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THE AFGHAN ALPHABET

(DOCU - IRAN)

A Makhmalbaf Film House production.
(International sales: Wild Bunch, Paris.)
Directed, written, edited by Mohsen

Makhmalbaf. Camera (color, digital video), Makhmalbaf; sound, Mojtaba Mirtahmasb; assistant directors, Samira Makhmalbaf, Hanna Makhmalbaf. Reviewed on videocassette, L.A., April 5, 2002. (In Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, Durham, N.C., and Tribeca Film Festival — Intl. Showcase.) Original title: *Alef-bay-e Afghan*. Running time: 45 MIN.

Shot in the winter of 2001 in the border villages along the Iran-Afghanistan divide, Mohsen Makhmalbaf's "The Afghan Alphabet" is a nonfiction return, post-9/11, to the territory of the director's previous "Kandahar." An outcropping of Makhmalbaf's Afghan Children Education Movement, the ostensible subject here is the rampant illiteracy among Afghan emigres to Iran and the various bureaucratic matters that stand in the way of those who want to learn. But Makhmalbaf's real interest lies in the way that religious rhetoric has already affected the minds of so many Afghan youths. Further fest exposure is certain.

As Abbas Kiarostami did in "Homework," Makhmalbaf first ingratiates himself with his camera-shy subjects and then asks them pungent and revelatory questions. To a class of young boys chanting passages from the Koran, he poses the question: Who, what and where is God? To a class of burka-outfitted girls, his query is: Why must you cover your face? He seizes upon one girl who refuses to uncover her face even to perform her classroom exercises; her potential unveiling becomes the crux of the film and is more human and compelling than almost anything in "Kandahar."

— Scott Foundas