

OFFSIDE

A FILM BY JAFAR PANAHI

2006 Berlin International Film Festival
Winner Silver Bear Grand Jury Prize
Official Selection 2006 Toronto International Film Festival

A SONY PICTURES CLASSICS RELEASE

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SYNOPSIS

Many Iranian girls love soccer as much as their countrymen and sport fans all over the world but, they are prevented by law from attending live soccer matches in their country. Inspired by the day when his own daughter was refused entry to a soccer stadium in Iran, Jafar Panahi's OFFSIDE follows a day in the life of a group of Iranian girls attempting to watch their team's World Cup qualifying match against Bahrain at the stadium in Tehran.

A disparate group of girls, united only by their desire to see their beloved team play live and in-person, disguise themselves in myriad ways, risking arrest to try to get into the game. The girls are either caught trying to get in or are spotted in the crowd once they make it past the entry guards, and all are taken to a holding area on the upper level of the stadium, where they are tortured by being able to hear the roar of the crowd without being able to see what is happening in the match.

The young women, who range from timid to tomboy, are guarded by a group of naïve young soldiers who would rather be watching the game themselves, out with their girlfriends or at home looking after their sheep.

The soldiers and their prisoners are so close in age, and the girls' crimes so harmless, that they have a hard time maintaining their adversarial roles.

As they wait out the game, the young men interact with and befriend the generally far more savvy women. One girl is a tomboy from the city who taunts the guards about their country ways. Another young woman relates the adventure that got her caught to cheers from the other girls – she stole an officer's uniform to disguise herself but, made the mistake of sitting in the wrong chair in the VIP enclosure.

One young soldier, who is as much a fan as his captives, is persuaded into shouting out the highlights of the game as he watches through a gate. When he is scolded by a slightly superior officer, his punishment is being forced to escort one of the girls to the bathroom. Fearful of how the men in the stadium might react, he punches out the eyes of a cardboard player's poster to make a mask for his prisoner, so she won't offend any men on the way. One girl turns out not to be a soccer fan at all but, has her own sentimental reasons for wanting to be at the game in honor of a friend.

As the game nears its end, the girls are rounded up in a van to be transported to jail, along with another young man who was caught setting off firecrackers in the stadium. The soldier in charge is persuaded to turn on the radio so they can hear the final moments of the game on the way and, when Iran defeats Bahrain to win the qualifying match, the day ends happily for all.

JAFAR PANAHI ON OFFSIDE

In Iran, like many other countries, football is very important. As you can imagine, the majority of distractions are rather limited. So football is both sport and entertainment. It's an opportunity for people to shout, let themselves go, expel all the pent-up energy within them. Sometimes, when a match coincides with a demonstration, and Iran wins, the demonstration becomes more intense.

Origins of the Project

Eight years ago Iran beat Australia and qualified for the World Cup. Upon their return the players were given a triumphant welcome by the population. It is prohibited in Iran for women to enter sports stadiums. However, this time they were granted the right to celebrate the players' return. Five thousand women turned up and went inside stadium, and this spurred a lot of debate as to why women are forbidden from entering in the first place. I remember at the time reading an article by a sports journalist, explaining that even in Ancient Greece, women were confronted with this problem. Four hundred years B.C. women had to disguise themselves as men in order to cheer on their sons who were sports heroes. Whether or not this is true, it triggered my first ideas on the subject.

Also, four years ago I was living near the stadium where our football team trains. I wanted to go and watch and my daughter wanted to come with me. I tried to explain to her that she couldn't, but she nevertheless wanted to try. So we set out with the entire family, that way if my daughter was refused entry, my wife could take her back home. We went to the stadium entrance and, as I had expected, my daughter was refused entry. I told her to go home with her mother, but she found another way of getting into the stalls and to my surprise, she joined me. This event also inspired my thoughts about the film, which I tucked away in a corner of my mind. When I realized Iran once again had a chance at being selected for the World Cup, I decided the time was right to do this film.

The Law

There is a problem in Iran because the barrier between what is permitted and forbidden isn't always very clear. If, for example music is banned, you can be sure that people will listen to it even more. Also, those who are there to enforce the laws have their own personal interpretations of them. For this reason, we never really know if we are dealing with an actual law or someone's interpretation of it. The police have to make sure people respect the law, but people will always try to do what they want anyway. Regarding football, the ambience inside a stadium is highly virile and masculine. Men in this context are prone to becoming rowdy and insulting each other, and this fuels the debate, as certain conservative people think that women should not be exposed to such behavior.

The Clash of Generation

Military service in Iran is mandatory, they are not civil servants. These guys come from normal families, they are just like everybody else. So they can easily relate to the urges and desires of their generation. These soldiers are there to pose restrictions, but they don't always feel comfortable with what they're doing. And then you have the elderly, with their more traditional views. The traditionalists represent nearly ten percent of the population, and they have the power. And there is of course, a clash between these two generations.

