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MOVIE REVIEW | 'WOMEN WITHOUT MEN'

In 1953 Iran, Sisterhood Sought During a Coup

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

Every frame of “Women Without Men” and every image within those frames attest to the background of its first-time director, Shirin Neshat, as a photographer celebrated for her explorations of Islamic gender issues. This visually transfixing film, which originated as a video installation, has the feel of an exhibition of Ms. Neshat’s work whose figures have stirred to life to play out a tragic feminist allegory.

With its intense chiaroscuro and meticulous manipulation of color that ranges from stark black and white to richer, shifting hues in scenes set in a metaphorical orchard, the film surpasses even Michael Haneke’s “White Ribbon” in the fierce beauty and precision of its cinematography (by Martin Gschlacht). Two of the film’s recurrent images are of a long dirt road extending to the horizon on which the characters walk, and a brook that suggests a deep current of feminine resilience below an impassive exterior.

“Women Without Men” conveys the slightly detached formality of a pageant, whose four main characters, Iranian women from different classes and backgrounds, have more symbolic weight than flesh-and-blood reality. It was filmed in Morocco, with Casablanca doubling for 1950s Tehran.

The most memorable of the four is Zarin (Orsi Toth), an emaciated prostitute who impulsively flees the brothel in which she works and finds temporary refuge at a women’s public bath. Here she furiously scrubs her body raw in an anguished attempt to erase the imprint of the men who have used her. At once monumental and pastel-hued, the bath scenes suggest Ms. Neshat’s response to the famous Ingres canvas “The Turkish Bath.”

Loosely adapted from a magical realist novel by Shahrnush Parsipur, who appears briefly as the brothel’s stridently bossy madam, “Women Without Men” is set in August 1953, when an Anglo-American-backed coup d’état toppled Mohammed Mossadegh’s democratically elected government and installed the Shah as dictator. The number of women has been reduced from five in the novel to four in the film.

Ms. Neshat, who was born four years after the coup, left Iran in 1979, just before the Islamic Revolution that drove the Shah into exile. Her film, very critical of the coup, implies that it made the eventual revolution and subsequent turmoil inevitable.

Ms. Neshat, who lives and works in New York, continued to visit Iran until she was banned from the country in 1996 for the political content of her work. Since 1998, she has collaborated with her husband, Shoja Azari, a video artist and filmmaker, with whom she wrote the screenplay for “Women Without Men.”

Besides Zarin, the characters include the 30-year-old Munis (Shabnam Tolouei), a virtual prisoner in the house she shares with her tyrannical fundamentalist brother. To his chagrin, Munis is not only unmarried but also spends her days glued to the radio, hearing about events leading up to the coup. After he furiously unplugs her only connection to the outside world, Munis commits suicide by jumping off the roof of the house. On discovering her body, her brother curses her for disgracing him. (In the novel he kills her.)

The third woman, the religiously observant Faezeh (Pegah Ferydoni), is a friend of Munis who secretly longs to marry Munis’s brother. After Munis’s death, Faezeh hears the voice of her friend speaking to her from underground and digs up Munis, who, in a magical realist trope, begins a second, independent life working with an underground Communist group publishing and distributing leaflets.

Fakhri (Arita Shahrzad), the fourth woman, is a wealthy 50-year-old, unhappily married to a general who reviles her for being menopausal and sexually unresponsive. When an old flame returns to Tehran with his American wife, Fakhri leaves her husband and buys an orchard that becomes a mystical retreat to which Zarin and Faezeh gravitate and form a mutually protective, healing sisterhood. If their self-imposed exile in this mysterious woodland hideaway is idyllic, compared with their former lives, Zarin hovers between life and death.

Eventually soldiers arrive during a party at which Fakhri entertains the guests by singing. Although the soldiers and the guests mingle warily, there is no mistaking the celebration for what it is: a last hurrah for a kind of social mobility and political freedom that may never return.

WOMEN WITHOUT MEN

Opens on Friday in Manhattan.

Directed by Shirin Neshat; written by Ms. Neshat and Shoja Azari, based on the novel by Shahrnush Parsipur; director of photography, Martin Gschlacht; edited by George Cragg, Jay Rabinowitz, Julia Wiedwald, Patrick Lambertz, Christof Schertenleib and Sam Neave; music by Ryuichi Sakamoto, Persian music by Abbas Bakhtiari; production designer, Katharina Wöppermann; costumes by Thomas Olah; produced by Susanne Marian, Mr. Gschlacht and Philippe Bober; released by IndiePix Films. In Persian, with English subtitles. Running time: 1 hour 39 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Pegah Ferydoni (Faezeh), Arita Shahrzad (Fakhri), Shabnam Tolouei (Munis) and Orsi Toth (Zarin).

