

The Apple opens in the US

By David Walsh and Joanne Laurier
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The extraordinary Iranian film, The Apple, has opened in New York City. We reprint below a comment on the film, written as part of coverage of the 23rd Toronto International Film Festival in October 1998.

The Apple, directed by Samira Makhmalbaf, the 18-year-old daughter of Iranian filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf, was one of the 1998 Toronto film festival's most remarkable works. The younger Makhmalbaf has chosen to reenact a real-life event, casting the members of the family whose story the film tells.

Neighbors in a poor part of Tehran have complained in a petition to the welfare department about a couple who have kept their two daughters, now 12 years old, locked up their entire lives. They have never been out of the house, they haven't had baths in years. The neighbors ask the authorities to take urgent action.

The welfare department takes the girls away, cuts their hair, bathes them. The first time we see Massoumeh and Zahra Naderi they can barely speak or walk, they appear almost retarded. The father is an old man; the mother is blind, her face entirely covered by a headscarf. The authorities return the girls to their parents, on the condition that they not be kept indoors any longer. The father goes out, locking them in once more. When he returns, he sets about teaching the girls to cook rice. "God made a woman for her to marry." One of the neighbors who signed the petition comes by. "You told lies, slander," the old man tells her. He complains that the petitioners had said he chained the girls up, which wasn't true. The neighbor responds, "There's no difference between being chained up and not seeing the sun for 11 years." He says, "I'm humiliated. I'm so angry. I won't forgive you. Nor will God."

Eventually the social worker in charge of the case returns, and finding the girls still locked up, confronts the father. He is not a monster. His wife is blind, she

can't look after the girls. What is he to do when he goes out to make some money? "I can't let my family starve." The social worker pushes the girls out into the street; they immediately bounce back in, like rubber balls. She remonstrates with the old man, "They're so used to being locked up, that they come back." She takes the key from the father, and leaves him locked inside the house. "See how you like it." The social worker borrows a hacksaw from a neighbor and gives it to the man, telling him to either saw through the bars of the gate or break the lock.

Meanwhile the Massoumeh and Zahra set off on their adventures. They may as well have been raised by wolves in the forest. An encounter with a little boy selling ice cream begins their education. Ice cream, apples, a watch--interesting things cost money in this world. They run into two other girls their own age who adopt them as playmates. One of their new friends talks a blue streak. She takes them here and there. Massoumeh and Zahra shuffle along, but they seem to be adjusting to life out on the streets. It doesn't seem to frighten them.

All the protagonists--the four girls, the social worker--end up at the old man's door. The social worker gives Zahra the key and asks her to unlock the gate. With some effort, she releases her own father. There are no recriminations. The girls tell their father, "Come buy us a watch." It's a fantastic sight, the four girls, two on each side, leading the old man down the narrow street, almost an alleyway. The blind mother stumbles out of the open door, not knowing what's going on. "I'm scared. Help me get my children back." A little boy lives opposite the family's house. He has an apple on a string he teases people with, pulling it out of reach when they grab for it. The apple brushes against the blind woman's head and face, irritating her. She reaches for it.

The summary doesn't do justice to the richness of the

film. It has so many elements to it. Certain images stay with you. A hand reaching through bars trying to pour water on a flowerpot. The mother's hand gripping her daughters', one of them holding an apple, like handcuffs. One of the girls negotiating with the little ice cream seller from the top of the courtyard wall. Some of the images are simpler than others, perhaps too simple, but the overall effect is devastating.

On one level, the film is about women in Iran. The father says, "A girl is like a flower. If the sun shines on her, she will fade." Samira Makhmalbaf, in her notes, comments: "For me, the subject was a pretext to try to understand how the street plays an important part in man's integration in society. Boys are allowed to play in the street, but girls are excluded."

If this incident had happened in an American city, it would simply have been a police matter. Makhmalbaf's film, on the other hand, does not make the parents out to be villains. They imprisoned their children, but they loved them. They treated them badly, but they thought they were doing the best for them. The filmmaker wants to understand the event, not point fingers. She uncovers the circumstances. The family was poor, backward and isolated. The society is to blame. People need to help each other. Isolation will kill you. The girls have lived in a state of sensory deprivation. As the film proceeds, through their interaction with others, they start walking straighter, they begin to speak. Solidarity, community are everything.

The director writes that she wants to understand "how the inhabitants of this neighborhood could not have been aware of what was going on right under their noses for so long."

Real people, real lives, real bodies. This is the first thing that strikes you. Movies and television in the US insist on pretty faces, regardless of whether the individuals have any thoughts in their heads or anything interesting to say. It's quite a contrast.

There are so many other things. The blind mother is an enigma. At various points in the film one hears her muttering, cursing in the background. Her face is entirely hidden. She is not romanticized. She is imprisoned by her own ignorance, fear, physical blindness. In the end, will she take the world on too?

The film is an astonishing accomplishment. Where are the 18 year olds here who are making such films, or thinking about such things? The "barbarous" Iranians,

this nation of "terrorists," continue to make some of the most humane, civilized films around.

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