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'The Apple'

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However fine the Iranian films shown in Britain over the last few years, one might be forgiven for wondering how much more mileage there is in making quite so many movies about children. That said, this particular example, the first feature directed by Samira Makhmalbaf – the 18-year-old daughter of Mohsen Makhmalbaf ('Gabbeh', 'A Moment of Innocence') – is a marvellous addition to the tradition.

Based on a true story – the participants play themselves – it tells of two gauche, innocent young girls, Massoumeh and Zahra Naderi, suddenly let loose in the world (by an impressively and pleasingly determined social worker) after neighbours inform the authorities of their having been locked up indoors for 12 years by their impoverished, elderly father and blind, deeply insecure mother. The admirably simple narrative offers a touching, often comic account of their release

and their various encounters with strangers on the streets of Tehran; at the same time, for all its charm, cuteness is offset by the the unsentimental portrait of family life.

Crucially, Makhmalbaf and her father (who wrote and edited this film) avoid passing judgement on the over-protective parents, whose actions are shaped by the inflexibly strict, finally self-serving traditions of a profoundly patriarchal culture now being questioned; indeed, the film is finally as much about their (potential) spiritual liberation as it is about the physical freedom of their offspring. It's a witty, gentle but often surprisingly acerbic little movie that slowly but surely works its way towards a quite devastating final shot, which underlines the need for an open heart and mind. Exactly how much the film's power derives from Samira Makhmalbaf's lucid, forthright direction and how much from her dad's screenplay is unclear; suffice to say that it's considerably more affecting than his own films.

Geoff Andrew