

Jon Stewart's *Rosewater*: Fatal sins of omission

Joanne Laurier

21 November 2014

Written and directed by Jon Stewart, based on the memoirs of Maziar Bahari, co-written by Bahari and Aimee Molloy

Jon Stewart, host of *The Daily Show*, the satirical US news program and talk show, has directed a film, *Rosewater*, treating the Iranian government's incarceration and torture of a London-based, Iranian-born journalist, Maziar Bahari, in the immediate aftermath of that country's presidential election in 2009.

The movie is adapted from Bahari's 2011 memoir, *Then They Came for Me: A Family's Story of Love, Captivity, and Survival*, co-authored with Aimee Molloy.

Stewart's film presents itself as opposition to authoritarianism. Thanks to its ahistorical and dishonest approach, however, *Rosewater* neatly fits into the propaganda campaign presently being conducted by the US government and military-intelligence apparatus, the most authoritarian force on earth, and serves Washington's foreign policy needs.

Rosewater opens on the morning of June 21, 2009 when a contingent of secret police come to arrest Maziar (Mexican actor Gael Garcia Bernal) at the Tehran home of his mother (Shohreh Aghdashloo). The ignorant, thuggish officers sort through Maziar's DVD collection, singling out Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Teorema*, *The Sopranos* television series and music by Leonard Cohen as evidence against the journalist ("Jewish porn?").

The movie then goes back eleven days in time. In London, where Maziar lives with his pregnant wife, Paola (Claire Foy), he is preparing to leave for Iran to cover the upcoming presidential election for *Newsweek* magazine.

Upon his arrival in Iran, Maziar encounters taxi driver Davood (Dimitri Leonidas), a young supporter of the opposition Green Movement, who introduces him to youth who get their news from satellite TV ("Dish University"). They are enthusiastic champions of Green Movement leader Mir Hossein Mousavi, who is running against the incumbent president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

On election-day Mousavi's supporters allege that Ahmadinejad's victory is the result of fraud, and protests erupt. With his camera, Maziar records the government's repression of protesters, passing the footage on to the BBC. This is the activity that brings about Maziar's arrest.

Accused of being an agent of foreign intelligence, Maziar is

thrown into the white-walled Evin Prison, where he is blindfolded, put in solitary confinement, interrogated and beaten. His persecutor (Danish actor Kim Bodnia) is a Revolutionary Guard whom Maziar nicknames "Rosewater," because the man is heavily scented. Rosewater is under orders to extract a confession from Maziar to be used publicly as evidence of foreign intervention.

Maziar's imprisonment lasts for 118 days. To keep his sanity, he has imaginary conversations with his dead father (Haluk Bilginer), a Communist Party member who was imprisoned in 1953 and later killed following the US and British-orchestrated coup that overthrew Mohammad Mosaddegh and brought to power the brutal dictatorship of the Shah. (It comes to light that Rosewater's father was also killed by agents of the Shah.)

Flashbacks highlight the fate of Maziar's sister Maryam (Golshifteh Farahani), who was imprisoned in 1980 and subsequently murdered under the post-revolutionary regime of Ayatollah Khomeini. Stewart's film skims over the big historical events involving Maziar's family, but leaves the viewer with the impression that Iran has always been a foreboding and terrifying place, as opposed to "democratic" America.

The movie also contains a re-enactment of the mock interview conducted by *The Daily Show*'s Jason Jones (played by himself) and Bahari in 2009 in Tehran. The conversation between the two was part of a clumsy *Daily Show* segment in which Jones pretended to be an American ignoramus, in sunglasses and keffiyeh, conducting a clandestine investigation of "evil" Iran and Iranians' "hatred" for Americans. Bahari's interrogators brought up the television segment during his months in prison and Stewart claims he felt partly responsible for the journalist's troubles.

However, Stewart's "atonement" is a meager one, only resulting in a movie that is crudely put together from an artistic point of view, and terminally afflicted by sins of political-historical omission. In keeping with its general tone and outlook, *Rosewater*'s final portion features US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's plea for Bahari's release.

