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2004

STRAY DOGS

A FILM BY MARZIYEH MESHKINI

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY MARZIYEH MESHKINI CAST GOL GHOTI / ZAHED / TWIGGY / AGHELEH REZAI / SOHRAB AKBARI / JAMIL GHANIZADEH / AGHELEH SHAMSOLLAH
BY IBRAHIM OHAFOORI EDITOR MASTANEH MOHAJER SOUND RECORDIST FARROKH FADAEI STILLS PHOTOGRAPHER MAYSAM MAKHMALBAF PRODUCED BY MAYSAM MAKHMALBAF
PRODUCTION MAKHMALBAF FILM HOUSE / WILD BUNCH

STRAY DOGS

A FILM BY **MARZIYEH MESHKINI**

Two children – a brother and sister - rescue a stray dog on the streets of Kabul.

That evening they visit the jail where their mother is a prisoner. Since her children have nowhere to live, they are permitted to stay with her at night. But the following morning, they are thrown out: prison is for criminals, not homeless orphans.

Desperate to return to the jail, brother and sister embark on a series of failed robberies. A fugitive tells them they can learn to steal from watching Hollywood movies. Alternatively, European cinema can teach them how to be caught.

CAST

Gol-Ghotai - GIRL

Zahed - BOY

Twiggy - DOG

Agheleh REZAI - MOTHER

Sohrab AKBARI - GUARD ATEF

Jamil GHANIZADEH - ANGRY GUARD

Agheleh SHAMSOLLAH - FEMALE GUARD

Razeddin SAYYAR - MAD OLD MAN

Maydeh GOL - GRANDMOTHER

Ghomri Valad AMIR - WOMAN WITH BURKA

Shah Mahmood GOLBAHARI - ROSARY SELLER

Emameddin VAKIL - MOVIE TICKET SELLER

Akhtar ABDOLAZIZ - CART OWNER

CREW

DIRECTOR **Marziyeh MESHKINI**

SCREENPLAY **Marziyeh MESHKINI**

ASSISTANT DIRECTORS **Kaveh MOEINFAR / Hana MAKHMALBAF**

SET DESIGNER **Akbar MESHKINI**

SCRIPT SUPERVISOR **Zahra KAMALIAN**

DP **Ibrahim GHAFORI**

CAMERA ASSISTANTS **Reza SHEIKHI / Mehdi AMIRI**

SOUND **Farrokh FADAAE**

SOUND ASSISTANT **Farid PIRAYESH**

EDITOR **Mastaneh MOHAJER**

MIX **Behrooz SHAHAMAT**

MUSIC **Mohammad Reza DARVISHI**

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS **Mohammad AHMADI / Fakhruddin AYYAM**

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LAB **FILMSAZ CO.**

STILLS PHOTOGRAPHY **Maysam MAKHMALBAF**

PRODUCED BY **Maysam MAKHMALBAF**

PRODUCTION **MAKHMALBAF FILM HOUSE / WILD BUNCH**

Marziyeh Meshkini, wife of renowned Iranian film-maker Mohsen Makhmalbaf, was born in Tehran in 1969. She studied film-making at Makhmalbaf Film House and worked as assistant director on Samira Makhmalbaf's "**The Apple**", "**Blackboards**", "**At Five in the Afternoon**" and "**September 11**", and on Mohsen Makhmalbaf's "**The Door**" and "**The Silence**".

Her directorial debut, "**The Day I Became a Woman**", was made in Iran in 2000 and screened in Critics' Week at the Venice Film Festival. The film has been awarded 13 prizes at international festivals worldwide, including Toronto, Chicago, Pusan, Thessaloniki, Nantes (France), and Nouveau Cinema (Belgium).

"**Stray Dogs**" is Marziyeh Meshkini's second feature.

INTERVIEW WITH MARZIYEH MESHKINI

Why would an Iranian director choose to make a film in Afghanistan?

I was born in Iran, but the entire world is my home. I have learned that film-making can be a way of alleviating the sufferings of human beings. Just as there are doctors without frontiers, so there are artists without frontiers. My compassion is aroused whenever there is suffering. Saadi, one of the greatest Persian poets, has a poem which expresses the same sentiment and which has been adopted by the United Nations:

Human beings are members of one another,

As they have been created from one essence.

When one member suffers pain,

The others grow restless.

You don't deserve to be called a human being,

If you are indifferent to the woe of others.

Afghanistan is Iran's neighbour and its people are suffering. I made "**The Day I Became a Woman**" in Iran, but it concerns the plight of women in all Middle Eastern countries. My second film is about the homeless in Afghanistan. Perhaps I'll make my third film in another country.

What inspired the story of "Stray Dogs"?

I travelled to Afghanistan in 2002 as Samira's assistant director for "**At Five in the Afternoon**". During location scouting we visited a prison in Kabul, where I met the children of female inmates who were living alongside their mothers as prisoners. At first I thought they were also convicts, but learned that they had no home outside the prison, that they were forced to stay with their mothers at night and to leave in the morning to try and make money. This was the inspiration for "**Stray Dogs**".

Stylistically, "Stray Dogs" could be described as a Neo-Realist film: one specific scene is an homage to Vittorio De Sica's "The Bicycle Thief". What made you choose this style?

My first film had a heightened, non-realistic atmosphere. There are also non-realistic scenes in "**Stray Dogs**", but the overall effect is one of realism. This is due to the similarities between post-war Afghanistan and post-war Italy. After 25 years of civil war and conflicts with foreign armies, the people of Afghanistan faced a situation very similar to the social and economic crises in Italy during the years 1945-48. "**Stray Dogs**" is a film about people living on the streets at a time when they have just emerged from the inferno of a war.

How much were you influenced by Italian Neo-Realism?

Between 1945 and 1948, more than forty so-called Neo-Realist films were made in Italy. I have seen only one: De Sica's "**The Bicycle Thief**". I respect the film, but have problems accepting it as 'Realist'. On the contrary, for the most part it strikes me as rather melodramatic, designed to manipulate the viewer's emotions with its very prominent musical score and so forth. I was more influenced by Cezare Zavattini, the Neo-Realist theoretician, by his ideas of making films about people's daily lives, outside the confines of the studio, with no set design and no make-up.

Did you shoot from a prepared script or was the film improvised?

As I said, the story was inspired by reality. I thought, researched and talked to many people before writing the script. But I shot spontaneous scenes inspired by the reality of the performers' situations. For instance, there is a scene of dogs fighting in the street that was not in the script. I used it to create an appropriate atmosphere in a scene that's basically realistic.

Why did you choose to work with a non-professional cast?

A realistic film should be shot on real locations with real people, so the film-maker can focus on the real lives we often ignore.

What problems did you experience working with non-professionals?

Working with non-professionals presents both problems and advantages. The advantages derive from the naturalness of the performers' behaviour. When you watch them you are not reminded of scenes in other movies. They act, laugh, cry or express surprise in an original way that does not remind you of Marlon Brando or Alain Delon. They are usually unaware of the story line, and so their performance in each scene is new, even for themselves. When they are supposed to be surprised, they respond realistically to a surprising situation; when they are supposed to be ashamed, they really feel shame, rather than 'acting' it.

I believe real life offers the best pattern for acting, and non-professional performers represent real life. I respect professional actors who can recreate real life with authenticity - they are gods of the acting profession - but there are very few of them. You should also consider that there was no film-making or theatre in Afghanistan for many years. The Afghani people have just begun to discover their talents, and no doubt professionals will appear. For instance, the 7-year-old girl who appears in "**Stray Dogs**" has an exceptional talent for recreating real life responses. I hope other film-makers will give her the opportunity to develop her talent. But unfortunately, performers of this sort are very rare. Personally, I often find it difficult to accept professional acting as a real-life response. False acting often betrays itself almost instantly.

The greatest problem with non-professional actors is their belief that a 90-minute film is shot in 90 minutes. They find it unbearable to work all day long for a two-month period. This is especially true with children, for whom film-making should be made to resemble a game. They have to feel they are only playing, otherwise they quickly grow bored and their performances lose the life you want them to show.

Do you think things have improved in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban?

