

A Hero from Iran: Asghar Farhadi's honest, intriguing new film

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Written and directed by Asghar Farhadi

A Hero, written and directed by Iranian filmmaker Asghar Farhadi, begins as a simple tale that ultimately expands into a drama full of ambiguities and complexities. It focuses on the lower echelons of Iranian society.

Farhadi is well known for *A Separation* (2011) and *The Salesman* (2016), each of which won an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. *A Hero* received the Cannes Film Festival Grand Prix last year. A socially realistic approach to everyday life characterizes the filmmaker's best work, obviously influenced, along with that of other Iranian filmmakers, by post-World War II Italian neorealism (Visconti, De Sica, Rossellini, De Santis and others). Farhadi has said: "At a stage the conditions in my country were the same as the conditions of Italy after the war, and we had similar experiences."

The candor and directness of Iranian filmmakers like Farhadi and their openness to the drama of quotidian life help account for the fact that the country's cinema has figured prominently in recent decades. Iranian filmmakers have also stood out, despite the vicissitudes of individual careers, because there is such a shortage of film artists around the world taking these issues seriously.

As the WSWS commented a decade ago about *A Separation*: "The central problems in *A Separation* are deeply human, and thoroughly believable." The film is a "realistic, hardly flattering portrait of Iran, a society beset by intense contradictions. ... The individual degrees of guilt or innocence fade into the background, as the ultimate responsibility for the tragedy clearly lies with the profound social and economic tensions."

In *A Hero*, for the first time, Farhadi probes the lower depths of society. Rahim (Amir Jadidi) is a working class artist and divorced father who has been in debtor's prison for three years. A voiceover informs: "Time passes slowly here. The sun rises more slowly over these walls than elsewhere and takes its time setting. The walls are high and discouraging here, but still, they give some shade where you can meet for a few moments, dream about after, after getting

out."

The movie's setting is Shiraz, a historic city in southwest Iran and the country's fifth largest by population.

Rahim exits the prison on a two-day leave and his first stop is an astonishing cliff containing the royal tombs of Persepolis, where the bodies of the kings of the Achaemenid Empire (c. 550–330 BC) lie. Since the tomb of King Xerxes is built into the mountainside, there is extensive scaffolding with stairs to provide access to the workers doing restoration work inside and outside the necropolis. Having made the interminable ascent, Rahim arrives out of breath to meet his genial brother-in-law (Alireza Jahandideh), who is repairing cracks in the reliefs, and discuss ways the former can repay his debt.

Rahim explains: "I was a sign painter and calligrapher. Then the printed banners came, and I had to close my business. ... I got a loan from the bank to start a turkey farm, but it didn't work. They caught some disease, died, and I went bankrupt. I couldn't pay back the loan. My guarantor had to pay for me, he brought a case against me, and I found myself in prison."

His creditor, Bahram (Mohsen Tanabandeh), is himself in financial straits and disinclined to forgive the monies owed, despite being related to Rahim by marriage. Rahim has been given his brief freedom from prison to clear his debt. In an apparent stroke of luck, his girlfriend, Farkhondeh (Sahar Goldoost), has found a handbag full of gold coins. But a gold broker informs the couple that the precious metal has dropped in price, and the 17 coins will not be nearly enough to solve the problem.

Rahim chooses to return the coins to their rightful owner. In need of good publicity in the wake of a prisoner's suicide (who killed himself after six years of incarceration), the prison authorities opportunistically use Rahim's act of civic selflessness to present him to the public as a kind of ready-made hero. According to the prison officials, Rahim "has proved with this act that one can prioritize good deeds over personal interest." The guileless Rahim is swept up by the publicity after a lifetime of poverty and humiliation.

The Mehrpooyan Charity Association, headed by Mrs. Radmehr (Fereshteh Sadr Orafaie), organizes a celebration to award Rahim with a certificate and raise money to pay back his lender. When it fails to generate enough money from its members, the charity pleads with lender Bahram to pardon the “hero’s” debt.

Bahram: “What exemplary attitude are you talking about? My attitude was exemplary when, three years ago, because I considered him a member of my family, I gave a bond check so that he could get a loan, start a business and help his family get through. I’m the one who did a good deed! When he didn’t meet the payments, I had to sell my daughter’s dowry and my wife’s jewelry to pay off all his debt, plus the interest and penalties to the loan shark! And now he’s presented as a hero, and me, who did so much for him, I’m the bastard creditor!” In other words, Rahim’s lender himself hovers over a financial abyss.

Unable to locate the woman to whom the coins were returned, Rahim cannot prove his story qualifying him for a job at the local council. Meanwhile, rumors are circulating that Rahim has invented the whole “good Samaritan” affair. In desperation, he confronts Bahram and the encounter turns violent. Bahram’s daughter, Nazanin (Sarina Farhadi, the director’s daughter), uses a video of the episode to discredit her father’s supposed attacker, prompting the charity to withdraw the funds from Rahim and use them to save the life of a convict about to be executed. As time runs out before he must return to prison, Rahim’s desperate contortions to salvage his tarnished reputation come to naught.

Prisons feature conspicuously in Iranian cinema. People are regularly thrown into debtors’ prison in Iran, where, according to the authorities, more than 18,000 persons were held in 2018 due to their failure to pay a fine or a contractual obligation.

A Hero is a compelling work. Farhadi looks at the tribulations of Iranian society’s victims. Although not the poorest of the poor, the film’s characters are caught in the vice grip of near impossible circumstances, despite their best intentions. They work mightily to overcome the intractable obstacles. At every step, the viewer senses that life holds few rewards for the hard-pressed, including the dour creditor Bahram. No amount of effort, Herculean or otherwise, is sufficient. The innumerable Rahims are being poured into the very bottom of society—debtor’s prison.

As an ensemble, the cast performs skillfully to artistically materialize this reality. Farhadi stands apart from the overwhelming majority of current filmmakers by the depth of his love and empathy for his characters and their difficulties. He sees the latter as social problems and not individual failings. Ultimately, the issue here is not ill will but bad social organization.

Significantly, in an open letter posted November 17, 2021 on his Instagram account, Farhadi responded angrily to an unnamed individual who had claimed the writer-director was both “pro-government” and “anti-government” at the same time. The filmmaker vehemently rejected the accusation that he was “pro-government.”

“Over the years,” he wrote, “I have tended to hold my tongue, choosing to focus on my writing and filmmaking. It was my understanding that my work would be the appropriate response to the government’s accusations and name calling, and that there was no need for further clarification. However, this silence has caused many to believe that they can say whatever they want about me, and to assume that I would not respond.”

Farhadi continued: “How can anyone associate me with a government whose extremist media has spared no effort to destroy, marginalize and stigmatize me in past years. A government to which I have made my views clear on the suffering it has caused over the years … from the cruel discrimination against women and girls to the way the country has allowed coronavirus to slaughter its people.”

Farhadi referred to the fact that Iranian authorities had submitted *A Hero* as the country’s entry in this year’s international Oscar category. Addressing the government, he wrote, if this action “has led you to the conclusion that I am in your debt, I am explicitly declaring now that I have no problem with your reversing this decision. I no longer care about the fate of the film that I made with all my heart. Whether in or outside Iran, this movie will live on its merits.”

At one point in *A Hero*, Rahim blurts out that “I’m too naive for this world.” All of his potential—his creativity, ingenuity, passion and sincerity—are no match for the crushing jaws of an inhuman social order. He is tossed about and beaten against the earth. He is punished in the confines of an overcrowded prison, and he also suffers in the arena of the broader Iranian society during his period of “freedom.”



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