Of people at sea

By David Walsh
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House of Sand and Fog, directed by Vadim Perelman, screenplay by Perelman and Shawn Lawrence Otto, based on the novel by Andre Dubus III, is a troubled young American woman, aided by a policeman with problems of his own, and a former Iranian air force colonel collide over a house along the coast south of San Francisco.

The novel is presumably set in the early 1990s, since Behrani refers in his narration (he and Kathy alternate as narrators in the first two-thirds of the book) to the recent Persian Gulf War. But there is something more distinctly “turn-of-the-century” about Kathy Nicolo’s character and predicament in particular.

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calling for a more spirited bearing, is quite affecting here.) About the end of her marriage, she says, “I wanted kids and he didn’t. I don’t know, I think if he really wanted me, he would have wanted them too, you know?” Indifferent, apathetic, she has no reason to think her life will improve. In the novel, she repeats a joke early on that had been told to her by an Irishman: America is the land of milk and honey, but “the milk’s gone sour and the honey’s stolen.” Her family is no help either, convinced as they all are that she’s a failure. When she calls her brother Frank, the owner of a car dealership, in real despair, he simply brushes her off.

Kathy’s eviction—for non-payment of a business tax that she never owed—shocks her, but doesn’t alter her approach to life. It’s simply another dirty blow that’s been dealt her. Thrown out of her bungalow, forced into a world of cheap motels, suburban diners and storage sheds, she responds in a fairly primitive manner to her difficulties, blaming “those Arabs” who have “stolen” her house.

In the novel, Kathy informs the reader: “I knew why I had gotten drunk last night, was smoking so much again, and why I was sleeping with Lester Burdon: losing my father’s house had been the final shove in a long drift to the edge, and I thought about calling Connie Walsh [her lawyer] again, just tell her to sue the county for as much as she could get. But that would take months, maybe years, and still my father’s only heirloom to Frank and me would be gone and even though it was just a little place in a low-rent beach town, I refused to be the one in the family who had let it slip away.”

By no means malevolent, however, she recognizes the members of the Iranian family as fellow human beings and eventually establishes friendly contact with Mrs. Behrani (Shohreh Aghdashloo), although it’s too late by that point. Burdon falls head over heels in love with Kathy’s floundering and threatening to go down; he, determined to be a life-saver and making things ten times worse as a consequence—rings true.

The essential outline of the Nicolo-Burdon affair—she, floundering and threatening to go down; he, determined to be a life-saver and making things ten times worse as a consequence—rings true.

The Iranian characters form the film’s weakest link, in my view, as they do in the novel. Fortunately, the filmgoer is spared Behrani’s stilted narration, presumably intended to suggest a Persian mind: “My wife has fifty years, but she spoke as would a young girl, a new bride. I thought perhaps she was disappointed in me, but then I regarded her smile, the fashion in which she held her chin low, looking up at me with those gavheeh eyes, and as she took my hand and led me back down the corridor to her room, my heart was like a flat stone moving over water and my breath was held like the boy counting the skips of his good fortune.” This may work for some readers, I merely found it distracting and patronizing.

The decision to make Behrani a former officer in the Shah’s armed forces was not adequately thought through by Dubus. Such a figure simply carries too much baggage with him. One knows, and the novel spells it out, that this was a regime of torturers and murderers, backed by the US. The author is obliged to spend a good deal of his time overcoming the reader’s instinctive antipathy toward Behrani. And to what end? To prove that human beings are to be found in the most unlikely places, that “None of us are black and white,” as the author explains in an interview. This seems a disproportionately small dividend.

If Behrani had been made merely a “garden variety” Iranian or Arab bourgeois down on his luck, with the same determination to restore his family’s previous social standing and the same repugnance for Americans’ supposed slothfulness and irresponsibility, the story would have been significantly strengthened.

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