

Women Without Men -- Film Review

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The Bottom Line

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As Iran's regime continues to stir world concerns, films about Iranian history take on added interest.

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Director Shirin Neshat was born in Iran, but her controversial photographs and experimental videos have made it impossible for her to return; she now lives in New York. Neshat's first feature, "Women Without Men," looks back at the crucial moment in 1953 when democratically elected President Mohammed Mossadegh was overthrown in a coup engineered by England and the U.S. This beautifully made film (which won the best director award at last year's Venice Film Festival) is the very definition of an art house movie with limited appeal, but its political import gives it added talking points that will draw attention.

This subjective, interior work revolves around the lives of four women during this turbulent moment in Iran's history. Munis (Shabnam Tolouei) is a budding feminist who refuses to hew to the circumscribed roles for women prescribed by her tyrannical brother.

Her friend Faezeh (Pegah Ferydoni) is a more timid woman inspired by Munis' acts of rebellion. Zarin (Orsi Toth) is a prostitute who flees the brothel where she works. Finally, an older woman, Fakhri (Arita Shahrzad), the unhappy wife of a powerful Iranian general, leaves her husband to live in a beautiful country orchard where the other women also seek refuge. But the military coup eventually intrudes on their peaceful idyll.

The film is not designed as social realism. The novel by Shahrnush Parsipur (who plays the madam in the brothel) is a work of magical realism, and the film incorporates intriguing flights of fantasy when dealing with the women's commune in the forest. Even the visual palette reflects these leaps into fantasy.

The scenes in Tehran are filmed in a muted, almost monochromatic style approximating

newsreels, whereas lush colors explode in the scenes in the orchard. From the opening scene of Munis contemplating suicide on the rooftop of her home, with the white building framed against a pale blue sky, the images are mesmerizing. The cinematography by Martin Gschlacht is a major asset.

Because this subversive film could not be made in Iran, production designer Katharina Woppermann did an expert job of re-creating Iranian settings in Morocco. The haunting musical score enhances the movie's mournful power.

All of the performances achieve the right emotional intensity: Tolouei conveys pride along with a deep-seated sense of melancholy, and Shahrzad's portrayal of the dissatisfied military wife is especially forceful.

"Women" recalls the adventurous foreign films of an earlier era. Audiences will continue to discuss and debate the film long after it reaches its poignant conclusion.

Opens: Friday, April 9 (Indiepix Films)

Cast: Pegah Ferydoni, Arita Shahrzad, Shabnam Tolouei, Orsi Toth, Navid Akhavan, Bijan Daneshmand

Director: Shirin Neshat

Co-director: Shoja Azari

Screenwriters: Shirin Neshat, Shoja Azari

Based on the novel by: Shahrnush Parsipur

Producers: Susanne Marian, Martin Gschlacht, Philippe Bober

Executive producers: Barbara Gladstone, Jerome de Noirmont, Oleg Kokhan

Director of photography: Martin Gschlacht

Production designer: Katharina Woppermann

Music: Ryuichi Sakamoto, Abbas Bakhtiari

Costume designer: Thomas Olah

Editors: George Cragg, Jay Rabinowitz, Julia Wiedwald

No rating, 97 minutes

Links:

[1] <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/topic/asia-movies-entertainment-film-reviews>