

No One Knows About Persian Cats: The struggle of young Iranian musicians

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No One Knows About Persian Cats is the latest film from Kurdish-Iranian director Bahman Ghobadi. Like his previous work *Half Moon*, *Persian Cats* tells the story of “illegal” musicians in Iran, in this case young, underground rock musicians in Tehran as they fight to make their music and stay hidden from the police.

Rock music is essentially illegal in Iran, with every group forced to acquire permits from the Culture and Islamic Guidance Ministry before they are able to perform or release recorded work; many are rejected, while those who receive permits often wait for long periods of time and must censor themselves to comply with the ministry's wishes. It is also illegal for women to sing in public or alone before an audience. Rap music is outlawed entirely.

“Based on real events, locations and people,” *No One Knows About Persian Cats* was inspired, in part, by a 2007 incident in which hundreds of young people were arrested at an “illegal” concert held in Karaj, some 12 miles west of Tehran. The film contains no professional actors, instead using real-life underground musicians in its leading roles.

Like the musicians at the heart of his new work, Ghobadi has also struggled with governmental suppression of his work. Even as he and his crew worked to complete the film about repression of artists and censorship, its co-writer, journalist Roxana Saberi, who is an American citizen and also Ghobadi's fiancée, was arrested by the Iranian government in January 2009. She was accused of espionage and spent 100 days in Iran's notorious Evin Prison before she was finally convicted and sentenced to 8 years behind bars. This was reduced on appeal to a two-year suspended sentence in May 2009, and Saberi is now free.

As *Persian Cats* begins, young musicians Negar Shaghagi and Ashkan Koshanejad (playing themselves) are searching for a way to acquire passports and visas in order to attend a music festival in London at which

they've been invited to perform. Ashkan has just been released from prison and receiving a passport through the official channels will be all but impossible.

An underground record producer puts the duo in touch with Nader (Hamed Behdad), one of those “someones” who everyone knows. Nader is an amusing, fast-talking character whose specialty is supplying his clients with all the luxuries banned by the government. A DVD and CD bootlegger, he proudly declares his operation a greater film distribution company than Paramount Pictures.

Nader takes Negar and Ashkan to the hidden practice spaces of various musicians in Tehran. Together they listen to the groups perform and select musicians from each ensemble to form a band of their own. The newly-recruited members of Ashkan and Negar's band soon gather in their own secluded practice site and rehearse, as Nader networks with black market dealers and contacts within government ministries to arrange the papers needed to get Ashkan, Negar and their new band out of the country.

In its best moments, Ghobadi's film is a moving piece that thoughtfully considers the devastating impact of the oppressive Iranian Guidance Ministry and its suppression of artistic production on some of the most sensitive members of society. The young characters depicted in this film—talented, energetic, determined and quite often brave—make a strong impression. Ghobadi, as he has shown in his previous work, has a tremendous feeling for Iran's youth and tells their stories with sensitivity and compassion.

More than a few of the film's sequences stay with the viewer. There is the sequence in which children in a school visited by Ashkan and Negar, their eyes closed, slowly strum imaginary guitars along with the music teacher who is singing for them. It is moving for a number of reasons, not the least of which is because there are no real instruments in the class room for them to learn to

play. They are in awe of the singer as he performs a song about a vagabond at a crossroads.

A scene in which Ashkan, Negar and their band huddle over a meal in their practice space, telling each other their dreams of making it big, or at least making their music freely, is also moving.

Along with these, there are the more humorous moments one has come to expect from Ghobadi's work. Much of the humor here comes from Nader, particularly as he haggles with black market dealers and a police interrogator. However, and importantly, the character isn't reduced to "comic effect," a foil to lighten up the mood of an otherwise serious work. This is a real human being and Nader, too, contributes a number of moving dramatic scenes.

Many of the real-life bands appearing in the film are talented, perhaps especially the Yellow Dogs, along with Ashkan and Negar's own group Take It Easy Hospital. However, at times, the story grinds to a halt as each of the bands is given its own music video sequence in which to perform a song. On the whole, the film is a little too self-consciously constructed to provide an overview of the underground music scene in Iran, including all the various styles involved. One can sympathize with Ghobadi's efforts to attract a wider audience for these musicians, and it is certainly a pleasure to hear many of them, but is regrettable that the narrative and the pacing of the work suffer because of it.

While *Persian Cats* is often very moving and the lives of these musicians are treated with considerable feeling, one might say that this is another of those films in which one gets "a sense" of the situation at hand, but never as complete a picture as one would like. The young people in the film, like Ghobadi himself, are opposed to the repression they face and the enormous social inequality prevailing in their country. But what do they make of all that?

This is not an abstract question. The recent "Green Revolution" movement has mobilized considerable support within Iranian artistic circles on a quite right-wing basis. Opposition to the reactionary-clerical Ahmadinejad regime and the religious hierarchy has become the means by which some prominent artists and filmmakers have thrown in their lot with the US and the "democratic" Great Powers, whose only concern, of course, is the installation of a regime more amenable to imperialism. While Ghobadi's film could not have taken in all these events, abstention on critical historical and social questions leaves the artist susceptible to such pressures.

We *Persian* really *Cats* learn about or desires of the musicians beyond their musical ambitions themselves. If it is the case—and one can't really determine this by watching the film alone—that the musicians throw up their hands at the rest and just want to be left alone to make their music, then that too should be pursued. Where would such a view leave an artist? These matters are never taken up by the film, unfortunately. The work is so thoroughly focused on the underground music world that the story never sufficiently considers the ins and outs of the "above ground" world from which the musicians are compelled to hide.

The difficult circumstances under which Iranian filmmakers are forced to work cannot be overstated. There is no doubt that what they are able to say—to get away with—is limited. For a time during the 1980s and 1990s, however, many Iranian filmmakers seemed to be saying—and feeling—more than almost anyone else. Since that time, a number of the prominent filmmakers have moved in disappointing directions.

One can only say that central to this decline has been the failure of these artists to develop a greater understanding of the events unfolding around them and the historical evolution of Iranian society, including its erstwhile Left. As we have noted, sensitivity and compassion are essential, but even further, an ability to pierce through social convention and commonly held and accepted views and explore reality to the fullest is urgently needed.

Ghobadi's film doesn't have everything, but at its best it contributes something genuine. Ghobadi continues to be one of the more interesting filmmakers working today.



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