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a film by Mohammad Rasoulof



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IRAN / 117 min / Scope 2,39 / 5.1 / 2017 / Farsi

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The Match Factory GmbH  
Domstraße 60, 50668 Cologne/Germany  
phone +49 221 539 709-0 / fax +49 221 539 709-10  
info@matchfactory.de / www.the-match-factory.com

**INTERNATIONAL PUBLICITY**

WOLF Consultants  
T: +49 157 7474 9724  
(in Cannes) M: +33 7 60 21 57 76  
hello@wolf-con.com

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Reza (35), having distanced himself from the urban quagmire, leads a simple life along with his wife and sole child, somewhere in a remote village in Northern Iran. He spends his days working in his gold fish farm. Nearby, a private company with close links to the government and local authorities, has taken control of nearly every aspect of the regional life. Its shareholders, accumulating wealth, power and economic rents, have been pushing local farmers and small owners to dilapidate their belongings, farms and estates, to the benefit of the Company's influential network and its monopoly. It is under their pressure that many villagers have themselves become local rings of the larger network of corruption. Meanwhile, Reza strives to resist coercion and preserve his farm. Soon though, he will realize that he can no longer stand up to this powerful, yet hidden, coercive web of corruption. Giving up, he decides to sell his property and move away. The Company however, decides to raise the stakes...



## PRODUCER'S NOTES

I have so far produced up to six films, none of which ever screened in Iran – the land my stories and I belong to. Censorship's jaws have shut all venues. Independent filmmakers, not dependent upon State funds for their production, constantly look for ways to circumvent censorship. To avoid the eyes of the censors and circumvent those crushing jaws, they either submit scenarios whose narratives are confined to the interior of an apartment or choose a location so remote that it practically puts the production out of their sight. However, all this inventiveness often ends up forgoing some of the common tools of cinematography: using small and non-professional cameras, renouncing to an operator and advanced lighting techniques, simple narratives... are ways independent cinematographers resort to keep production from additional harassment.

In the underground films I have produced, I have used these stratagems while always trying to keep the narrative structure of the final cut devoid of any visible presence of the censorship's limitations. A Man of Integrity's story however was such that it made forgoing production means practically impossible. The story was so important to my eyes that it was unthinkable to have the censorship's limitations palpable at first glance in the film's structure. Producing it was not easy. And although its screening has been banned in Iran, I have not renounced obtaining the necessary authorization. Meanwhile, I keep looking for innovative ways to circumvent censorship while avoiding cinematographic limitations in production.

## DIRECTOR'S COMMENTS

**“The people's fear of power causes its identification with that very power [which violates the people's rights].”**

This view of the American sociologist, **C. Wright Mills**, best describes A Man of Integrity's central characters embodied by the [fish-farming] couple. A man and a woman who, out of necessity, withdraw into isolation in a remote area, making a living out of fish-farming, only to end up identifying with that same corrupting environment they had chosen to escape.

Social corrupt [and corrupting] structures either crush or turn one into a link of corruption in the chain of corruption. Is there any other choice?

# INTERVIEW WITH MOHAMMAD RASOULOF

## **Is any part of this story based on real life people or situations?**

Normally the stories which interest me relate to the environment around me. My characters are based on those around me. In my mind I can find references to the events and characters in this film too.

I am only looking around me. I tell my stories and within them ask my questions. Many are questions that have remained with me since my childhood. For example, when our history books in school told us that, from hundreds of years ago, kings have ruled people by subjecting them to oppression and injustice, I used to ask myself how is this possible? I think that I am still asking the same questions.

## **How does the censorship of your work in your home country affect your creative process? Does your relationship with the authorities make it more difficult to find the right collaborators?**

It's often been said that encounters with censorship and limitations result in more creativity for the artist. But this is not always true. Eventually you reach a saturation point and it results in despair for the artist. When the censorship authority does not allow you to connect with your audience, you have to try indirect and subtle ways and you are always working to avoid being depressed by this enforced retreat to the sidelines. On the other hand, when your connection with your audience becomes this limited, gradually your work becomes like a monologue. Then you have to find a cure for this problem too. The same censorship mechanism that has forced you to the sidelines, by painting a manipulated picture of you and your work (which is not available to the public), directs the feelings of the majority of people towards their own ideals. It's a little disheartening - but you do always find some people around you who are seeking the truth. My main crew remains the same and we have, after many years of working together, developed a mutual understanding and respect.

