

Review: 'Women Without Men'

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Visual artist Shirin Neshat makes pic debut with an uneven take on the controversial Persian novella.

Jay Weissberg (<http://variety.com/author/jay-weissberg/>)

Famed visual artist [Shirin Neshat](http://variety.com/t/shirin-neshat/) (<http://variety.com/t/shirin-neshat/>) makes her feature debut with an uneven adaptation of the controversial Persian novella "Women Without Men." Directed in collaboration with her offscreen partner, helmer-artist Shoja Azari, the much-anticipated pic has striking moments comparable to the best of Neshat's potent imagery. But the script jettisons most of the book's more powerful sections, upping the political angle and inexplicably eliminating motivations that made the strongly feminist story, rich in symbolism, so intriguing. Neshat's rep in the contemporary art scene ensures a lively fest presence, but theatrical prospects will depend on Euro arthouse and bicoastal play.

Iran, 1953: Unrest grips Tehran on the eve of the CIA-backed coup that toppled Mohammad Mossadegh's government and reinstalled the Shah. In the opening sequence, Munis (Shabnam Tolouei) dramatically kills herself by jumping off a rooftop. Flashbacks reveal her glued to the radio, devouring any bit of news about [the coup](http://variety.com/t/the-coup/) (<http://variety.com/t/the-coup/>) while her stern brother Assad (Bijan Daneshmand) scolds her for her independence. Superficial friend Faezeh (Pegah Ferydoni) comes calling, but she's only focused on getting Assad to notice her.

Fakhri (Arita Shahrzad) is unhappily married to a well-to-do army officer who taunts her about her menopausal state. Yearning to be viewed as an intelligent woman, she searches for the right setting and chooses a run-down house where she dreams of setting up a literary salon. Eventually, silent prostitute Zarin (Orsi Toth) wanders into this Eden, a gaunt, haunted figure desperate to scrub away the taint of countless johns.

These women, all from different social classes, represent repressed womanhood while doing double duty as symbols of a democratic Iranian revolution cut short by Western interference. Shahrnush Parsipur's source material downplayed the coup in a way that made the feminist message timeless yet linked it to the country's tragically aborted freedom movements, whereas Neshat and her collaborators want to give politics and feminism equal weight, resulting in a far weaker thrust.

In the novella, Munis doesn't off herself but is killed by her brother for perceived immodesty; when she literally comes back to life, she's genuinely changed, having passed through ignorance into knowledge. Neshat's conception makes little distinction between Munis pre- and post-suicide, calling into question the whole purpose of her resurrection, and her death is forgotten, as if it's an inconvenient plot point best ignored.

A purportedly troubled production history — there are six editors credited — cannot have helped Neshat hone her message. Visuals are more successful than structure and rationale: Starkly evocative images reminiscent of her "Women of Allah" series set black-veiled women alone or against groupings of men, emphasizing their individuality.

The colors have been drained of bright tonalities, securely fixing the past as a distant time where dingy green predominates. Oddly, Neshat does little to distinguish the Eden-like nurturing garden, highlighting some flowers but never allowing this fragile symbol of emancipation to blossom into the kinds of vibrant colors the eye craves. Casablanca works as a good stand-in for 1950s Iran.

Women Without Men

Germany-Austria-France

Production

An Essential Filmproduktion (Germany)/Coop99 (Austria)/Parisienne de Prod. (France) production, with the support of Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg, Filmstiftung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Deutscher Filmfoerderfonds, Filmfoerderungsanstalt, Eurimages Council of Europe, Oesterreichisches Filminstitut, Filmfonds Wien, THECIF, in collaboration with ZDF/Arte, ORF, Cinepostproduction, Shoenheitsfarm Postproduction, Schweizer Brandung Filmproduktion. (International sales: Coproduction Office, Paris.) Produced by Susanne Marian, Martin Gschlacht, Philippe Bober. Executive producers, Barbara Gladstone, Jerome de Noirmont, Oleg Kokhan. Directed by Shirin Neshat, in collaboration with Shoja Azari. Screenplay, Neshat, Azari, Steven Henry Madoff, adapted from the novella by Shahrnush Parsipur.

Crew

Camera (color, HD), Martin Gschlacht; editor, George Cragg, Jay Rabinowitz, Julia Wiedwald, Patrick Lambertz, Christof Schertenleib, Sam Neave; music, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Abbas Bakhtiari; production designer, Katharina Woeppermann; set designer, Shahram Karimi; costume designer, Thomas Olah; sound (Dolby Digital), Uve Haussig; associate producers, Shoja Azari, Joerg E. Schweizer; line producers, Peter Hermann, Bruno Wagner, Erwin M. Schmidt, Isabell Wiegand. Reviewed at Venice Film Festival (competing), September 8, 2009 (Also in Toronto Film Festival — Special Presentations; London Film Festival.) Running time: 100 MIN. (Farsi dialogue)

With

Pegah Ferydoni, Arita Shahrzad, Shabnam Tolouei, Orsi Toth, Bijan Daneshmand, Shahrnush Parsipur.