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Matinee Magazine : Movies : 0-9 : 10 (New York Film Festival)

Starring:

Mania Akbari

Amin Maher

Directed by:

Abbas Kiarostami

Released by:

Zeitgeist Films

Grade: B+

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10 (New York Film Festival)

by Joe McGovern, Senior Film Critic

His reputation recently called into question with the overpraised DV indulgence *ABC Africa*, Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami sidesteps into much more compatible territory with the uncommonly accessible and highly engrossing behavioral study, *10*. Cutting exclusively between static shots of the driver and passenger seats in a compact car, Kiarostami exhibits an acute sense of storytelling by making himself virtually invisible. And mercifully so. The movie's success rests foremost with its candid, unassuming naturalism. By accepting simplicity and using only the most elementary tools (non-professional actors and digital video, here vital instead of merely cheap), it squeezes free any arrogance or pretensions that admittedly may grip its set-up. Kiarostami is not waving his finger at us; quite the contrary, he is inviting us to put our ear to the ground and simply listen. It is an artistic expression that could easily have been bitter and threatening to the point of impatience, yet comes off as not only fluid and honest, but even a little lovely.

The ten separate vignettes all involve a high society divorcée (Mania Akbari) as she transports friends, relatives and strangers across Tehran. Her belligerent young son (the deviously innocent Amin Maher), much wiser than either his years would indicate or his equally argumentative mother would care to admit, rides along for three earsplitting segments. The fact that these two performers are not actually mother and son will likely stun audience members unconsciously clued into the tiniest details of their repellent symbiotic relationship, such as how the boy cannot resist smiling when his mother talks him into a corner. Evidently scripted and extensively rehearsed, the movie doesn't include an unconvincing or inorganic moment, even if some of the passages aren't as perceptive to the subtleties of behavior as others.

The effect and technique is dead-on analogous to what HBO has been doing for years with *Taxicab Confessions*, especially in that even the banality of everyday life is totally addictive--and if *10* were nothing but self-importance and cultural pomposity, the comparison would be enough to call its bluff. But Kiarostami clearly has something tangible to offer--to American audiences (and they will get a chance to see it via Zeitgeist Films), it might have to do with how comparable the confines of this Iranian car, as well as its surrounding geography, is to their own. Kiarostami sycophants will claim that *10* resonates because of its commentary on modern Iran, yet I would prefer to believe its unexpected power derives from how it is not seized by any such limited scope. In the film's most haunting and eloquent scene, a prostitute accepts a ride in the car because she thought the driver was a man. In the dark reflection of street lamps and headlights, Akbari asks her if she ever thinks about sin or guilt. The prostitute, whose face we never see, spits up a mouthful of feeble laughter.

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