

Jafar Panahi: Breaking the Circle

Iranian film is critically acclaimed for its gravitas, and there is a certain leaden bleakness about *Crimson Gold* that is easier to understand after meeting the film's creator, writes ANDY MASON.



hope of escape. Hussein lives alone in a tiny apartment and cannot comprehend the wealth of Iran's upper class, even though he often delivers pizzas to high-class homes. In a key scene, he is invited in by the occupant of a luxurious residence to share some pizza and a chat. While the man talks on his cellphone, Hussein embarks a slow, deliberate and bemused exploration of the house, attempting to come to terms with its gratuitous opulence. Failing to do so, he jumps fully-clothed into the indoor swimming pool in a futile

Jafar Panahi is an uncompromising man. Small and intense-looking, with thick eyebrows and a deep brow, he is the physical opposite of Hussein, the overweight, morose, tragically unresolved anti-hero of *Crimson Gold*. But at the level of psychic truth, it is easy to see why Panahi resorted to this lumbering, inarticulate character to convey his obdurate vision of the world.

It's difficult to be a filmmaker in Iran, if you want to tell the truth, says Panahi. If you don't care about the truth, it's much easier: the country produces some 70 films a year in a range of popular genres. But Iran's serious art movie tradition, exemplified by the great Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami, is one of uncompromising truth-telling in the portrayal of a closed society. All Panahi's films have been banned by the notorious Iranian Ministry of Guidance, and may not be shown in that country, even at film festivals. The best that Panahi can hope for is that some people get to see the few illegal VHS copies that are clandestinely circulated amongst art movie aficionados. Before a film is made in Iran, scripts and outlines have to be submitted for approval to the Ministry of Culture's Supervision and Evaluation Department.

Panahi reportedly had to personally smuggle a copy of *Crimson Gold* out of the country so that it could be screened at Cannes, where it garnered a special jury prize. The film's story is based on a news event involving a robbery that went wrong and a thief who killed himself to save face. Panahi extrapolates this event into a complex portrait of a pizza deliveryman whose life is a closed circle of deprivation, from which there is no

attempt to momentarily immerse himself in a life that will forever elude him.

The thinking that the movie inspires is circular, always coming around again to the same, pessimistic conclusion, as Hussein circles through the city on his motorcycle, never getting any closer to the centre of the circles that his life inscribes. Hussein's life, like that of most poor people, is a closed circle of repetitive, unenlightening experiences.

There appears to be no escape for people like Hussein. They cannot comprehend, let alone influence, the leaden reality that traps them in servitude and excludes them from participation in the modern, free flow of goods and ideas that the beneficiaries of contemporary global capitalism enjoy. Hussein's final act of defiance is nothing more than that - a futile attempt to break the monotonous circle of his life.

"Poor people are stationary," says Panahi. "They are not going anywhere. My film looks at the world through Hussein's eyes. We see what he sees. He is not unusual, he represents all the poor people who are in the same position as him. There are people everywhere in the world who are just like Hussein. They are living in circles, and the radius of these circles depends on geography, politics, industry, religion... Some circles are bigger, some are smaller, but everybody is trying to expand their circle. Occasionally someone, like Hussein, tries to break the circle, even if just to prove that they exist."

Partho Sen Gupta: Beyond Bollywood

By Andy Mason

Two hundred years ago Mumbai (Bombay) was nothing more than an archipelago of seven small marshy islands dotted with fishing villages on the west coast of India, rented to the British East India Company for £14 a year. Today it's one of the world's raciest cities with a population of 13 million people who speak a dozen languages. It's also the site of vast wealth disparities and home to the world's largest movie industry, which produces over 900 Bollywood films every year.

The city grew up around the harbour and in its early days it existed as a conduit between the Bombay cotton mills and Manchester, the primary destination for Indian cotton. "The city is a product of imperialism," says Partho Sen Gupta. "Apart from a few descendants of the original fishing families, everybody in Mumbai comes from somewhere else." Those who came either made it into the big time or got locked into the endless suburbs, evolving a unique form of Hindi spoken nowhere else - "Bambiya" - the fast, fractious lingua franca of Partho Sen Gupta's *Hava Aney Dey* (*Let the Wind Blow*).

