

Ely film society = **the notes**

july 2014

latest news

- Definitive news on the silent show in the Cathedral: it will now be *THE KID BROTHER* starring Harold Lloyd, on Friday September 19 at 8pm.
- EFS members get in on their membership cards, all other seats £10. Watch for posters.
- A future possibility is being pursued to celebrate the Ely connections of the noted cinematographer and director Jack Cardiff, with a special screening and talk.

The Apple

Samira Makhmalbaf, Iran 1997

Written by Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Samira Makhmalbaf

Massoumeh Naderi Massoumeh Zahra Naderi Zahra Ghorban Ali Naderi Father Azizeh Mohamadi Azizeh Zahra Saghrisaz

Produced by Iraj Sarbaz

Cinematography by Mohamad Ahmadi, Ebrahim Ghafari

Film Editing by Mohsen Makhmalbaf

The Apple tells an apparently simple story of two girls suffering a regime of cruel imprisonment imposed by their father, and the ways in which all of them cope with this situation. But, as with all tales, the charm lies in the telling.

Samira Makhmalbaf is the daughter of the award-winning Iranian Director, Mohsen Makhmalbaf (*Gabbeh* 1996, *A Moment of Innocence* 1996 and *Kandahar* 2001 which was voted one of the top 100 films by Time Magazine). He now spends his time between Paris and Afghanistan since he is *persona non grata* in his own country.

Makhmalbaf involves all his family in his film-making, and his eldest daughter, Samira, directed *The Apple* when she was only 17 years of age. He himself wrote the screenplay –



though it was very sketchy, leaving space for both the director and actors to be creative - and edited the film. The twin teenage girls have been kept indoors since they were very young, since their parents fear for them in the outside world and, in the words of the Koran, girls are like flowers that fade out in the sun. Their mother is blind and father elderly, but

doting, and they scrape together a meagre existence. The status quo is interrupted when neighbours inform social services of their plight. The methods used by the social worker are, to say the least, unconventional, but do succeed in releasing the girls. Their experiences form the main thread of this thoughtful and humorous film, but Samira succeeds in engaging

our sympathies for the whole family, including the father who, in other hands, might have been portrayed as an ogre. Samira uses 'real' people rather than actors as the protagonists in her films; in this case, it is the actual family that appears on screen.

The film deals with eleven days in the life of this family, eleven days which, literally, changed their lives. Does this make her films documentaries? If they are, they also have a poetic, lyrical quality, with images and moments which linger in the mind. As Simon Hattenstone wrote in the *Guardian*: although the films look like documentaries, they manipulate us like movies. And it is important to remember that they were made under the eyes of the censors of a fundamentalist regime.

The Apple was seen as a veiled criticism on the position of women in society, but its power lies in its humanity rather than in its exposure. Discussing the repression of women in her country, she says: we have a lot of limitations, but these limitations made a lot of strong, different kinds of women in Iran. They may have found a deeper way through all these limitations. What makes her angry is 'the narrow-mindedness which makes people think you are not a first class human being'.

The film won the Camera d'Or at Cannes and the Sutherland Trophy for best first feature at the London Film Festival, both in 1997. To prove that this was not a one-off, Samira's next film, the breathtaking *Blackboards* (2000), won the Prix du Jury at Cannes, as did *At Five in the Afternoon* in 2003. She is the youngest film-maker to have won this prize. *Blackboards* is shot on the border between Iran and Iraq and deals with the condition of the Kurds who live there; *At Five in the Afternoon* is shot in Afghanistan. Samira is not a director to shun a difficult issue. But perhaps her greatest achievement is to have established herself – a woman – as a role model and spokesperson for Iran.

**NEXT MONTH'S FILM IS
SPIRITED AWAY** (Hayao
Miyazaki, Japan 2001)
Monday 18 August



After my film *The Apple* many people questioned me about Iran. They wondered if Iran was really a country where thirteen-year-old girls could be locked up for eleven years and where an eighteen-year-old girl could have her first film at Cannes. I think Iranian women are like freshwater springs: the more pressure applied, the more force they show once they are freed.

I R A N

Iran has not had a good press in recent years; the overthrow of the Shah, the autocratic rule of the Ayatollahs, the Iran/Iraq war, the rigged elections, the nuclear power issue. It is difficult to imagine that this was one of the most respected, greatest, and earliest of great nations in the ancient world.

Iran has settlements going back to 4000 BCE (Yadz is regarded by the UN as the oldest city in the world), but its period of greatness started in 625 BCE when the Medes unified an area of disparate tribes, including Babylon. There are various references to the empire in the Old Testament. Darius I The Great (550 – 486 BCE) extended the Persian Empire from the Danube to the Indus and from the Caucasus to Egypt (though he was defeated at the Battle of Marathon). He built the city of Persepolis, even today one of the most impressive sites of the ancient world.

Alexander the Great overran the Persian Empire in 334 BCE, defeating the king, Darius III, but after the death of Alexander the Empire broke up. The Islamic conquest took place in 650 AD, but the area has never been arabised. The language is Farsi. The Safavid dynasty ruled from 1501 to 1979 when the Shah was forced to abdicate following the Revolution, caused by his attempts to modernise and secularise Iran in the face of opposition from Islamists and

communists.

Since 1979 the now Islamic Republic of Iran has been a theocratic state; though theoretically a democracy, candidates for election have to be approved by the Council of Ayatollahs. The first of these, who had been in exile in France, was Ayatollah Khomeini who was elected Supreme Religious and Political Leader for life. A Shiite, he issued laws which were enforced with extreme brutality; many of these curbed the freedom of women: wearing makeup, showing hair under the hejab, putting on nail varnish, wearing sandals which revealed a toe could all be punished by flogging, fines, or up to one year in prison. Going to football matches, singing and dancing were prohibited. Newspapers, books and television programmes were censored (the television censor was a cleric who was blind). Two women, who had been cabinet ministers under the Shah, were sentenced to death by the new regime for 'warring with God'. Men were allowed to have sex with animals to curb their sexual instincts; these animals could not then be eaten by his family or neighbours, but could be eaten by others. Some of these laws were subsequently relaxed, but many have again been re-introduced by the present regime.

It is within this context that Iranian culture, especially cinema, is to be viewed.