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The Gardener

Exiled Iranian filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf and his son Maysam debate the personal and political roles of religion in entertaining docu "The Gardener."

By [Richard Kuipers](#)

With: With: Maysam Makhmalbaf, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Ririva Eona Mabi, Paula Asadi, Guillaume Nyagatare, Tjireya Tjitendero Juzgado, Ian David Huang, Bal Kumari Gurung. (Farsi, English dialogue)

Exiled Iranian filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf and his son Maysam debate the personal and political roles of religion in entertaining docu "The Gardener." Taking their cameras into the magnificent gardens of the Baha'i Faith's headquarters in Haifa and Akka, Israel, father and son gather testimony from followers of the peace-promoting denomination and combine it with their own reflections to produce a stimulating and highly accessible cinematic conversation. Although theatrical exposure will be limited following the pic's world premiere at Busan, the docu looks certain to enjoy a long fest life, and is a perfect fit for niche broadcast outlets.

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Announcing in voiceover narration that he does not subscribe to Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Baha'i or any other religion, Mohsen chooses to film in the epicenter of a worldwide faith claiming 6 million members. Baha'i originated in Persia 170 years ago, and its adherents suffer persecution and exclusion in contempo Iran. Central to Baha'i is the need for peace, and the proposition that its founding figures, the Bab and Baha'u'llah, are but the most recent in a line of messengers, like Jesus and Buddha, who have delivered the word of God.

Wisely giving auds just the basics of Baha'i to get the ball rolling, Makhmalbaf Sr. decides on a filming strategy. He will look for positive aspects with his camera, and Maysam will probe for negatives. From time to time, a third camera will film them discussing their findings.

The simple technique works wonderfully well. For Mohsen, this means spending time with Eona, a believer from Papua New Guinea whose dreams have come true with a job tending the garden at Haifa. Elsewhere, Maysam hits a funny snag when he encounters an extremely enthusiastic woman who relates her story of discovering Baha'i, and joyously makes hard-to-criticize statements such as, "We are all flowers of one garden and leaves of one tree."

Expanding their lively debate on the pros and cons of Baha'i, Mohsen and Maysam consider the question of religion's role in peace, war and politics. Mohsen finds that faith is such a powerful force, it is worth having for the good it can create. Sticking to the devil's advocate role assigned by his dad, Maysam declares whatever good there might be in religion has been corrupted beyond repair by groups such as the Taliban.

Leaving the garden to expand on his thoughts, Maysam enters Jerusalem. While filming devotees praying at the Western Wall, he pessimistically wonders how it came to be that one of the most sacred sites in Judaism is located so close to the similarly important Al-Asqua mosque of the Islamic religion.

With their civilized discussion and amusing asides about the making and marketing of docus, the Makhmalbafs succeed in entertaining and engaging auds who are interested in the question of why people seek religion, and are willing to listen to all sides of a story.

Color-saturated lensing of superb foliage is pleasing to the eye, although frequent grainy, black-and-white aerial shots of the garden don't add much to the experience. Subtle, well-positioned music by Paul Collier rounds out a pro tech package.

The Gardener

Documentary - Iran

PRODUCTION: A Makhmalbaf Film House production. (International sales: M-Line Distribution, Seoul.) Produced by Makhmalbaf Film House. Directed, written by Mohsen Makhmalbaf.

CREW: Camera (color/B&W, HD), Maysam Makhmalbaf; editor, Maysam Makhmalbaf; music, Paul Collier; sound (Dolby Digital), Asad Rezai. Reviewed at Busan Film Festival (Gala Presentations), Oct. 8, 2012. Running time: 87 MIN.

CAST: With: Maysam Makhmalbaf, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Ririva Eona Mabi, Paula Asadi, Guillaume Nyagatare, Tjireya Tjitendero Juzgado, Ian David Huang, Bal Kumari Gurung. (Farsi, English dialogue)



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