

# buddha

collapsed out of shame

A FILM BY  
**HANA MAKHMALBAF**

SCRIPT  
**MARZIYEH MESHKINI**

WITH  
**NIKBAKHT NORUZ  
ABDOLALI HOSEINALI  
ABBAS ALIJOME**

PRODUCED BY  
**MAKHMALBAF FILM HOUSE  
WILD BUNCH**

PHOTO / DESIGN: M. ZONHOUR



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CINEMA  
2007  
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# BUDDHA COLLAPSED OUT OF SHAME

DIRECTED BY  
**HANA MAKHMALBAF**

IRAN-FRANCE / 81' / 35 MM / 1:85 / DOLBY SR / COLOUR

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## SYNOPSIS

Amidst the wreckage beneath the ruined statue of the Buddha, thousands of families struggle to survive.

Bakhtay, a six-year-old Afghan girl, is challenged to go to school by her neighbour's son who reads in front of their cave. Having found the money to buy a precious notebook, and taking her mother's lipstick for a pencil, Bakhtay sets out. On her way, she is harassed by boys playing games that mimic the terrible violence they have witnessed, that has always surrounded them. The boys want to stone the little girl, to blow her up as the Taliban blew up the Buddha, to shoot her like Americans.

Will Bakhtay be able to escape these violent war games and reach the school?

## DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Afghanistan is a strange country. Over a period of 25 years, it has experienced many rulers: the communist Russians, Al-Qaeda and the extremist Islamic Taliban and Christian or atheist Westerners. Each of these, in order to 'save' Afghanistan from the other, has first attacked and laid waste to the country. Present day destruction in Afghanistan is not limited to cities and homes.

Now, in their games, the children of this country fire at each other with wooden weapons. They act out play stonings with little girls as victims and jokingly place pretend land mines beneath each other's feet.

When they become adults how will these children, who mock the game of war in childhood, play with each other and with the future of humanity?

- Hana Makhmalbaf

## CAST

<i>Bakhtay</i>	Nikbakht Noruz
<i>Talib boy</i>	Abdolali Hoseinali
<i>Abbas</i>	Abbas Alijome

## CREW

DIRECTED BY	Hana Makhmalbaf
SCREENPLAY	Marziyeh Meshkini
DP	Ostad Ali
SOUND	Farid Pirayesh
PRODUCTION DESIGNER	Akbar Meshkini
PRODUCTION MANAGER	Fakhroddin Ayam
STILLS PHOTOGRAPHER	Mehrdad Zonnour
MUSIC	Tolibhon Shakhidi
EDITOR	Mastaneh Mohajer
MIX	Hossein Mahdavi
TECHNICAL SUPPORT	Ali Gozidehpour
LAB	Arri Film
PRODUCTION	WILD BUNCH MAKHMALBAF FILM HOUSE

## **INTERVIEW WITH HANA MAKHMALBAF**

### **Where does the film take place?**

Most of the film was shot in Bamian, in Afghanistan, beneath the ruins of the statues of the Buddha that were destroyed by Taliban in 2001.

### **How did you choose your cast?**

I visited many schools in Bamian and its suburbs, saw thousands of children and auditioned hundreds until I found those I felt best suited my story.

### **How did you find directing the children?**

Hard, but rewarding. Hard because they weren't familiar with cinema. No one has ever shot a film in their city before, they've never even had a local TV station to allow them to get used to seeing their own image on-screen. But it was tremendously rewarding to work with all these children with so much energy, to see their beautiful, innocent faces. When directing them, I tried to take a different approach, to make everything seem like a game. And you can see this playful theme in the film. If there is a meaning to the film, it can be found behind these kids' games.

