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WASHINGTON REPORT ON MIDDLE EAST AFFAIRS

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Music & Arts

Iranian Documentaries Offer Insight

THE SMITHSONIAN Institution's Freer and Sackler Gallery, in conjunction with Link TV and Search for Common Ground (SFCG), screened three Iranian documentaries in November. The films were part of Link TV's "Bridge to Iran" series, which aims to foster understanding of Iranians and their daily lives. A unique aspect of the series is that all of the films were created by Iranians who live in Iran, thus offering an insider perspective.

"Dream of Silk" (2003) depicts director Nahid Rezaei's visit back to her high school 25 years after graduation. The film documents the realities, such as the pressures to pass university entrance exams, as well as the lofty dreams, like traveling abroad or becoming a journalist, of many young Iranian girls living in Tehran. A teacher reminds the girls that, "Human identity is our main truth, it is not about being a male or female." When one outspoken girl turns the questions around, Rezaei reflects that despite the fact that the school's walls and corridors have remained the same, many changes have occurred in the social situation and overall happiness of her subjects.



Iranian director Massoud Bakhshi at the Freer Gallery in Washington, DC (Staff photo N. Hamedani).

"Tehran Has No More Pomegranates" (2007) showcases archival footage of Tehran juxtaposed with modern images in a visually engrossing experimental film by Massoud Bakhshi spanning 150 years of the city's evolution. After the screening, Bakhshi explained to the audience that the film is like a satirical mirror held in front of the city. Elaborating later, the director said he made the film for people living in Tehran, and that it was his "personal feeling translated into film." Bakhshi said he intended it to be a "film about Tehran itself...and the transformation of the city," showing normal things like supermarkets and subways to illuminate the "big difference between modernity and modernization."

"President Mir Qanbar" (2005) is Mohammed Shirvani's poetically stylized film following the unlikely campaign of a man in his 70s who, because of the age limit placed on candidates, faces his last chance to run for president. Despite the fact that Mir Qanbar Heidari's own granddaughter confesses that she is uncertain he could manage a society, the unflappable elderly man rides his bike to all the local villages in the desert outside of Tabriz, carrying a megaphone and a large red flag that displays the Qur'anic verse: "Help from Allah and a fair victory." The director explores the motivations behind Qanbar's campaign, which depends upon his political sidekick named Seifollah.

More information, including clips from the documentaries as well as interviews with the directors, is available on Link TV's Web site, <www.linktv.org/bridgetoiran>.

—Nina Hamedani

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