



Once upon a Time, Cinema
(In Farsi: *Nasseredin Shah Actor-e Cinema*)

“...In a vaguely unreal past, a Chaplin-esque cinematographer saves his own skin by seducing a sultan with movies—
and Makhmalbaf does the same by seducing us.”

- *Michael Atkinson, The Village Voice: Shelf Life*

Iran 1992.

Director: Mohsen Makhmalbaf.

Cast: Ezzatollah Entezami, Mehdi Hashemi, Akbar Abdi.

B/W, 35mm, in Farsi with English subtitles. 100 mins.

An Iranian king with 84 wives and 200 children is categorically against cinemas, regarding it as perdition. Until one day he goes to the movies and the unforeseen occurs: he falls in love with the heroine of the film, as if by magic. Now confused, he will have no more of his kingdom, and much less of his wives and children. He hankers only for the sight he saw on a movie screen. To be close to the love of his life, the king does not think twice: he decides to be an actor....

With a Chaplin-esque touch, the film is a touching tribute to movie-making, with a wealth of magic and poetry. A wonderful, fairy-tale like comedy set during the Qajar dynasty which is a condensed history of Iranian cinema in general.

“...Once Upon a Time, Cinema (*Nasseredin Shah Actor-e Cinema*) Makhmalbaf's "love letter to the Iranian cinema" (Deborah Young, *Variety*) is a free-for-all fantasia in the mode of Buster Keaton's *Sherlock Junior* or Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, in which "characters jump in and out of cameras, projectors and screens, time goes backward and forward in melancholy leaps and actors appear in multiple roles" (Young). At the dawn of the 20th century, a Chaplin-like character known as the Cinematographer introduces the magic of movies to the Iranian court. The pompous Shah, who has 84 wives and 200 children, is dead-set against the pernicious influence of movies, but at the sight of his first film he falls madly in love with its damsel-in-distress heroine, and resolves to give up his kingdom and become an actor. Makhmalbaf has described the work as a "1001 Arabian Nights" of Iranian film history, and he pays fond tribute to his nation's cinema by seamlessly and inventively weaving myriad clips from classic Iranian movies into the screwball narrative. The film won major awards at the Karlovy Vary, Istanbul and Taormina festivals. "Once Upon a Time, Cinema almost defies description as the complexity and imagination Makhmalbaf brings to it produce a dazzling visual rollercoaster on which to sweep the viewer along. . . [a memorable] cinematic fairy tale" (Sheila Whitaker, London Film Festival)."

- from *"Salaam Cinema: The Films of Mohsen Makhmalbaf"* (presented by PACIFIC CINEMATEQUE, Vancouver, BC). A retrospective of work by the "misanthropic humanist" who is Iran's most popular and controversial filmmaker -- and one of contemporary world cinema's leading talents

"...It is an ironic aspect of the career of Makhmalbaf, one of the foremost artists of the Iranian post-revolutionary cinema, that he had not ever once gone to the movies until after the 1979 Islamic revolution, when he was already past the age of 20. Regarding his decision to make his 10th picture, **Once Upon a Time, Cinema**, Makhmalbaf says: "In my childhood I did not go to the cinema with my mother, and on one occasion I stopped talking to her for some time because she had gone to the movies. The reasons for my objections to the cinema were clear to myself. Cinema in our country meant selling dreams to people who longed for ideals. I first went to the movies at the age of 23 - after the revolution. I decided to express my dislike for the continuation of the pre-revolution type of cinema by making completely different films. Gradually, the old dream-mongers were driven out and a new generation of filmmakers entered the scene, while a select number of genuine artists of the old school still accompanied the Iranian cinema. **Once Upon a Time, Cinema** took shape in my mind, and now when I watch the film, I realize that I am no longer against the cinema, but have actually become part of it."

Once Upon a Time, Cinema is a fantasy involving the Qajar king, Mozaffareddin Shah who traveled to France and brought the first motion picture projector to Iran. The king takes a fantastic journey through the cinematic realm, lands in contemporary Iran, and is shocked when he is not allowed to enter his palace. Makhmalbaf uses clips of a great number of films from the history of the Iranian cinema. To make the selections he spent about 3 weeks viewing old films, often at the rate of 8 to 10 pictures a day. The film's general plot outline is based on the first Iranian movie, Haj Agha, the Film Actor and the first Iranian talkie, The Lor Girl. Makhmalbaf clearly intended his picture to be a tribute to all the people who worked in Iranian film industry throughout its sixty-year history..."