### **Watching the film now, do you feel that you have said what you intended to?**

I tried to depict the effects of years of violence on the country by showing a picture of today's Afghanistan, so that adults might see how their behavior affects the younger generation. Children are the adults of tomorrow. If they get used to violence, the world's future will be in great danger. A teenage boy in the film says: "When I grow up, I will kill you", because as a child he has lived through lots of violence: it has become part of his everyday life. I believe that children's real school lies in observing and copying the behaviour of their parents and other adults around them. For instance, a few years ago a terrible massacre took place in Bamian during which many men and boys were beheaded in front of their wives and mothers. The irony is that even those who come to rescue Afghanistan first destroy it and then do not find the time to rebuild. Then the next so-called 'rescue group' arrives and repeats the same cycle of destruction and violence again and again. First,

it was the Russians, then the Taliban, and now the Americans. Communists, Muslims and atheists / Christians, but all with one thing in common - violence. And this violence has been injected over and over by three different groups into the culture of this country's people, so strongly that you can see it in their children's play. Unlike their counterparts in America who learn violence through Hollywood action films, the children of Afghanistan have learnt it by witnessing the atrocities suffered by their relatives. They have witnessed their fathers being beheaded in their own gardens.

### **The film is called BUDDHA COLLAPSED OUT OF SHAME but weren't the Buddha statues really destroyed by the Taliban?**

Yes, you can say that. You can also see this destruction at the beginning and the end of the film. But the title comes from my father, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, who meant that even a statute can grow ashamed of witnessing so much violence and tragedy visited upon innocent people, and can collapse as a result. Not just because of this metaphorical meaning, but also because most of the story takes place in front of the void left by the Buddha statue, I felt the title was appropriate.

### **Did you have the complete story in mind before you started filming, or did it develop as you shot?**

At the beginning there was quite a poetic story line about the day-long journey of a 6-year-old girl who is encouraged - or rather, provoked - by the boy next door into going to school. As she doesn't have an exercise book, she sells her chicken's eggs to buy stationery, but the money she makes isn't enough to buy a pencil, so she takes her mother's lipstick instead, and sets out. Unaware of the steps one needs to take to be enrolled as a pupil, she visits every school along her way but is rejected. When the first part of the shoot was over, during the editing I felt that the characters were somehow incomplete. So I went back to my mother, the scriptwriter, and we started to work again on the plot. In fact, the day-long story that we see in the film was shot across three different seasons: spring, summer and autumn.

### **How did the characters in the film develop?**

Partly during the writing and partly during the shoot. As soon as filming began, I saw and learnt new things about the subject I wanted to address. I paid close attention to the children playing around us and decided to incorporate some of their games and some of this new information in my story. For example, I met a man who was a communist during the Russian invasion, became a Mullah during the Taliban period, and was now working with the Americans. For two decades he had maintained close contact with whoever was in power. In the film, he is portrayed by the boy who 'kills' endlessly, each time under a different name representing different groups. Another example is the boy who keeps practicing the alphabet regardless of what happens to him. Even under torture he practices, although it seems he's never going to master it. Endless effort with no sign of progress! But beyond his overwhelming experiences lies a profound meaning. Unlike the other man, he has never been in power or close to those in power; on the contrary, he has been abused and broken by power. This is the experience of many nations across the world. Those who are constantly abused, tortured or slaughtered but who neither give up nor achieve any success.

The boy learns that sometimes in life you need to die to be able to carry on. This is not an ordinary experience. The last thing he says to the girl is: "Die so they will leave you alone." The girl accepts to die in their game in order to escape the vicious circle of violence in which they are trapped.

### **Does the film have a hero?**

There is no hero in the film. Not even the girl, as she does not achieve her goal. She even accepts to die temporarily, to collapse like the statue of the Buddha, when she is asked to by the boys towards the end of the film. She has no choice. During the film, she travels a long way to different schools seeking to learn a joke. No one teaches her the joke she's looking for, but she learns many other things during her journey. For me, not only are there no heroes in this film, but also describing and trying to simplify the characters who represent people

in real life is difficult. Each character represents different layers of life. It also depends on the way I look at the film. For example, when the boys are seriously 'playing' their fathers in the wars, the girls are also lost in performing as their mothers - putting on make-up. As we see, all this happens in a country where guns can be made out of tiny sticks, schools can be invaded armed only with a lipstick, and a city can be bombarded in the imagination with a simple toy like a kite.