In their film Stewart and company offer uncritical support to the US-backed Green Movement in Iran. While *Rosewater* paints Mousavi's "green revolution" as a world-shaking

struggle for democracy, the real trajectory of that movement is less savory. Mousavi represented a faction of the Iranian elite looking to make a tactical shift in Iranian policy toward a speedier accommodation with American imperialism and the economic “opening up” of the country to Western investment. Ahmadinejad spoke for a competing faction within Iran’s bourgeois-clerical establishment, which won electoral support from sections of the poor for its populist rhetoric and certain concessions it was forced to make to forestall social upheavals.

In the course of an intense struggle, both sides attempted to exploit the concerns of working people and youth for democratic rights and decent living standards for their own ends. Tellingly, however, at one point in *Rosewater*, a group of Green supporters express their agreement with Mousavi’s policy of rolling back government subsidies that benefit Iran’s poor. In the scene, petty bourgeois hostility for the working class distinctly makes itself felt.

Along with a great many other things, Stewart neglects to mention the relentless provocations and threats made against Iran by successive administrations in Washington. The latter’s aggression, sanctions and saber-rattling no doubt contribute to a more bitter and repressive internal state of affairs in the Middle Eastern nation.

Furthermore, while Iranian secret police perform a thoroughly reactionary function, the fact of CIA, MI6 and Mossad spying on Iran is hardly a paranoid fantasy. *Spies Against Armageddon: Inside Israel’s Secret Wars* (2012), written by two Israelis, for example, boasted that Mossad had assassinated five of Iran’s top nuclear scientists over the previous five years as part of a campaign aimed at sabotaging the country’s nuclear program. The operatives of foreign intelligence services are doing their dirty work in Iran every day.

The conscious decision by the makers of *Rosewater* to cover up these realities and focus entirely on the brutishness of the Iranian regime inevitably produces a false, circumscribed, one-sided drama and a soullessness particularly evident during the excruciatingly dull and flat prison sequences. Only a movie without an aesthetic or intellectual life-force could leave one so cold in the face of inhuman acts.

Along these lines, Stewart would presumably not welcome the recent report to the UN Committee Against Torture, which concluded that the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama have both been responsible for far-reaching violations of international law. The report detailed how the US authorities directed and covered up a global torture program developed by the CIA in the period following September 11, 2001. “Civilian and military officials at the highest level created, designed, authorized and implemented a sophisticated, international criminal program of torture,” the report stated.

The filmmakers hardly miss an ideological trick. Added to the unholy mix of anti-Muslim and anti-Iranian chauvinism and support for “humanitarian” imperialist intervention is a healthy dose, just for good measure, of anti-communism. (In one of his

“talks” with his ghost father, Maziar berates him for being a communist.)

Stewart, along with other political lampooners such as Stephen Colbert and Bill Maher, has become a component part of the official opinion-making apparatus. Having gained a certain reputation and youthful following with his iconoclasm, particularly during the Bush era (*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* first aired in January 1999), Stewart continues to hurl the occasional barb at the political establishment and ultra-right media types. And he has had good days, including in the wake of the financial crash of 2008, at the expense of some of the more ridiculous and easily targeted figures.

Stewart’s fatal political limitations, however, have come to the surface in the last several years.

In 2010, he cynically and viciously attacked Julian Assange at a time when the WikiLeaks founder was the subject of an intense international campaign of persecution spearheaded by US and allied authorities. The *Daily Show* host—like the entire American media—is extraordinarily selective about the victims of persecution he chooses to champion.

Also in 2010, Stewart and Colbert organized their miserable “Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear” in Washington, at which, as the WSWS noted, they preached the need for a political consensus between the two big business parties and their allies in the media, the general line of the Obama administration itself.

The WSWS commented at the time that Stewart’s “‘politics of the golden mean’ is a facile one, devoid of any understanding of the social forces driving politics, including the significant corporate financing behind the promotion of an extreme right-wing movement in the United States. Stewart expresses the attitude of the relatively comfortable middle-class supporters of the Democratic Party who are constantly trying to reach some sort of accommodation with the right. The basic sentiment that Stewart sought to cultivate was one of complacency.”

Stewart has consistently demonstrated there is nothing genuinely non-conformist or oppositional about him. How else would it be possible to make a film about Iran that promotes discredited and hypocritical warmongers like Hillary Clinton?

The conceptions behind *Rosewater* create a picture intended to mislead the spectator. In the hands of the filmmakers, Bahari’s ordeal becomes a further argument for tightening the screws on Iran as part of the US ruling elite’s hegemonic drive in the Middle East.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact