



The Eye of the Storm

by Leslie Brokaw

In Iran, moviemaking is politics by other means.
Meet the women leading a cinematic revolution.

THE PROTAGONIST OF THE 1998 IRANIAN FILM

The May Lady is a divorced, middle-class woman in her 40s. She works as a documentary filmmaker on a project about women and motherhood. In her off-hours she navigates between a clandestine relationship with her new lover and her protective, Westernized teenage son. By Western standards, *The May Lady*, directed by Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, is not a provocative movie. But in the restrictive context of Iranian cinema, the film's candor about female desire—emotional, sexual, artistic—was astonishing when it was released, and it remains so today. Initially, the Iranian government would not permit the film to be shown within the country; only after it played at international festivals to much acclaim did the government reverse itself, and the film became enormously popular in Iran.

The May Lady represents one of the many rebirths of Iran's national cinema. Filmmakers such as Bani-Etemad came of age before the 1979 revolution that toppled the Western-leaning Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi and ushered in the ascendance of the Islamic rule of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. In the 25 years since the revolution, filmmakers have used ingenuity, persistence, and more than a little chutzpah to resist the Islamic clergy and continue to make art about the complexities of Iranian life and politics. The past seven years have been particularly fruitful: since the 1997 election of President Mohammad Khatami, the country has experimented with democratic reform, although the clergy—known as the mullahs—continue to hold supreme

power. At the same time, pockets of filmmakers, including a new, post-revolutionary generation, have dared to state the truths of their lives with increasing bluntness and boldness.

Film is “the most dominant form of expression in Iran today,” according to Jamsheed Akrami, a U.S.-based academic and producer of an informative documentary, *Friendly Persuasion: Iranian Cinema after the 1979 Revolution*. With a production schedule of about 60 movies a year, an audience both domestic and international, about a dozen film magazines in both Farsi and English, and large mainstream and underground distribution systems for videos and DVDs, Iranian filmmaking has become a social and political force without peer in the Middle East. “Filmmakers in developing countries, as well as other cultural workers like poets and writers, have a larger stature in society than intellectuals have in the U.S.,” says Hamid Naficy, a professor in film studies at Rice University and author of *The Accented Cinema*, a study of moviemaking by Third World exiles living in the West. “The educated public looks to them for leadership. They’re not just seen as individual artists, well versed in their field, but as public intellectuals whose pronouncements and whose art actually matter.” Shelley famously called poets “the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” In Iran, substitute filmmakers—especially the women among them—for poets.

In a beautiful irony, at the same time that Iranian women's rights have constricted under Islamic rule, growing numbers of



Iranian filmmakers Tahmineh Milani (left) and Rakhshan Bani-Etemad: “The educated public looks to them for leadership.”

that ought to be used for the sake of educating the people, but as you know, it was used instead to corrupt our youth,” he says. “It is the misuse of cinema that we are opposed to.”

The clerics did some misusing of their own. Existing Iranian films and imported movies were crudely edited—frames were literally cut out or blackened with marking pens. The country’s Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance steered government funds to filmmakers, but only under strict conditions. Women had to be shown veiled at all times, even in their own homes. Music with a female vocalist was forbidden, as were romantic gazes. Men and women, even married couples, were never allowed to touch, and even a parental character could not place a hand on the shoulder of a teenage child. Films could not blaspheme Islam or insult the ruling council of the country, and only the mullahs could say what constituted blasphemy or insult.

Moviemakers still need governmental sign-off on their screenplays, cast and crew selection, production schedules, final edits, and exhibition permits. The state’s near-monopoly on film stock and equipment means that shooting schedules are tight. Scenes are typically shot in one or two takes. “We are working within the particular conditions of our own cinema, which might be inconceivable for most foreign filmmakers,” says Bani-Etemad. “They might find it hard to believe how a 5-meter rail for traveling shots could be shared among three different film crews on the same day.” (Her comments come from *Friendly Persuasion*, Akrami’s 2000 documentary; Bani-Etemad speaks in Farsi and is subtitled in English.)

Just as Iranian filmmakers have learned to make films for \$100,000 to \$200,000—less than the catering budget for many Hollywood films—Iranian audiences have adapted, too, and learned to read between the lines. Says Farrokh Soltani, a 19-year-old who lives in the suburbs of Tehran and studies film at Tehran Art University: “They cut the sexual parts. You always know when the boy and the girl are looking at each other, standing close to each other, that there must have been a kiss and they couldn’t show it.” Audiences “look for critical allegories and political metaphors” in the storylines, says Ramyar Rossoukh, an American Ph.D. candidate at Harvard University who is spending this year in Iran studying the film industry. “That’s often what makes a film a hit in Iran, as opposed to whether it’s a celebrity vehicle.”

