

# THE CIRCLE

## VENICE FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW

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The world's ravenous appetite for Iranian cinema continued on the Lido with a slew of new works, including Jafar Panahi's "Dayereh" ("The Circle"), in competition at the recently concluded 57th Venice Film Festival. A grueling, sparsely structured film about the vicious cycle of female persecution in contemporary Iran, "Dayereh" demonstrates once again how simplicity in filmmaking can yield the most potent rewards. Panahi, whose previous features include art-house fave "The White Balloon" and Locarno festival winner "The Mirror," proves himself a master of economy and restraint, forcing his audience to fill in the gaps of a minimalist but revelatory roundelay-style plot.

Following recent examples of Iranian cinema, including the works of Abbas Kiarostami, to whom Panahi served as assistant director on "Through the Olive Trees," the 40-year-old graduate of Tehran's influential College of Cinema and TV shows us that what isn't shown counts the most -- particularly in a society of second-class female citizens forced to disguise themselves behind chadors in public and obey codes of personal conduct that verge on the ridiculous.

Following a credit sequence in which a woman gives painful birth off-screen, "Dayereh" opens with the eerie image of a woman in a black chador, photographed from behind, as she attempts to gain information about her daughter's recent delivery through a window set into a stark, whitewashed hospital wall. The contrast is disturbing and impersonal -- the woman resembles some bold, fleeting apparition that isn't entirely there. She isn't, and her daughter isn't and her daughter's daughter isn't -- ultrasound tests had indicated a boy but it's a girl, prompting the grandmother to fear the worst: her daughter's furious in-laws will probably insist on divorce.

One chador becomes another and we're soon out on the street, as Nargess and Arezou, two young female prison inmates on temporary leave, try and scrape together cash so that Nargess (Nargess Mamizadeh, in the film's most striking performance) can purchase a bus ticket home to her idyllic childhood city. Arezou (Maryyam Parvin Almani) raises the cash -- we're not told how; we can only assume -- amid leering catcalls from men in the street and a merchant's brusque suggestion that "it's better not to smoke." Nargess, sporting the remnants of a black eye, gets harassed at the bus station for not carrying a student ID card; then she misses her bus following a police sweep.

More seemingly unrelated vignettes follow: Another prison inmate (Fereshteh Sadr Orafi), an escapee, finds herself cast out on the streets from her brother's home after it's revealed that she's pregnant and unmarried. She seeks an abortion from an old prison connection that doesn't want anything to do with her, for fear of exposing her own criminal past. A single mother (Fateme Naghavi) tries to abandon her young daughter -- having tried several times before -- convinced she'll be better off with a real family. Finally, a prostitute (Mojgan Faramarzi) gets hauled into prison for speaking her mind on the street -- what she discovers in jail is "Dayereh's" bleak, all-too-obvious message: that female persecution courses in infinite circles throughout Iranian society, without recourse. One prison is really no different from the next. A woman's best bet is to serve her time and respect the chador.

We're never told why this group of women was incarcerated in the first place. Again, it's Panahi's sobering stock in trade never to reveal too much about his characters' backgrounds. Ridiculous minor infractions spring to mind, like vagrancy, or circulating in public unaccompanied by a man, or smoking a Virginia Slim at the bus stop. What makes "Dayereh" so shocking is the casual, quotidian manner in which Panahi tracks his female characters, who always seem to be fleeing someone, or going someplace they're not allowed, or trying to get somewhere in desperation. They're like hunted animals, and at times it's horrifying.

Some of the director's shots are facile at best. He begins and ends the film with the same image of a closed door, bringing the film full circle in a trite, predictable fashion. He resorts to the tedious recurring motif of a spiral staircase. In another scene, two female friends -- former inmates again -- discuss the future behind the bars of a cinema ticket booth where one of the women works. While commenting on the repression of women in Iran, the scene also refers to the restrictive nature of Iranian filmmaking itself -- "Dayereh" has already been suppressed by the Iranian government and denied a national theatrical release.

But "Dayereh's" voice won't go unheard in the rest of the world, where each new Iranian offering gets welcomed with increasing zeal. It's hard to say why "Dayereh" and its predecessors feel so revolutionary. The blows struck in Iranian films arrive in whimpers and sighs rather than screams --but you know that each new work helps to pull down the veil that much further.

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