Even with all this, we still encountered unexpected problems during production. For instance in A MAN OF INTEGRITY there was an important role, which required a strong actress. I knew this would be a very sensitive role and it is possible that due to the subject and fear of censorship, no one would want to play a character who is not a Muslim and whose religion is not defined. Nevertheless, I started by offering this role to one of my close friends. No one accepted to play the role. We were finishing the shooting and still hadn't found anybody. I was very worried, until something interesting happened. My assistants found a very distinguished actress who accepted it. She left Tehran in the evening and reached the filming location in the morning. She was very tired but due to the limited time that we had at that location, she had to perform the most important and difficult part of her role that day. I was worried whether or not she would be ready. At the same time, I was interested to know what made her accept this role. On the location, a few minutes before shooting, I sat in a car with her to talk about these issues. She knew everything. She understood the character very well and told me that she knows people who have gone through the same experience. It was obvious that her motive for accepting this role was to express her feeling towards this injustice. She played the role very calmly and without fear.

## **Your main character's relationship with authority is also somewhat paradoxical...**

This paradox is the result of the main protagonist's respect for ethics, because the social values of the environment around him find themselves in direct contrast to his moral principles. In such conditions, the social structure, like a giant machine, carries on regardless. If you don't obey the prevalent value system, which itself seems to be totally immoral, you become seen as an outsider and a troublemaker.





**Tell us about the corporation in the film.**

In our story, “The Corporation” is a place where politics, money and power are intertwined. A place where, due to its social structure, has influence over the village. It has violated social values and, unhappy from this structure, many of the village inhabitants prefer to affiliate themselves with the ruling system rather than try to bring about reforms and changes in the conditions.

**Do the goldfish Reza raises in the film represent something in Iran, symbolically?**

The Iranian people, as part of the New Year celebrations, display goldfish as a symbol of vitality and reward. However, by selecting this profession for Reza, I wanted to explain part of his character. Though Reza seems to be a grumpy and sullen character, and there is a steeliness and coldness in his gaze, inside he is a tender soul. He is like a snail who has hidden inside his hard shell.

**What about the cave in which Reza finds refuge and escapes the pressure of everyday life?**

The solitude Reza chooses shows that he has given up hope of any change taking place. He isolates himself from his surroundings so that if he cannot actually implement change, at least he will not be part of the chain of corruption that has surrounded him. This solitude and loneliness has made him to curl into his shell. Every time he goes to the thermal bath in the cave, he finds some strength that allows him to carry on. Going to the hot water pool is an internal trip for him; somewhere where he meets himself and, by drinking a few glasses of homemade wine, forgets for a moment life’s hardships.

### **Can you talk about the frantic and dramatic sequence showing the attack by swarming birds?**

The birds sequence took form as the story developed. Even when writing this sequence in the script, I was hesitant. In making my films, I am very weary of any artificial devices. But the story had taken me there. From every point of view, the birds' attack in the script was correct and effective, but I was afraid of doing it with CGI. I was afraid that it would not fit in with the type of stories I tell in my films. In the end I decided to keep this section in the story and tried to render it in a way that would not be contrary to my type of stories.

### **How did you develop the dynamics between the married couple of Reza and Hadis?**

Hadis' relationship with Reza is a supportive one. She wants to keep her family. Hadis is a powerful woman and it is apparent that she has a motherly behavior, alongside her role as Reza's wife. Due to her job, Hadis also has more social contact with the outside world. She understands her husband's solitude, but she is not a loner like him. So when they reach a dead-end, she easily succumbs to the dominant social values in place. She tries to use her connections and resources in the school where she works to solve Reza's problems. Even when the court ruling is issued, she advises Reza to behave like others to come out of this dead-end – to pay people off and make the necessary compromises. Hadis' situation is one stranded between Reza and the society they live in. She knows that if she is hard headed like Reza, all the doors in their life are going to be closed to them. You could say that Hadis acts as a kind of insulation between Reza and the society.

