

Document Citation

Title	The apple
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Source	<i>Variety</i>
Date	1998 Mar 09
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	46
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Sib (The apple), Makhmalbaf, Samira, 1998

THE APPLE

(SIB)

(IRANIAN)

A Cinema Workshop (Tehran) production. (International sales: Farabi Cinema Foundation, Tehran.)

Directed by Samirah Makhmalbaf. Screenplay, Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Camera (color), Ebrahim Ghafari; editor, Mohsen Makhmalbaf; sound, Behrouz Shahamat. Reviewed at Fajr Film Festival (Iranian competition), Feb. 6, 1998. Running time: 85 MIN.

With: Zahra Naderi, Masume Naderi, Qorban Ali Naderi, Azize Mohammadi, Zahra Saqari Saz, Amir Hossein Khosrojerdi.

By GODFREY CHESHIRE

A haunting, reality-based drama about two 11-year-old girls who were locked up from birth by their parents, "The Apple" offers an allegory of Iranian society that's at once poetic and perplexing in more ways than may be intended. Although credited to Samirah Makhmalbaf, who was 17 at the time of its making, pic seems full of the stylistic assurance of her dad, renowned helmer Mohsen Makhmalbaf, who gets script and editing credits. While chances of arthouse crossover appear slight, the Makhmalbaf name and pic's curious subject matter should make it a festival favorite.

Recalling the docu-fiction techniques of Abbas Kiarostami's "Close-Up" as well as the concern over grotesque social conditions in Makhmalbaf's "The Peddler," pic starts with news accounts of twin girls discovered by social workers to have lived virtually as prisoners of their poor father and blind mother.

Acting within days of the story's unveiling, Makhmalbaf and his daughter persuaded the family members to play themselves in a scripted tale that opens with shot-on-video footage, presumably staged, of the girls, Zahra and Masume, being released from the state's custody and returning home.

Makhmalbaf's subsequent story interweaves the family's reality with his interpretation of it. Zahra and Masume, who appear mildly retarded (although it's hard to say how much this might be a product of their confinement), seem happy and more relaxed than self-conscious on camera. Much of the tale concerns their curiosity and desire to play beyond the gates of their home, and the difficulty visiting social workers face in trying to persuade their stubborn father to remove those gates.

The father's gruffly evasive but extraordinarily natural performance is a wonder in itself. The reasons he gives for keeping his daughters so sealed off from the world seem to combine a medieval social ethos that decrees that women are property to be locked up till marriage, and a personal impetus to keep the girls from discovering boys and their own sexuality, an issue rather unsubtly symbolized by apples that appear occasionally and provide pic's title.

As much as all this may provocatively and imaginatively limn oppressive patriarchal values that still condition Iranian society, pic leaves salient questions about its own modus operandi untouched. First is the issue of possible exploitation in the use of the girls. Second is whether pic's father offers an unwitting element of self-portraiture on the part of Makhmalbaf, whose handiwork here "contains" his own daughter.

That in turn touches on the question of the director's credit and whether it reflects reality or an opaque personal agenda. Whichever, pic's mounting overall is thoroughly pro, with Ebrahim Ghafari's sharp 35mm lensing lifting it above the technical rawness of some docudramas. At 85 minutes, it could still use a bit of trimming, but generally has no problem sustaining interest.