

TEHRAN TAXI

A film by
Jafar Panahi



Golden Bear & Fipresci Prize, Berlin Film Festival 2015

Iran 2015 / 82 minutes / Farsi with English subtitles / Cert 12A
Opens in cinemas 30 October 2015

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SYNOPSIS

A taxi driver is driving through the vibrant streets of Tehran. Diverse passengers, from his niece to a vendor of pirated DVDs, and to the prominent human-rights activist Nasrin Sotoudeh, enter the taxi, each candidly expressing their views while being interviewed by the driver who is no one else but the director Jafar Panahi himself. His camera placed on the dashboard of his car, transforming his car into a mobile film studio, captures the spirit and contradictions of Iranian society through this comedic and dramatic drive.

Banned from travelling and making films in 2010, Jafar Panahi has managed to astonish us with his beautiful trilogy composed of *This is not a Film* (2011), *Closed Curtain* (2013) and now *Taxi Tehran*, winner of the Golden Bear at this year's Berlin Film Festival.

'I'm a filmmaker. I can't do anything else but make films. Cinema is my expression and the meaning of my life. Nothing can prevent me from making films as when being pushed to the ultimate corners I connect with my inner self and in such private spaces, despite all limitations, the necessity to create becomes even more an urge. Cinema as an Art becomes my main preoccupation. That is the reason why I have to continue making films under any circumstances to pay my respect and feel alive.'
(Jafar Panahi)

Written and directed by Jafar Panahi

Produced by Jafar Panahi Film Production (Teheran, Iran)

(No credits divulged)

DCP 2K, Colour, 82 Min., 2015

Photos available at <http://www.newwavefilms.co.uk/press.html>

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THE DIRECTOR: Jafar Panahi

Director, author and producer, **Jafar Panahi** (b. 1960) is one of the most influential filmmakers in Iran today. He attended film school after serving in the army during the Iran-Iraq War. While making short films and television documentaries, he contacted Abbas Kiarostami to offer his services in any capacity. Kiarostami became an enthusiastic mentor, helping to get Panahi's feature debut, *The White Balloon*, into Cannes, where it became the first Iranian film to win a major prize, the Camera d'Or (1995).

Like many Iranian directors, he began making films about children. The popularity of children as subjects stems in part from the existence of state funding for such films. They also serve to steer filmmakers clear of censorship problems that complicate the filming of any domestic or intimate scenes involving adult women. However, after his first two feature films, Panahi decided to tackle these complications head on by making *The Circle*, a devastating look at the strictures against women in contemporary Iran. This new tone of social critique continued in the unsettling *Crimson Gold*.

In the aftermath of the troubles following the disputed 2009 elections, Panahi was detained, sentenced to six years in prison, but then put under a twenty-year ban on filmmaking, script writing, traveling outside of the country and giving interviews. His sentence of six years in prison still stands, and his past three films were made without authorization. *This Is Not A Film (In Film Nist)* premiered in Cannes (Special Screening), *Closed Curtain (Pardé)* won the Silver Bear for Best Script in Berlin, and *Tehran Taxi*, his latest film, won the Golden Bear in 2015.

Panahi has won a number of human rights prizes, including the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought and The Medal of Art for Freedom.

FILMOGRAPHY

2015 TAXI – Golden Bear, Berlin Film Festival

2013 CLOSED CURTAIN (Pardé) – Competition, Berlin Film Festival

2011 THIS IS NOT A FILM (In film nist) – Special Screening, Cannes Film Festival

2006 OFFSIDE – Best Director, Berlin Film Festival

2003 CRIMSON GOLD (Talaye Sorkh)

2000 THE CIRCLE (Dayereh) – Golden Lion, Venice Film Festival

1997 THE MIRROR (Ayneh) – Golden Leopard, Locarno Film Festival

1995 THE WHITE BALLOON (Badkonake Sefid) – Caméra d'or, Cannes Film Festival

NASRIN SOTOUDEH

Born in 1963, Nasrin Sotoudeh is a prominent Iranian human rights lawyer and activist who has defended numerous social and political causes. In 2010 she was sentenced to 11 years in jail, commuted later to 6 years. She ended up spending 3 years in solitary confinement in the country's notorious Evin prison for representing political activists, before being released after international pressure. She was also banned from practicing law for 10 years and from leaving the country for 20 years after being convicted of spreading propaganda and conspiring to harm state security. Her case came to international attention in 2012 when she embarked on a 50-day hunger strike against a travel ban on her daughter. She won, together with Jafar Panahi, the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought in 2012. She has since been arrested several times and her family put under a lot of pressure.



Extract from the article

JAFAR PANAHİ GOES THROUGH RED LIGHTS

By Ghazal Golshiri

Le Monde, 14 April 2015

Fifteen days of shooting

After having limited himself to enclosed spaces in order not to get noticed, Panahi has bitten a bit more at the red line imposed by his conviction. Transformed into a taxi driver, he set up video cameras inside his car and took several passengers on board, with whom he shared a bit of time on the road while having discussions, sometimes of a very political nature.

According to Solmaz Panahi [Jafar Panahi's daughter, who lives in Paris], the idea for this film came to him during one of his trips in a collective taxi: *"He heard a conversation between the driver and two other passengers and he thought to himself, 'I cannot do anything else but make films. What if one day I was forced to become a taxi driver?'"*

In order to film, he had to take a series of precautions: *"Jafar and his collaborators could not use extra lights, in order not to raise the authorities' attention. They removed the car's roof to be able to work with daylight. Afterwards, in the editing stage, they put the roof back using special effects."*

Shooting and editing only lasted fifteen days and every evening Jafar Panahi would edit the rushes shot that day. *"He had to finish the film and have it taken out of Iran as quickly as possible, before rumours started to circulate,"* Solmaz Panahi recounts. *"As for his collaborators, most of them are very young and have just started their career... Their names are kept secret. The day circumstances become favourable, their names will be published."*

These are necessary measures, because those who have worked with Jafar Panahi since his conviction have sometimes been harassed. Kambuzia Partovi and Maryam Moghadam, who participated to the making of Closed Curtain, had their passports confiscated upon their return from Berlin. The awarding of the Golden Bear to Taxi Tehran did not leave the Iranian authorities indifferent either. In a letter to the Berlin Film Festival's Jury, the Cinema Organization of Iran's director, Hojatollah Ayoubi, criticized the festival's "purely political approach."

The letter pushed Jafar Panahi to transgress another of the terms of his sentence by giving an interview to the official information agency ILNA (Iranian Labour News Agency): *"People in power accuse us of making films for foreign film festivals (...). They do not, however, reveal that our films are never authorised to screen in Iranian cinemas",* Panahi lamented.

With the release of each of his films, Jafar Panahi reminds the most conservative of Iranians that he is free and that he keeps filming, despite his conviction. This attitude

increases his risk of being summoned to jail to serve his sentence, a possibility he is ready to confront. *“He is not scared” according to his daughter. “Cinema is the most important thing in his life, he is even ready to die for it. If he does not film, there is no difference for him between being free and being in jail.”*

Does he have other ongoing projects or ideas for a new work? *“I frankly don’t know,” Solmaz Panahi explains. “He doesn’t tell me anything and everything is secret until someone visits me and gives me a DVD saying: ‘Here is your father’s latest film’.”*

Despite all these tensions, Jafar Panahi has never stopped repeating that he is not a political director, but a filmmaker who wants to talk about society’s ills. If one is to believe his daughter, today he has only one dream: to place his camera freely in the midst of people again and tell their stories.

Translated by Diane Gabrysiak



INTERVIEW WITH POOYA ABBASIAN

(by Clémentine Gallot)

Published in Libération, 14 April 2015

Based in Paris, Pooya Abbasian collaborates with Jafar Panahi on a regular basis. Pooya Abbasian, a 32-year old video artist, has directed a number of animation shorts. Friend and collaborator of Jafar Panahi, he supervised the post-production in France of Panahi's last three films.