But the clerics have ways of striking back. Scripts and exhibition permits are often held up for years, even for established directors, and director Tahmineh Milani was arrested in 2001. Two years earlier, her film *Two Women* had been a domestic and international hit, screened at 50 festivals around the world. The first part of a trilogy, it focused on the plight of a woman caught in an oppressive, unhappy marriage and unable to convince the courts to grant her a divorce. The protagonist, played by the luminous Niki Karimi, was one that women deeply related to, says Milani. “Women cried all the time and said ‘This is our life.’”

The next film in the series, *The Hidden Half*, released in 2001, looked critically at the treatment of student groups during the revolution, and Milani echoed that criticism in public comments. Although the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance had approved the script (after blocking it for seven years) and issued an

women are working in front of the cameras as defiant characters and behind the cameras as subversives in the best sense, leaders of the millions of Iranians yearning for a more open, tolerant society. The push and pull between restriction and freedom within the world of moviemaking mirror the same push and pull in the country as a whole. Female filmmakers such as Bani-Etemad, outspoken feminist Tahmineh Milani, and 23-year-old Samira Makhmalbaf (whose second and third feature films won the Jury prize at the 2000 and 2003 Cannes Film Festivals) have become leading forces on the country’s cultural landscape. The religious leaders at the head of Iran’s government aren’t at all comfortable with the liberal values embodied in the work of these women, but the mullahs have learned the perils of trying to silence them.

“The Misuse of Cinema”

Before the 1979 revolution, Iran had a healthy film industry. A small but significant body of artistic work received respectful international notice, even as it struggled to compete domestically with imports from Hollywood and India. But the revolution drove many artists of all sorts out of the country. The ones who stayed learned to navigate channels of artistic freedom within the harsh new boundaries of *sharia*, or Islamic law.

The strictures came from the top. In his first speech to the nation following the overthrow of the Shah, the Ayatollah Khomeini talked about movies—itsself a remarkable commentary on their role in Iranian society. “The cinema is a modern invention

'The Iranian government has no problem with Persian films being shown abroad. They just don't want Persians to see them in Iran.'

exhibition permit for the final edited version, the Islamic Revolutionary Court had Milani arrested for blasphemy and counterrevolutionary ideas. Bizarrely, the film continued to screen in Iranian cinemas. A week after the arrest, the court bowed to international pressure, and the demands of President Khatami, and released Milani.

The mullahs could not have picked a better way to increase Milani's stature. Audiences could hardly wait for the third film in the trilogy, *The Fifth Reaction*, which played last year both in Iran and at international festivals. The film is a *Thelma and Louise*-style feminist road movie, whose heroine conspires with women friends to escape a dictatorial father-in-law, but this time Milani wasn't thrown in jail.

Khatami's intervention on Milani's behalf highlights his close relationship with the film community. Now in his second term (he was reelected in 2001), Khatami had overseen the film industry as Minister of Islamic Guidance and Culture from 1982 to 1992. Despite the restrictions his department had to impose upon filmmakers, Khatami presided over a post-revolution "flourishing of the arts and cinema," says Rice University's Naficy. He resigned from the Ministry in 1992 because of clerical resistance to his reforms, writing at the time that he would rather "fight ignorance and backwardness" on his own. During the 1997 presidential election, the cinematic community came out in his support. Rosa Issa, an Iranian film scholar based in the U.K., says that Khatami has seen every Iranian film of note and knows all the country's directors, actors and actresses by name. She adds in *Iranian Women Filmmakers*, a 2003 documentary, "I don't know many presidents who are like that."

Fatemeh Motamed-Aria, a popular Iranian actress, made a sympathetic documentary about Khatami's second run for the presidency in 2001 called *A Man for All Reasons*, showing screaming girls begging for his attention like teeny-boppers weeping for the Beatles. Bani-Etemad also made a documentary about the 2001 elections. Its primary subjects: the young activists—including her own daughter, Baran Kosari, who was 16 at the time—campaigning for Khatami and the 48 women who tried to become parliamentary candidates. Nearly all were disqualified from running by the Council of Guardians, the same group that disqualified more than 3,000 candidates from February's elections.

Of the dozen or so major female feature film directors in the country, Bani-Etemad is generally regarded as the doyenne. She graduated from Tehran's College of Dramatic Arts in 1979 and after the revolution worked on documentaries and as an assistant director of feature films. She began directing her own films in 1988 with *Off the Limit*, the story of a young couple whose new home is in a district outside city zoning and not protected by police. The female protagonist was hardly the feminist that Bani-Etemad would depict 10 years later in *The May Lady*. "American and Iranian audiences abroad consistently expressed surprise that the director of such a traditional representation of women was a woman," Rice University's Naficy has written. But, he continues, the film is bold "in the political solution that it offers to the community's dilemma...an activist vision that beauty and prosperity require political will and independent action."