### **For you, does the system in Iran have any echoes in Western cultures?**

Oppressive systems share glaring similarities. For example, it seems that some of the people in Iran today can identify with many of the experiences of Romanian people in Ceausescu's times. Although Romania was suffering from a communist dictatorship, today in Iran the political structure relies on a religious power base. Of course, this is not the whole story. The story of A MAN OF INTEGRITY is more concerned with the structure that such a regime has produced. In this structure, social pressure automatically punishes those who do not toe the line and succumb to the governing social values. If you don't get on board the tank, it will crush you in its path.



### **How did you work with editing and cinematography to give your film a nail-biting rhythm and make it a kind of thriller?**

For me, working with the editor starts at the writing stage. It is in writing that the foundations of the internal rhythm of the story are built. The cinematographer also joins us at the script writing and location scouting stage. Obviously some of the visual story telling comes from the story itself, but in the end it is you who decides where to stand and how to tell your story. Storytelling is a reflection of the storyteller's taste and view of the world. For example, in editing you can arrive at a fast and exciting rhythm or a thoughtful (but not necessarily slow) rhythm which requires the involvement of viewer in the thought process. This is a choice that also determines the method of shooting and editing of the film. For instance, in the fire sequence, both me and my editor preferred to show Reza's breakdown rather what was burning. Obviously the length of the emotional time taken in this type of narrative is longer than what would be used in action films to show a fire. Of course this is not to sacrifice the attraction of the story, but you are forced to find other ways to maintain the story's appeal. I'd like to also point out sound as another main constituent, alongside editing and cinematography, also an independent unit in the body of the narrative.

### **For you, does the film's final atmosphere make a definite statement.**

I know that anyone who has seen the film will laugh at this statement, but really when I was writing A MAN OF INTEGRITY, I tried my best to tell a hopeful story. After showing all the adversity surrounding the main protagonist, I wanted to suddenly say that, despite all this, life is beautiful and one must try to improve the conditions. Throughout the writing process, I wanted Reza to choose an alternative way but I could not tame his anger with my optimism. So obviously this means I foresee a violent conclusion to the existing social conditions in Iran. I could not use hope as an excuse to ignore the reality. On the other hand, I could not ignore the power of individual choice in face of the social structure. For this reason the final sequence is very important for me. I was looking for a situation where after Reza's final reaction to The Corporations's representative (Abbas), and the offer from The Corporation, see him devoid of any humanity, as if about to turn to stone. In the final scene, Reza resembling a relic on a fossil, in a helpless condition, naked and still, is holding to a rock. Suddenly he starts trembling. The sound of his quiet crying describes his human shame, this internal shame in Reza for me is a great hope that matches reality.

### **The prison sentence you received together with Jafar Panahi was reduced to 1 year, and then, as of now, not enforced. Do you still fear that the sentence could be executed in the future?**

The way the operating systems work in Iran is puzzling. The one-year sentence ruling is hanging over my head like Damocles' sword and I have been told that it will be carried out. But I think that up until now the international objections and pressure have been very effective in preventing the sentence from being carried out. I'm out on bail but I don't call it freedom. This is a phantom of liberty. This is living in fear and on the edge. Every time that I want to exit Iran, I'm afraid that I will be prevented from doing so and every time I enter Iran, I have a deep fear. But I cannot change my course. I believe in this way of life. In this environment and under these conditions what can I do except utilise every small opening for evading censorship and being creative? Each time I try to find a way to pass through the obstacle of censorship and the problems it causes for me and my crew. But I don't know how long I can carry on like this. Still I don't lose hope. I will keep trying. I will work as long as I can and when I can't, I will take comfort in the thought that I did my best. I think an artist will always find ways of expressing his thoughts. Even if they did take film making from me, I will find new ways of artistic creation.