How long have you known Jafar Panahi?

Five years. The situation is complicated because he cannot work with many people, he needs to be discreet. For *Closed Curtain*, I received a non-definitive version for which we had to modify the edit before doing the colour grading. It was a strange experience because the internet does not work well in Iran, so we could not use Skype, YouTube or Vimeo. Jafar did not have access to this new version of the video, he could only listen to it without seeing the image. He hadn't even seen the version sent to the Berlin Film Festival.

What has happened in regards to his condemnation since 2010?

At the time, he was shooting a new film and was counting on going to Hollywood to direct an adaptation of Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, produced by Sony Pictures. During the shoot, the entire team, about 10 people in total, together with Jafar Panahi's family, were arrested. They stayed in jail for three days. He was kept there several months and was only able to get out after starting a hunger strike. He was sentenced to six years in jail and banned from leaving the country, directing films, writing scripts and giving interviews for twenty years.

He has since made three films. He therefore didn't follow these injunctions and continued to work. He co-directed the two first post-2010 films with filmmaker friends, who both encountered problems afterwards with their passports, or were imprisoned. It becomes increasingly difficult to make films when your collaborators are harassed.

Were there retaliations after these three films?

He took a risk in shooting *This is Not a Film*. We were aware he was doing it but he was not saying it out loud. Filming took place in the intimacy of his flat, it reflected the state of shock he was in after his conviction. He was asking himself, facing the camera, how to continue working. It was an artist's self-portrait. He made the second, *Closed Curtain*, after going through a depression. Then he took photographs of clouds for a year – we are in fact trying to put together an exhibition of these images in Paris. *Taxi Tehran* signals a return to Jafar Panahi's way of looking at the world. It is important to know that Iranian media, in their festival roundup articles, always leave his name out. When the film won the Golden Bear in Berlin this year, we were faced with very critical articles on the "director who is against the regime", who had made "a political film". There was no reaction from the government, except for a minister who threatened him orally but for the time being, he has not been sent to jail. Iran embodies this paradox, his conviction was a symbolic gesture directed towards other artists, a demonstration of strength.

What influence did the international mobilisation in favour of Jafar Panahi have?

When members of government saw the unanimous reactions emanating from foreign film festivals and the Western media, they were surprised, they realised they had made a mistake. They don't want to take back anything they said or make the situation worse. As far as the future is concerned, everything is possible coming from them; we can't know for sure as there is no precedent.

Is there a sense of solidarity with the Iranian cinema community?

Jafar has friends who are independent directors. He is present in the art world even if he does not attend the Tehran Film Festival. His inner circle has evolved since his arrest, but he nevertheless stays well surrounded.

His films, which are not released in cinemas, do they circulate illegally?

Of course, like a whole section of cinema. It is a very common practice.

How are Jafar Panahi's spirits today?

When he works, he is very well. One can see it in *Taxi Tehran*, which is a comedy. He was hurt but he continues to live and to laugh. He is even at peace with his detractors.

How did the idea of filming while in a car come about?

When someone lacks inspiration, Jafar usually says: "take a taxi and you'll come up with many ideas." He came up with the idea of using three very small cameras, the Blackmagic Cinema Cameras. They are high definition (2K). Jafar is a terrible driver and, for this film, he had to drive, direct and act all at once!

How was the shooting?

It took place over two weeks. The film was produced with his own money, based on a script inspired by his own experience, with people he knew. This film is a fiction based on documentary material. There are no professional actors, the film's protagonists are people who know Jafar and are very devoted to him. We don't name the technical collaborators in the credits section to avoid creating issues for them.

...

Is there a possibility that Jafar Panahi might go into exile?