The Taliban were the clearest embodiment of a medieval outlook in the contemporary world, and after their defeat, Afghanistan has entered its age of Renaissance. A year after the fall of the Taliban I travelled to Afghanistan with Samira for "**At Five in the Afternoon**". The deeply-rooted fear of the Taliban could still be felt and women dared not discard their burqas. Hanna Makhmalbaf portrayed this fear in her "**Joy of Madness**". But a year later when I returned to Kabul to make "**Stray Dogs**", only 10 per cent of the women were still wearing the traditional Afghani veil. Gradually, it is becoming clear that the Taliban's collapse paved the way for Afghanistan's future development.

When we were making "**At Five in the Afternoon**", the Kabul streets were crowded with children begging from tourists, but by the time I returned to make "**Stray Dogs**" their number had decreased greatly. The streets were cleaner, many refugees had returned home, buildings destroyed during the war were being reconstructed. In general, one could feel a renewed sense of joy, and hope for a better future.

Are the homeless children begging in the streets or the children of prisoners like those in your film a widespread problem in Afghanistan?

About two million people have died in Afghanistan as a result of poverty, famine, war and homelessness in the past two decades. That's about 10 percent of the country's population. So, many children lost their parents, and if they could not emigrate or find places in orphanages, were forced onto the streets. The general economic conditions make it impossible to resolve such problems in the short term. When we were making "**At Five in the Afternoon**" we offered medical care to 800 children in an orphanage. Most were the children of men who had killed one another in the civil war. You could see the orphanage as a metaphor for the entire country. As a nation that has gone through a civil war, the first thing people in Afghanistan should do is to forgive one another. Apart from children in orphanages, there were thousands begging on the streets of Kabul, very lively children playing happily in spite of their poverty. But as soon as they saw a tourist, their demeanours changed entirely. Samira described them as exceptional actors. We spotted 14 children who exhibited a great talent for painting, and for a year, paid them to paint instead of begging. Each child produced one painting every month. Some have since been offered scholarships to study art in other countries.

How did you find the girl in the film?

Her name is Gol-Ghotai. Among the street children, I saw a girl with a wild beauty, a combination of energy and innocence. I knew instantly she was the girl I had in mind when I wrote the script, and prayed that she could perform. She didn't understand me when I began to talk to her, and I learnt that she had lost her hearing as a result of disease. Fortunately, she regained some of her hearing with medical care. Gol-Ghotai had not gone to school, but she was living proof of Zavattini's theories: an actress trained in the school of life. She observed a strange discipline. I thought, what amazing human flowers grow from the swamp of poverty and hardship! In the original script, the boy was the principal character, but when I saw the girl and recognised her great talent for the expression of her inner feelings, the story changed. She became the principal character. This is an instance of reality altering the preconceived script.

What are your feelings about the war in Iraq? Would you like to make a film there?

I am opposed to all wars, because wars only cause the slaughter of innocent people. Neither Bush nor Saddam - not even Bin Laden or Molla Omar - were killed in the U.S. invasion of Iraq. They sat in their palaces and pitted innocent people against one another. Wars are designed by arms manufacturers to sell their latest products. I hate Bush who endangered American democracy by starting a war in the 21st century. On the other hand, I am glad Saddam Hussein is no longer in power. He not only destroyed his people, but was also responsible for the death or permanent disability of hundreds of thousands of people in my country. It is sad to hear those who were fighting Saddam until a few years ago now talking about him as if he were a hero.

I am sure the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq was not motivated by a wish to save the peoples of the two countries. The capitalist West views the world as a vast market rather than a family of human beings. I am also sure that for many Americans, the taxes they pay are more important than the blood that is shed in other countries. At the same time it is important that two dictatorial systems have collapsed. Perhaps other forms of dictatorship may be imposed on Afghanistan and Iraq in the future, but it has to be conceded that it was impossible to bring about any changes in the two countries through popular struggles, and the Afghani and Iraqi people could not have coped without some sort of international intervention. The fact is a few dictators like Bush, Saddam and Bin Laden had conflicts of interest and as a result the people of two countries gained freedom which I hope will last.

As for me, I would be willing to make films in Iraq or any other part of the world if I felt it would help alleviate suffering.

Makhmalbaf Film House is an important film production company in Iran. What are the company's future projects?

Initially, Makhmalbaf Film House was mainly a film school. Now the company is engaged in creating art films. Its future projects include two feature films in Tajikistan and India, both to be directed by Mohsen Makhmalbaf.

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