Bani-Etemad's films of the 1990s examine love, class, and women's rights. Her 1992 *Nargess* features the romantic triangle of a male criminal, an older woman who is his lover and partner in crime, and a strong-willed woman who marries him. It won first prize in Iran's premier film festival, the Fajr Festival, the first time the prize went to a film directed by a woman. *The Blue Veil*, released in 1995, is a sweet story about the affection that takes root between a female farm worker and the older owner of the plantation. "Happiness is not what you see from the outside," says the plantation owner. "No law can say what people will be happy together." *Under the Skin of the City*, released in 2000, touches on everything from visas to drugs to prostitution. Bani-Etemad's most recent film, *Mother Gilaneh*, premiered in February at the Fajr Festival, where it won a Special Jury award. Part of a trilogy by three different directors, it is set in Iraq and focuses on a mother and her son, a disabled war veteran.

The international film festival circuit has brought the films of Bani-Etemad and other leading artists to Iranian exiles abroad as well as to the wider film community. In 1999, by one count, there were 849 international screenings of Iranian films. Boston's Museum of Fine Arts has hosted an Iranian Film Festival since 1993; Chicago's Festival of Films From Iran began in 1989. In 1999, the National Film Theatre of London presented 60 pre- and post-revolutionary Iranian films over two months; that same year Majid Majidi's *Children of Heaven* was nominated in the Best Foreign Film category of the U.S. Academy Awards (*Life Is Beautiful* took the Oscar).

For the Islamic authorities, the international popularity of these films is "a double-edged sword," says Akrami, the producer of *Friendly Persuasion*. "On the one hand, these films show a negative portrayal of Iran, but on the other hand, these films also win awards in prestigious international film festivals, elevating Iran's name. And the government takes the credit for it. The Iranian government has no problem with Persian films



being shown abroad. They just don't want Persians to see them in Iran."

The official ambivalence toward filmmakers takes many forms. Midlevel bureaucrats can be surprisingly helpful. "Even if films do not get seen publicly," says Naficy, "they do get seen by people in the know, by critics, by cohorts, by university students, in various other venues," ranging from Tehran's House of Cinema to classrooms and private screenings. Some of those screenings are informal, if not clandestine, but some are actually arranged by civil servants. "The middle-level people who are in charge of cinema," says Naficy, "are interested in promoting cinema and professionalizing it, and they're not so much interested in ideology. Their relationship to filmmakers is sometimes quite friendly."

The Virtue of the Veil

Rebuilding trust between the government and the film community is a slow process. Naficy reports that between 1979 and 1981, 180 cinemas were burned down or destroyed. One became a storehouse for hay; another, a prison. (The Rex Theatre, in southern Iran, was the site of a horrific massacre in 1978, when more than 300 people were locked in and the building torched by anti-Shah revolutionaries.) Only a handful of new theaters have been built in the past 25 years. As a result, most Iranians watch movies in their homes via videos, DVDs, or satellite TV. Bootlegs of banned films, both foreign and domestic, are widely available. "A lot of us have forgotten what it's like to watch films on a big screen," director Bahram Bayzai has said.