No, at some point it was strongly suggested to him but he loves his country and decided to stay. He simply wants to continue making his films. The media largely contributed in creating an image of Panahi as being a "filmmaker against the government."

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Translated by Diane Gabrysiak

INTERVIEW WITH NASRIN SOTOUDEH

Published in Der Spiegel, 23 February 2015

As a human rights activist, how did you come to play a role in Jafar Panahi's film?

Last October, we received a surprise visit from Jafar Panahi. He told us about his project. It was an honour for me to play in this film, but with my text scripted, I did not feel capable of doing it. He told me: "This is not a problem, just be yourself." And this is how I appear as a human rights activist who takes a taxi to visit the family of a famous prisoner, Ghoncheh Ghavani – still locked up in the infamous Evin prison while the film was being shot. Ghonche Ghavani was arrested for trying – as a

woman – to enter a stadium and watch a men’s volleyball game. On screen, I speak of the injustices we are confronted with.

Is it not dangerous to make a film when you have no permission?

Never mind these interdictions. Jafar has every right to make a film. We often joked about these interdictions, to practice law for me and to make films for him. We even thought we could exchange our professions: “You work as a lawyer and I make films!”

You spent almost three years in jail for defending dissidents. Do you still worry you’ll get into trouble?

This film represent a modest but significant step towards a broader opening of our society. We can congratulate extremists – and ourselves too – for having contained their anger. Or at least up until now. It is perhaps too early to draw conclusions. In our newspapers, Taxi Tehran was deemed anti-Iranian. Many asked themselves, often in a sarcastic way, how Jafar Panahi had been able to make a film when he was banned from doing so.

In fact, how did he manage?

In order not to attract too much attention, he installed, in so far as it was possible, cameras inside the taxi. This explains why we did not run into any problem during my two days of shooting.

Do you think you’ll one day be able to see yourself on screen?

Despite us both being banned from leaving the country, we will manage one day to watch this film abroad. But for me, the most important is for Taxi Tehran to be allowed to screen in Iran. We could then attend its premiere here (in Iran).

Translated by Diane Gabrysiak (from the French press book)



Freedom of expression must be protected. No matter who tries to suppress it.

Respect for human rights is one of the European Union's fundamental values. As a strong political and legislative player in the field, the European Parliament believes that their violation corrodes the democratic principles upon which our society is founded, whether it take place within or outside the EU.

The European Parliament's support for human rights is embodied by the annual award of the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, established in 1988. The Prize is awarded to individuals who have made an exceptional contribution to the fight for human rights across the globe and draws attention to human rights violations. Former laureates include people such as Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi and Malala Yousafzai.

The Sakharov Prize is not simply a symbolic acknowledgment of the work of each year's laureate. The European Parliament continues to nourish a relationship with all its former laureates through the Sakharov Prize Network and strives to provide them with continuous support, by bringing visibility to their cause even after it's no longer on the media agenda.

In 2012 the Sakharov Prize was awarded to Jafar Panahi, an outspoken supporter of the Iranian opposition and a critic of former President Ahmadianajad. Mr Panahi was arrested in 2010 as he was making a clandestine film about the 2009 failed Green

movement uprising in Iran. Though released after three months following international protests and a hunger strike, he was then sentenced to a jail term, banned from making films, travelling and talking to the media. During a media interview in defiance of this ban, Mr Panahi said that he felt he has been released from a small jail only to be thrown into a bigger one when he was banned from working.

Mr Panahi does not regard himself as a political person, but one who is willing to expose injustice. He has spoken out against censorship in Iran and criticised President Rouhani for not accomplishing his electoral promises in this regard. He has also launched the Step by Step campaign aiming to end the death penalty in Iran. He demonstrates that the fight for human rights need not take place only on the political or organisational level, but also on the individual level; that each and every one of us can stand up for what we believe in and make a difference.

Mr Panahi's latest film is both an exceptional work of art and a courageous political act. It is therefore an honour for the European Parliament to continue supporting Mr Panahi and help bring his film to audiences.

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