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A Marin Karmitz, Abbas Kiarostami presentation of an MK2/Abbas Kiarostami production. (International sales: MK2 Diffusion, Paris.) Produced by Karmitz, Kiarostami. Directed, written, edited by Abbas Kiarostami.

Camera (color, DV to 35mm), Kiarostami; music, Howard Blake; sound (DTS), editing assistants, Morteza Tabatabaai, Bahman Kiarostami, Mastaneh Mohajer, Mazdak Sepanlu, Reza Yadzdani, Vahid Ghazi. Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (competing), May 19, 2002. Running time: 92 MIN.

Driver ..... Mania Akbari

Amin ..... Amin Maher

With: Roya Arabshahi, Katayoun Taleidzadeh, Mandana Sharbaf, Amene Moradi.

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By DEBORAH YOUNG

**L**iberated from a camera crew and all the paraphernalia of 35mm filmmaking, Iranian pacesetter Abbas Kiarostami makes a revolutionary leap forward technically and narratively in "10" — 10 dazzling and perceptive snapshots of women with which femmes everywhere can identify. Using a small DV camera attached to the dashboard of a car and just two camera setups — closeup of driver and closeup of passenger — he creates a rich, believable emotional world around a young divorced Iranian woman grappling with her anxieties. Sometimes funny, sometimes moving, always engrossing, "10" is a far cry from the static minimalism that passes itself off as avant-garde, offering a new model of filmmaking that reaches deep into human behavior and concerns. Its radical nature will keep many viewers at bay, while the nonstop dialogue will sorely test viewers' subtitle reading skills.

Even lacking the wide appeal of his visually expansive films leading up to "The Wind Will Carry Us," "10" is an inspired work, marking a milestone departure comparable to his 1990 "CloseUp." This courageous, instinctive film reduces all cinematic elements to a minimum in this one-man-show, which the director wrote, produced, shot and edited himself on the model of last year's DV docu "ABC Africa," with an economy certain to be widely studied and imitated, particularly in the emerging countries.

Kiarostami has never been noted for his female characters, who hug the background in most of his work. Here five non-pro actresses hold center stage. Most engrossing and complex is the main character (Mania Akbari), introduced in a conversation with her young son Amin (Amin Maher). Camera remains fixed on his face for 15 minutes as he argues and shouts with his unseen mom. He can't forgive her for divorcing his father and remarrying a man he treats as a stranger. She loads her own feelings of anger and guilt on him, accusing him of being "full of rage" and like his father.

This is the first and longest of 10 scenes, clearly delineated with numbers. In the next long tableau, the young mother is shown behind the wheel of her car, driving a relative who talks about Amin's hostility and need to live with his father. She's beautiful and fashionable in her makeup and sunglasses, and has a great need to talk.

She knows she's no model hausfrau for her husband and son, but she refuses to reform. Instead she drives through the streets of Tehran, picking up female hitchhikers. In one scene she offers a lift to an old lady on her way to pray at a mausoleum and, in a daring nighttime drive that shows to what lengths she's prepared to go in her search for understanding, she picks up and quizzes an intoxicated prostitute about men, sex and love.

Gradually it becomes clear what she is so desperately seeking is peace of mind in a society in which women's rights are trampled, where men are unfaithful and love transient and often illusory. The satisfaction of sexual needs is a puzzle, related to the larger question of whether all male-female relationships are based on commerce. By pic's end, she appears to have achieved the inner peace she craves, perhaps by learning to love herself and live for herself, not just in relation to the men in her life.

Kiarostami, also a well-known photographer, brings a fresh take to digital cinematography, exploiting its ability to record in small spaces as no one has previously attempted. Akbari and young Amin Maher are unbeatable at improvisation, shot after several weeks' rehearsal, but the whole non-pro cast is exceptional. Howard Blake's lyrical song "Walking in the Air" gently closes the film.