### **Tell us about your last two films and your experience in cinema up to now?**

My second experience was JOY OF MADNESS, a behind-the-scene documentary about my sister Samira's film AT FIVE IN THE AFTERNOON, which I shot digitally with no crew. At first, the idea was to document the problems Samira faced while shooting in Afghanistan but the finished film turned out to be about the situation of women in Kabul following the American invasion. My first film, THE DAY MY AUNT WAS ILL, was a short, made at home with a simple camcorder when I was eight years old. So there's a nine year gap between this first short and my first feature film. During those nine years I worked constantly on films, as a stills photographer, assistant director, and so on.

### **Why Afghanistan and not Iran?**

I would film any story that interests me, wherever I could obtain permission to make it. I have many stories that take place in Iran and hopefully one day when I have the permission I will make them. Now is not an easy time.

### **How do you see the future of Afghanistan?**

The Taliban are gone but their impact on this culture remains. Constant war in Afghanistan has destroyed the culture more than the country. The violence that has raided the souls of the children may well erupt as a new complex in the future. Ahmad Shah Massoud used to say: "A good politician is not one who analyzes the future well. He is one who understands today." When I am there, I feel that the world does not even comprehend the country's present-day problems. How can it presume to predict and build Afghanistan's future?

**Why do you make films? Is it because you come from a family of filmmakers, or because you have something to say that you can express only through this medium?**

As an 18-year-old girl living in contemporary Iran and facing very particular ideological, political and social pressures, I have a lot to say. I write most of my film ideas in the form of short stories, for myself. If writing does not reduce any pain of those with whom I sympathize, at least it lessens my own psychological pressures. Although it was not made in Iran, BUDDHA COLLAPSED OUT OF SHAME conveys what I have to say about the common suffering that exists in both Iran and Afghanistan. Both societies have similar cultural/political problems.

**When did you become interested in cinema?**

When I was eight years old. Before that, I wanted to be a painter and befriended a great Iranian woman painter. When I witnessed her solitude during the long days of painting, I realized that I loved painting but not the loneliness that came with it. Cinema was more dynamic. When my father was working, I was always enchanted by the waves of energy that emerged around his films. The very words "Sound, camera, action!" excited me: there was a strange power just in these three words. That's why I quit elementary school after second grade at the age of eight, only a few months after Samira quit middle school. I studied in my father's classes alongside her, worked on family film projects as photographer, continuity and assistant director and made behind-the-scene documentaries.

**Did your father support your leaving school?**

Since my father did not believe in the educational system in Iran that taught ideology rather than science, he said to me: "If you are prepared for more studies, welcome to our school." And my work became harder from that moment on because in my father's school I learned cinema and outside I had to study the subjects that my peers were studying in school.

**What kind of problems did this way of studying cause?**

Above all, the jealousy of my peers. When they saw that I read books in a month that took them a year to read, that I took tests and pursued my own interests, they grew jealous of me. At one point, after a few years I missed conventional school, so I returned for two weeks but the teachers' threatening treatment of students, the classical method of education and the political-ideological overtones of all subjects disappointed me again. One day, when I looked at myself in the the mirror, I felt like an old woman and ran away from school again.

**Do you think cinema is a tough job or an easy one?**

As I progressed, the difficulty of this job became more evident. As a child, I used to hear the word censorship but today I experience it. This last script stayed in the Iranian ministry of culture for months, but it was never issued a permit. Today, cinema has practically exiled us. My father is forced to live like a gypsy in order to escape censorship. My last film was shot in Afghanistan and edited in Tajikistan, with the laboratory work being done in Germany.

**How do you perceive Samira? How different is she from you?**

I see her on the outside and myself on the inside. But she is a pioneer. Not only for me but for many of her peers. And not just in Iran either. She has given the young generation, and especially women, a great self-confidence. On one hand she is crazy and makes her films with her craziness. And that is why she believes the ex-president of Iran failed, because he was not crazy enough. Samira believes that the crazy drive history forward and the wise control it. I am not as crazy as she is, but I was the first to make films when I was eight years old. My film was shown at the Locarno Festival. Samira began later than I did. But these comparisons do not resolve anything. Perhaps both of us one day will quit cinema and live like others. I have gradually reached the conclusion that a filmmaker is not someone who knows how to make films, but rather someone who does not know how to live like others.