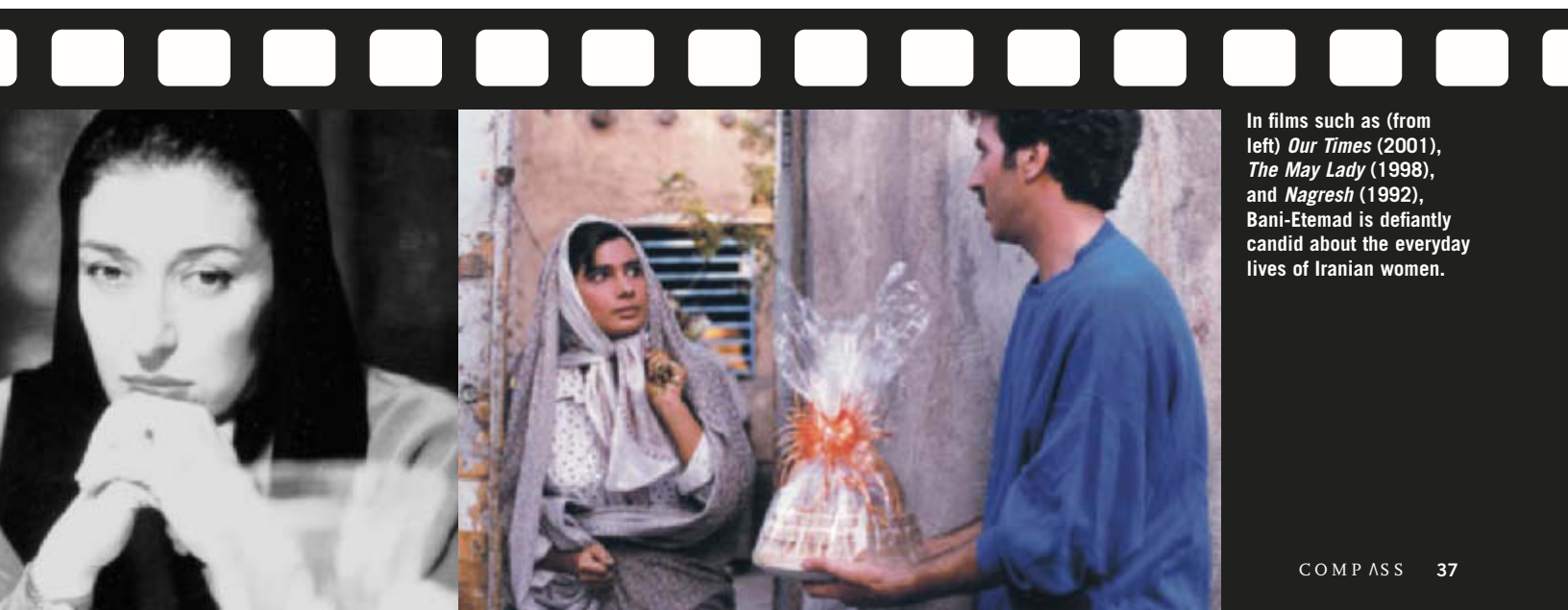
International exposure not only increases the audience for Iranian films, it is an invaluable avenue for financing. "*Children of Heaven* was sold to Japan alone for \$400,000," says producer Jamsheed Akrami. "With that sort of money, you can make two more movies." Other financing comes via an initiative promoted by President Khatami. Local producers can obtain lucrative licenses to import foreign videos only if they agree to help finance one Iranian feature project for every four imported films. Other ordinances, such as tax breaks for local films, also encourage local production. Banks are extending long-term loans, the government has allocated foreign exchange to import equipment and supplies, and film-industry workers now have their own social security fund.

But none of this explains why women filmmakers should flourish in Iran, of all places. "The remarkable and unexpected thing is that in the first decade after the revolution, more women directed feature films in Iran than in the entire eight decades before," says Hamid Naficy. Ironically, he credits *hejab*, the Islamic laws mandating that women wear veils and refrain from fraternizing with men. "It allows for a kind of Puritanism on the set," Naficy says, "a 'safety' that there would be no untoward, unethical relations." Hejab assured both women and clerics that women were in the studio to work, and moviemaking opened as a profession to women in a way that it hadn't before. "I'm not supporting the hejab," Naficy says, "but the imposition of the veil had certain unforeseen consequences in cinema."

With the exception of Tahmineh Milani and Samira Makhmalbaf, the prodigy whose prize-winning films *The Blackboard* and *The Apple* depict the struggles of young Iranians against literal and figurative imprisonment, few young women filmmakers have reached the prominence of Rakhshan Bani-Etemadi and Milani. Two-thirds of Iranians have yet to turn 30, and they have little direct experience with the convulsive days of the revolution and only the haziest memories of the 1980-1988 war with Iraq, which killed at least 500,000 people. Farrokh Soltani, the 19-year-old film student, says he's not very hopeful about the majority of younger filmmakers. He calls last October's 20th Annual Tehran Short Film Festival, which was sponsored by the Young Filmmakers' Society of Iran, a big disappointment. The shorts were notable for their "ambiguous symbolism, avoidance of sociopolitical issues, an absence of urban settings, and awful filmmaking."

But Milani, who turns 44 this year, says in Jamsheed Akrami's documentary *Friendly Persuasion* that "the younger generation of filmmakers, if I can include myself in that category, is too stubborn to leave the field. It has just begun to learn what to do, how to analyze and understand the issues, and find ways to communicate its ideas." Smiling slyly, she adds, "I don't think the new filmmakers will quit anytime soon. They'll continue to make films." Iran and the rest of the world will be watching. ■

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In films such as (from left) *Our Times* (2001), *The May Lady* (1998), and *Nagresh* (1992), Bani-Etemadi is defiantly candid about the everyday lives of Iranian women.