### **Do you see anything new taking shape under President Hassan Rouhani, new directions or reasons to be hopeful?**

President Rouhani has some ideas but his inability to implement them comes with the territory. Because in Iran the president does not have any executive power. Rouhani's government speaks of citizens' rights, which if implemented would be a great step. But in reality they have no power to implement even a small part of it. The soul and essence of the ruling power in Iran is totalitarian. It does not go hand in hand with freedom of speech and thought. In Iran there is no rule of law, but the law is the ruler and decider. There is definitely hope, and whether the ruling system wants it or not, social change will gradually take place and everything will be different in the future.



## DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Mohammad Rasoulof was born in Shiraz in 1972. He started his artistic activity at age nine by acting in the theatre in Shiraz. He then pursued writing and directing for the theatre. He has studied social sciences. Focusing on social issues and the mutual impact on the individual and society, by living under a dictatorial and impervious government, has been the subject of most of his films. The documentary *The Twilight* (*Gagooman*, 2002) was his first feature length film and won the Crystal Simorgh (phoenix) at the 21st Fajr International Film Festival in Tehran, as well as Best Documentary award at the 6th Iran Cinema House ceremony. Following the events after the 2009 Presidential election in Iran, Mohammad Rasoulof and Jafar Panahi were arrested while on location making a film. At the ensuing trial Rasoulof was sentenced to six years imprisonment (5 years on charges of gathering and collusion against national security and 1 year on charges of involvement in propaganda against the regime). In the appeals court, he was acquitted of the first charge and his sentence was reduced to one year. In 2011, due to selection of his film *Goodbye* (*Be Omid e Didar*, 2011) at the 64th Cannes Film Festival, his exit ban from Iran was lifted. In 2013, after making the film *Manuscripts Don't Burn* (*Dast-Neveshteha Nemisoozand*, 2013) and its screening at the 66th Cannes Film Festival, his passport and personal belongings were confiscated at Tehran Airport. Currently he is out on bail. In 2013, at the 40th Telluride Film Festival, the Silver Medal of the festival was awarded to Mohammad Rasoulof, Coen Brothers and Robert Redford.

## FILMOGRAPHY

2017 *A Man of Integrity* (*Lerd*)

2013 *Manuscripts Don't Burn* (*Dastneveshteha Nemisoozand*)

2011 *Goodbye* (*Be Omid e Didar*)

2009 *The White Meadows* (*Keshtzar haye sepid*)

2005 *Iron Island* (*Jazireh Ahani*)





## Reza Akhlaghirad BIOGRAPHY

Reza Akhlaghirad was born in Mashhad in 1977. In 2000 he starts his acting career in theatre. A graduate of dramatic arts from the University of Arak, his television and cinema career begins behind the stage as a script supervisor, director's assistant and artistic director. He has several feature films and TV series in his record.

## Soudabeh Beizaei BIOGRAPHY

Soudabeh Beizaei was born in Shiraz in 1982. She studied literature and graduated in 2005 from the University of Ahwaz. She was 25-years old when, discovering her desire to become an actress, she left her job and enrolled at Samandarian School theatre. She has several feature films and TV series in her record.

## MAIN CAST

Reza Akhlaghirad  
Soudabeh Beizaei  
Nasim Adabi  
Misagh Zare  
Zeinab Shabani  
Zhila Shahi

## MAIN CREW

Written and Directed by  
Director of Photography  
Editors  
Set and Costume Design  
Sound Design and Mix  
Composer  
Makeup  
Producer  
Co-Producer  
Co-Producer

Mohammad Rasoulof  
Ashkan Ashkani  
Mohammadreza Muini / Meysam Muini  
Saeed Asadi  
Alireza Alavian  
Peyman Yazdanian  
Mahmoud Dehghani  
Mohammad Rasoulof  
Kaveh Farnam  
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