easy to do it quietly, and not hit it over the head, and not be obvious, not go the easy route.

DW: I didn't know your other film, I didn't know what to expect, and you see so many films of a certain kind, purportedly about these sorts of neighborhoods, I kept thinking, 'When's the shoot-out going to come?,' 'Who's going to be stabbed, or raped, who's going to be murdered?,' 'How's he going to end up in jail?' I really was expecting that. Fortunately, you never made any of those choices.

RB: Some of them were made in the script, and my co-writer and I looked at each other and said, 'No, throw those pages away, let's go back to do what we want to do.' It's hard. The industry expects certain things. It's really hard to say no. Because these things take money to make.

DW: The last moment in the film. It's remarkable. His acceptance of what she's doing is not merely a kind of brotherly feeling, but also a certain sense of social solidarity. 'Well, this is what we have to do.' He recognizes it's not her fault.

RB: And her acceptance of what he's done. He says, 'I'm working, you should be working too.' That's a big thing he's told her. He knows that she understands that he knows what she's done. She has to accept him as well. It's done with no one talking.

Do you know how long it took to get that? It took five weeks to get the pigeons. The pigeons were eight garages down, plus an intersection, where that other guy was. It took me three weeks to get them from his garage to Rob's. The pigeons arrived at 8, he arrived at 8:30. We fed them little by little, and then five minutes earlier every day, to get them to come about 7:40, which gave me 20 more minutes before the sun would ruin the shot. To the dismay of the scheduling people, I said, 'This has to be shot last, it has to be scheduled over two mornings.'

We did it 52 times, and it worked four. There's four times when it all happens in one shot. It was so important that it happen in one shot, or you wouldn't believe. That moment when the pigeons actually do come, and she stomps, and they go up in the air. There's a guy with a broom trying to keep them in the frame here.

DW: The look she has ...

RB: It's so right, quiet, right ... Kiarostami reached through the seat and grabbed my arm when she smiled at him. I thought it was the boy sitting next to me, I said, 'Leave me alone.' Later Kiarostami told me it was him, and he said he was just in a state of shock as the scene continued, he thought it was going to be over with that smile.

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