- "Biography: Mohsen Makhmalbaf" presented at XIV Turin International Film Festival- Turin (Italy) November 15 - 23, 1996

About the director:



One of the present day exponents of Iranian movie-making, Makhmalbaf is also one of the most active artists of the post-revolutionary period in his country. The winner of fifteen international awards, Makhmalbaf has produced some 20 short and feature length films, most of which have been shown at several film festivals around the world. Some of the most famous ones are: *The Peddler (Dastforoush)*, *The Cyclist (Bicycle-raan)*, *Once Upon a Time, Cinema*, His tribute to the 100 year of cinema: *(Nasereddin Shah, Aktore-Cinema)*, a short-length film *A Selection of Scenes from the Ghajar Dynasty*, *Salam Cinema*, *Time of Love*, *Marriage of the Blessed*, *The Actor (Honarpishe)*, *Moment of Innocence (Nun va Goldun)*, *Gabbeh*, a Tajik film called *Sokoot* or *Silence* and recently *Apple* with his daughter Samira Makhmalbaf.

Born in a poor area in Teheran in 1951, Makhmalbaf left school at the age of fifteen to form a group of religious activists in opposition to the regime then in effect, the government of Shah Rzeza Pahlevi. Two years later he was imprisoned and was only spared from execution because he was under age. He was released from prison during the Moslem revolution and realized he might go into politics by means of artistic activities. He wrote twenty-eight short stories, three novels, ten plays, two books of essays, and twenty-eight scripts (several of these forbidden) before his debut as a director in 1982 at the age of 31 years with *Nassouh Repentant*. Makhmalbaf, known internationally for *The Peddler*, *The Cyclist*, and *Once Upon a Time, Cinema*, has directed 15 films.

Filmography

Feature Films:

Tobe-ye Nasuh (Nasoooh's Repentance, 1982)
Do cheshm-e bi su (Two Sightless Eyes, 1983)
Este'aze (Seeking Refuge in God, 1984)
Baycot (Boycott, 1985)
Dastforush (The Peddler, 1986)
Baysilkeran (The Cyclist, 1987)
Arusi-ye khuban (The Marriage of the Blessed, 1988)
Nobat-e asheqi (Time of Love, 1990)
Shabhay-e Zayandeh Rud (Nights on the Zayandeh Rud, 1990)
Nasseroddin Shah, Actore Cinema (Once Upon a Time, Cinema, 1991)
Honar Pishé (The Actor, 1992)
Salaam Cinema (Salam Cinema, 1994)
Gabbeh (Gabbeh, 1995)
Nun Va Goldun (A Moment of Innocence, 1996)

Documentary:

Gozideh tasvir dar doran-e Qajar (A Selection of Images from Qajar Era, 1992)
Sang-o shisheh (The Stone and the Glass, 1993)

"...What are Iranian films like?"

In some ways, of course, they are as different as the very diverse individuals making them. Yet there are common threads that link many of them. They often focus on ordinary people caught in harsh circumstances brought about by social, cultural or natural forces. The devastation caused by an earthquake, the wounds and traumas left by war, the hardships heaped on the poor, the prejudices faced by women -- these are powerful subjects, and Iranian filmmakers manage to address them not with easy sloganeering or sentimentality, but with insight and a sure sense of storytelling basics and dramatic purpose. The films' most singular quality is a feeling of compassion for those who suffer. Formally as well as narratively, Iranian filmmakers have shown a genius for making virtues out of constraints. Since the films are cheaply made, they often have a surface simplicity that encourages subtlety and realism; budgetary limitations are perhaps one reason their directors have also become famous for exploring the boundary between documentary and fiction. That Western-style violence, obscenity and sex are prohibited (actresses must wear the veil at all times, and couples may not even hold hands) has meant that filmmakers carefully choose their subjects and practice skillfully indirect, allegorical storytelling. For example, films about children, an Iranian specialty, allow for a form of oblique social commentary and intimate situations that would be harder to effect among adults."

- GODFREY CHESHIRE, *PBS On line: Beyond the veil - The Iranian Cinema*
(<http://www.pbs.org/visavis>)