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LOCARNO

A MOMENT OF INNOCENCE

(NUN VA GOLDUN)

(IRANIAN-FRENCH)

An MK2 release (in France) of a Pakhshiran (Iran)/MK2 Prods. (France) production. (International sales: MK2, Paris.) Produced by Abolfazi Alagheband. Executive producer, Mohamed Azin.

Directed, written, edited by Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Camera (color), Mahmoud Kalari; music, Nadjid Entezami; art direction, Reza Alagheband; sound, Zezam Kiai. Reviewed at Locarno Film Festival (competing), Aug. 12, 1996. (Also in Montreal, Toronto fests.) Running time: 77 MIN.

With: Mirhadi Tayebi, Ali Bakhshi, Ammar Tafti, Maryam Mohamadamini, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Moharam Zinal Zadeh.

The less-is-more theory is amply proved by "A Moment of Innocence," a wisp of a pic from Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf that continues to resonate long after higher-profile arty stodge has sunk without trace. Though his style and concerns are totally different, there's an almost Rohmer-esque purity and precision about this film, which takes a making-of-a-movie vignette and spins something that's delicate, funny and touching by turns. Pic is already booked solid on the fest circuit and should go on to discreet art-house business as well, further consolidating Makhmalbaf's international rep.

Helmer has taken an incident from his youth 20 years ago when, driven by dissident passion, he stabbed one of the Shah's policemen while trying to steal his gun. (Makhmalbaf was jailed and set free only following the fundamentalist revolution in 1979.) In a lovely opening sequence that sets much of the straight-faced comic tone throughout the film, the cop, now an ordinary citizen, is



INNOCENT PROPOSAL: Maryam Mohamadamini appears in Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf's "A Moment of Innocence," which revisits an incident from the helmer's youth.

shown arriving at Makhmalbaf's home in Tehran wanting to become an actor. He's met at the door by the helmer's protective young daughter, who takes a message.

The craggy-faced, inexpressive guy clearly has as much personality as a loaf of bread, but Makhmalbaf (playing himself) decides to take the incident and show it from different perspectives. At this point, the ex-cop tries to take over the casting call, disagreeing with both Makhmalbaf and his d.p. (Moharam Zinal Zadeh) on who should play him as a young man. After that's resolved, the ex-cop takes the lucky applicant off to be outfitted in the proper uniform, chatting with the tailor about his favorite Hollywood film moments and later schooling the thesp in how to conduct himself as a member of the Shah's police force.

All this, set in wintry, snowbound Tehran, and played like low-key absurdist comedy, sets the scene for the heart of the picture — shooting the crucial scene on a minuscule budget and tight time frame. It's here that the film develops its Chinese box structure, which grows ever more complex until the final shot. The ex-cop remembers the event as a thwarted love affair. On guard in front of a dignitary's home, he'd fallen for a girl (Maryam Mohamadamini) who often walked by. That day he had bought a flower, intending to propose marriage, before being attacked by Makhmalbaf. That's the version he's told to reenact.

Makhmalbaf, however, is preparing his version of the incident, which was a planned attack. In this scenario, the girl is a deliberate decoy rather than the innocent she appears.

In its delight in looking at the mechanics of the film business, pic has obvious overlaps with Makhmalbaf's "Salaam Cinema" (1995), and with its mixing of the apparently "real" and cinematic, echoes the director's more exotic "Gabbeh" (1996). Makhmalbaf doesn't force home any grand theories on filmmaking or perceptions of reality: They're there for the taking, but this warm, slyly witty picture is character-based first and foremost.

The movie's technical shortcomings, most noticeable in the yellowy-green wash that pervaded the print caught, are overcome by the performances, seemingly caught on the hoof but, if the Swiss-clock like script is any sign, carefully planned. Pic's Farsi title, which translates as "Bread and Flower," far more accurately reflects its content and simplicity.

—Derek Elley