Sen Gupta's debut film, which won Best Feature at the third annual Commonwealth Film Festival in May this year, is the antithesis of Bollywood filmmaking, and the young director consciously set out to subvert the norm.

"The theme of the movie is a universal topic," he says. "You have millions of common people huddled into huge urban 'villages', with no time for community participation. It's work-sleep, work-sleep - television is the only friendly escape. Suburban living represents a disintegration of human society - a loss of the village and countryside.

"Ironically, the Indian people in South Africa seem to have a stronger sense of community than Indian people back home," he says. "Maybe it's the result of apartheid, I don't know, but you do get a similar feeling amongst Indians in London or Sri Lankans in Paris - our second generation diaspora." But while Indians are scattered across the globe, globalisation has brought the glamorous world of Bollywood into every home.

And it is Bollywood's fantasy world that Sen Gupta consciously set out to contest. His ideas received little support from the mainstream film industry in Mumbai, and he sought French funding,



which he got, having been a film student in France. The balance was made up by private investors.

"Indian people seem to be very disturbed by the film," he says. "Many have said to me that they found it too real. I guess there is a certain hardness to it - someone said to me that it felt like I had rammed a finger right into their guts."

In pursuit of realism in dialogue and characterisation, Sen Gupta enlisted the help of a 26 year-old writer, Yogesh Vinayak Joshi, with whom he shares the scriptwriting credits. The result is a film that feels both young and true. Its documentary feel is, strangely, not unlike that of Panahi's *Crimson Gold*. Both films track the lives of insignificant urban dwellers trapped in repetitive, limited lives, aching to get out, but lacking the ability to escape. Sen Gupta's film, however, is far less pessimistic in that the creative talents of the young protagonist, Arjun, offer some hope for the future, even if this future is wiped out in the rather contrived ending that sees the advent of nuclear war between India and Pakistan put an end to it all. But the ending does nothing to diminish the powerful realism that courses through the film, particularly in the portrayal of the noisy, argumentative street and café life of an opinionated population constantly threatening to come to blows with one another, whether the subject of their conflict is political or personal. "Arguing is a Bombay pastime," says Sen Gupta. "We just love to argue and to make our opinions heard."

The result is a noisy film that conveys the reality of urban living in the South in a way that is seldom captured. Its realism speaks of a growing concern about the quality of life of the vast majority of poor, powerless people in the world who are at the receiving end of a cynical process of globalisation, indifferent to their existence as anything other than consumers of its commodities.

FESTIVAL FOCUS

PICTURES BY MONICA RORVIK AND MPHLO MOLOKO



Gisela Albrecht, Jenny Cargill, Angela Mai, Deputy President Jacob Zuma and Peter Rorvik at *Memories of Rain* - Scenes from the Underground South African premiere.



Alla Verlotsky distributor of *Trilogy of Love* and executive producer of *Russian Ark*.



Minister of Health Zweli Mkhize and Prince Sifiso Zulu at *Memories of Rain* premiere.



Mayor of Durban Obed Mlaba, Marc and Sharon Wells, Hakeem Kae-Kazim and Mthobisi Joy Meandla from *The Sunflower*.



Gillian Schutte and Sifiso Singiswa (directors of *Umgidi*) in a workshop at Ekhaya Multiarts Centre facilitated by Imagination Lab.



Craig Freidmond (director *Gums and Noses*).



Jafar Panahi (director - *Crimson Gold*) and Rakesh Sharma (director - *Final Solution*),



Rasool Snyman (Documentary Judge) and Laurence Attali (director of *Trilogy of Love*).



Francis Onwochei - Nigerian Focus director



Minky Schlesinger (co-director of *Belonging*)

CREDITS

Reel Times is compiled and edited by Andy Mason.

Student writers: Genevieve Akal, Ed Zingu

Layout: Christa Naidoo, Artworks Communications (031) 303 6466.

Views expressed are those of the writers and are not necessarily held by the Centre for Creative Arts, the University of KwaZulu-Natal or Artworks Communications.