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Global Village People

The teenaged daughter of an internationally celebrated filmmaker makes a feature-length documentary about twin 11-year-old girls who have been locked up at home since birth by their blind mother and elderly, fundamentalist father. By its very existence, *The Apple* articulates, in a way no fiction could, the contradictions of Iran's Islamic Republic.

Sometimes, it takes a global village. Samira Makhmalbaf, who captivated American journalists when she appeared with *The Apple* at the last New York Film Festival, says that she was inspired to make her first movie by a TV report on the residents of a poor Tehran neighborhood who had petitioned a

The Apple
Directed by Samira Makhmalbaf
Written by Mohsen Makhmalbaf
A New Yorker release
Opens February 19

Beshkempir—The Adopted Son
Directed by Aktan Abdykalykov
Written by Abdykalykov, Artandil Adikulov, and Marat Sarulu
A Fox Lorber release
At Film Forum, through March 2

BY J. HOBERMAN

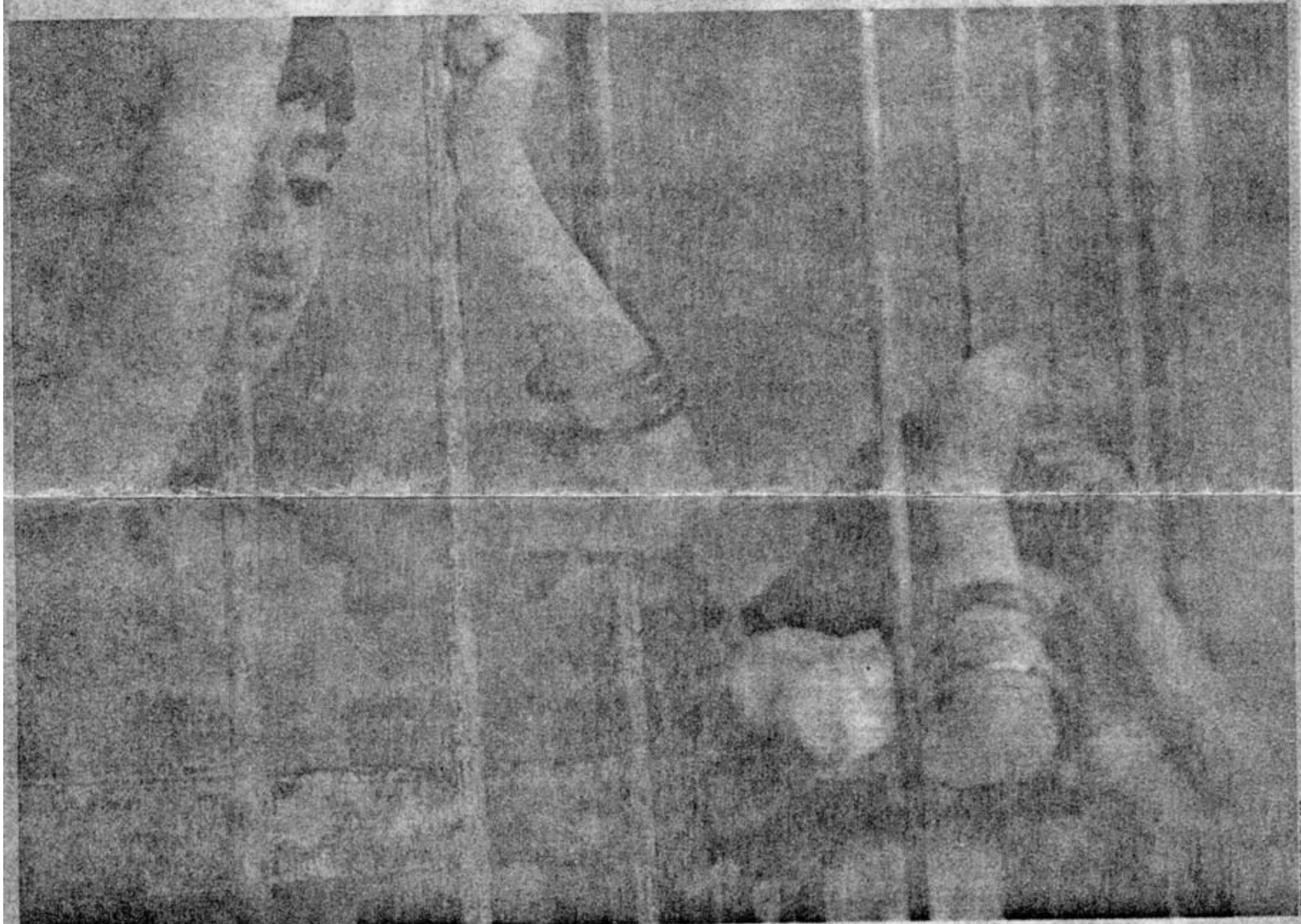
tarded, all the more so once their parents come to fetch them. But if the girls seem feeble-minded, what is one to make of their pathetically whimpering father? Or of their fully veiled mother whose constant sotto voce

