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'Apple' Tells Extraordinary Story in Modern-Day Iran

KEVIN THOMAS

Samira Makhmalbaf's "The Apple" is astonishing on at least three counts. First, it is a beguiling and tender film about an oft-putting true-life incident: An impoverished 65-year-old Tehran man was discovered to have never allowed his 11-year-old twin daughters out of the house. Second, that it is the debut film of a 17-year-old filmmaker, daughter of major Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf, known for such films as "A Moment of Innocence," "Once Upon a Time, Cinema" and "Gabbeh." And third, that Makhmalbaf was able to persuade the man and his family to play themselves in a work in which the line between fiction and documentary is blurred in a singularly effective, persuasive and responsible manner. "The Apple" is the latest in a series of Iranian films, including "The White Balloon" and the Oscar-nominated "The Children of Heaven," that deal with the lives of children to reveal a society whose cinema is heavily censored.

Drawing upon her father's writing and editing skills, Makhmalbaf wisely whisks past one of the most unsettling aspects of the case: that the girls had never been bathed because their blind mother could not take them to the neighborhood public bath. Because they are hidden by chadors, we don't get a good look at the girls until they're in the custody of a welfare worker (Azizeh Mohamadi, also playing herself), who has scrubbed them thoroughly and given them short haircuts. Massoumeh and Zahra walk and talk haltingly, but they're smiling, even happy youngsters. They are remarkably healthy physically, and clearly theirs is a loving family.

What Makhmalbaf discovers and explores so eloquently is a conjunction of circumstances and ultra-conservative tradition. Certainly, life would have been different for the twins had their mother, who speaks only Turkish, not been blind and their parents less impoverished and better educated. As it is, the family



subsists on charity, and the father, Ghorbanali Naderi, is afraid to let them out of the house. The deeply religious Naderi is so conservative that he believes that should he allow his daughters to play in the tiny, walled yard in front of their small house, they might be dishonored if one of the neighborhood boys were to so much as touch them. Because the boys play in the narrow street in front of the house, they sometimes climb over the wall to retrieve a ball. "My girls are like flowers. They may wither in the sun," Naderi asserts. "A man's touch is like the sun."

Yet without contact with the outside world, deprived of education and exercise, the girls are withering away mentally and physically, hardly suitable for marriage, which custom dictates. Looking to be in failing health, the overwhelmed Naderi has not asked himself what would happen to his helpless, innocent daughters and his nearly helpless wife should something happen to him.

Makhmalbaf got Naderi's cooperation because when the plight of his daughters' life-long imprisonment became a media scandal, he believed he did not get his say and felt acutely dishonored when it was falsely reported that he had kept the girls

chained hand and foot. Fixated on this inaccuracy, he's unable to comprehend the widespread outrage directed at him.

In depicting the girls' discovery of the outside world, Makhmalbaf sets up a series of situations and shows how the girls react - for example, a boy selling ice cream bars happens by, and the girls, who'd really rather have an apple, neither know what ice cream is nor that if you take a bar you have to pay for it.

At the heart of the matter, of course, is that the twins represent the extreme oppression of women in Iran, yet Makhmalbaf is careful to suggest that the angry reaction to their plight reveals that the status of women is improving within a patriarchal Islamic society.

THE APPLE

Director: Samira Makhmalbaf. Producers: Marin Karmitz, Veronique Cayla. Executive Producer: Iraj Sarhaz. Writer/Editor: Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Cinematographers: Ebrahim Mohamad Abmadl. In Farsi with English subtitles. Running time: 1 hour, 21 minutes. WITH: Massoumeh Naderi (Massoumeh), Zahra Naderi (Zahra), Ghorbanali Naderi (Father), Soghra Behrozi (Mother), Azizeh Mohamadi (Social Worker).

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