filmmaker, father treats the twins to a cooking lesson and (prompted by a newspaper clipping that Makhmalbaf evidently sprang on him) argues with a neighbor, bitterly complaining that he has been "slandered." Meanwhile, the twins are distracted by the presence outside their gate of a child ice-cream vendor, even younger than themselves.

At length, the state power arrives in the person of a no-nonsense social worker, bringing an ultimatum for the father and little mirrors for the girls. The mirror is not just the movie's main special effect but the signifier of its intentions. But what exactly does *The Apple* reflect? In an inspired bit of forced role-playing, the social worker locks the old man in the house and, leaving him with

("Barbara Rubin has no shame; angels have no shame; Barbara Rubin is an angel," Jonas Mekas wrote.) A font of excuses, the father compares his daughters to delicate blossoms. His house is their shelter. "They may wither and die in the sun." But we see them seek the light and bloom in the clear gaze of Makhmalbaf's camera.

Experimental docudrama, open-ended essay, *The Apple* is a remarkable movie. Still, the question remains: Is Samira Makhmalbaf the real flower of the Islamic revolution or a hothouse orchid? Have Massoumeh and Zahra truly been set free? Or will they be shut in again two years hence?



Bar none: *The Apple's* imprisoned twins

state welfare agency to redress the twins' situation. Using film stock approved for a project to be directed by her father Mohsen Makhmalbaf (best known here for *Gabbah*), the 17-year-old neophyte made *The Apple* in 11 days.

According to the filmmaker, *The Apple* had no prepared script. After a brief introduction—shot on video, handheld verité-style—showing the parents reclaiming their girls from the welfare-agency offices, Makhmalbaf devised and filmed a series of situations that compelled the actual family to react. If the methodology is avant-garde and the directorial mode behavioral, it might be said that Makhmalbaf had been preparing for her own performance all her life, having appeared as a child actress in her father's 1988 feature *The Cyclist* and served as a production assistant on his latest film, *The Silence*.

Initially, the two girls—Massoumeh and Zahra—can barely speak. Although well-behaved and good-natured, they are scarcely socialized; they appear infantile, if not mentally re-

muttering (in Turkish, the only language she understands) has more than a whisper of insanity. But who is crazy here, the family or society?

As extreme as the particular situation may be, it is impossible not to treat this found metaphor as a cultural critique—particularly once Makhmalbaf switches to 35mm film and, with a surprising degree of delicacy and tact, allows her subjects to redramatize their life together. The "group therapy" portion of the movie is signaled by Makhmalbaf's shift to a deliberate overhead angle as the father brings Massoumeh and Zahra back home and, ignoring the welfare agency's injunction, once more locks them in the house.

Skinny and sweet, with big eyes and lolling tongues, the twins are as much mischievous pets as prepubescent children. They down behind their gate—beating spoons on the bars—until the old man returns like the witch in a fairy tale, carrying their daily bread and ice. In a bit of mordant comedy doubtless staged for the benefit of the

a hacksaw to cut away the bars on his front door, shoos the shuffling, mugging children out into the street.

The Apple is hardly straight documentary. Developing specific visual metaphors, Makhmalbaf has a bit of her father's hieroglyphic style. (*The Apple* doesn't fall far from the tree.) Massoumeh and Zahra enact little scenes—stealing ice cream, chasing the eponymous fruit that's dangled in front of them by a neighbor boy, heading off to the marketplace with two other little girls from their street. In the end, the twins head back to the market with their father, leaving their mother alone in the courtyard. Sightless and without language, she's the real prisoner and yet, even in her case, there is the possibility of transformation.

Makhmalbaf was the same age as the underground filmmaker Barbara Rubin was when she made her orgasmic, taboo-breaking *Christmas on Earth* and, although the two films could not be more different, there is a kindred purity in their desire for liberation.