Every restriction is the result of many other restrictions. If we look at one limitation in particular, it prompts us to consider many more. My films work in the same way. I take a relatively simple subject and try to develop all the issues surrounding it, everything in general which relates to this one simple subject. This one small problem ends up representing a greater problem on a larger scale in society. The World Cup is an international event. Whether it be in Iran or Japan, we all aspire to the same values and that is why we must eradicate oppression. Perhaps our Iranian girls are also expressing a desire to be part of the global community. But this is not meant to be the message of my film, the audience free to take from it whatever they want.

Almost like a Documentary

The film is constructed like a documentary in which I have inserted characters. Are we in a documentary, or is this fiction? I wanted the action to reflect this ambiguity. So we tried to preserve a unity of time, so that each second that passes the viewer feels he or she is watching a real event unfolding. The places are real, the event is real, and so are the characters and the extras. This is why I purposefully chose not to use professional actors, as their presence would have introduced a notion of falseness.

We ran into many obstacles making this film. It's not terribly difficult to obtain an authorization to film a football match in Iran, but if you film girls in the stadium, that's another story! And then there was the issue of my reputation as a director, which we knew from the start would be a problem. We tried to be very discreet and avoid any mention in the press. However, five days before the end of the shoot, a newspaper published an article stating I was directing a new film. The military immediately gave orders to interrupt the shoot. We were instructed to bring them our rushes to be verified. I immediately announced to the official in charge of cinema in Iran that this was out of the question, and that I would not allow a single soldier during the final days of the shoot. Luckily, there were only a few scenes left to shoot, inside a minibus, so we just left the military zone and continued filming sixty kilometers outside of Tehran.

Reactions in Iran

If a film is selected at the Tehran film festival, it is easier for it to find a distributor in Iran. Every year, I fill out all the necessary applications for the festival but for the time being my films have not yet been released in Iran. I have no other choice but to remain optimistic. Perhaps because there is humor in this film, it stands a chance of being released this year. I think that if the film is shown, it will re-ignite discussions about letting women into the stadiums. With the World Cup approaching, the timing is fabulous. Perhaps that's just a dream, but I continue to hope.

Japan vs. Iran

There were approximately one hundred and ten thousand people at this game. When it was over, there was a military helicopter at the stadium exit, surrounded by soldiers so that the crowd couldn't get near it. The soldiers started to push the crowd and some people were trampled in the crush. Seven people died and many more were injured, but the Iranian press published photos of only six of the dead. The rumors were that the seventh victim was a girl. We have no tangible proof of this, though we did learn that one of the injured parties was a girl disguised as a boy.

Closing Song

The song I used to close the film is a sort of a national hymn. Sixty years ago, when the Westerners were in Iran, one of our poets witnessed the abuses inflicted on the Iranian people. He was so pained by what he saw he decided to write a song. The song speaks of our country and our people, not the States that have governed it. That is why we love it more and more with each passing day. Many singers have sung it over the years. The version we have chosen was the one that seemed the most epic to me.

ABOUT JAFAR PANAHI

The cinema of Jafar Panahi is often described as Iranian neo-realism. Regardless of how one chooses to categorize his powerful work, the unprecedented humanitarianism of Panahi's films cannot be denied. Panahi's cinema is urban, contemporary and rich with the details of human existence. Panahi's *THE CIRCLE* won the Golden Lion at the 2000 Venice Film Festival. The unsettling drama about the social dilemma of several modern Iranian women was named FIPRESCI's «Film of the Year» and appeared on Top 10 lists of critics worldwide.

Panahi debuted with 1995's *THE WHITE BALLOON*, Camera d'Or winner at the Cannes Festival. The story of a young girl's adventures as she seeks to buy a lucky goldfish for New Year, *THE WHITE BALLOON* marked the emergence of a new cinema talent. Panahi's 1997 film, *THE MIRROR*, received the Locarno Festival's Golden Leopard, and confirmed the young director's promise. *CRIMSON GOLD* was selected in Un Certain Regard at Cannes in 2003 where it won the Jury Prize. It went on to win a number of best film awards and opened to excellent critical response.

Filmography

1995 *THE WHITE BALLOON*

1997 *THE MIRROR*

2000 *THE CIRCLE*

2003 *CRIMSON GOLD*

2006 *OFFSIDE*

CAST

Sima Mobarak Shahi	First girl
Safar Samandar	Azari Soldier
Shayesteh Irani	Smoking girl
M. Kheyraadi	Mashadi soldier
Ida Sadeghi	Girl soccer player
Golnaz Farmani	Girl with chador
Mahnaz Zabihi	Soldier girl
Nazanin Sedighzadeh	Young girl
M. Kheymeh Kabood	Tehrani Soldier
Mohsen Tanabandeh	Ticket seller
Reza Farhadi	Old man
M. R. Gharadaghi	Boy with firecrackers

CREW

Producer, Editor, Director	Jafar Panahi
Director of Photography	Mahmood Kalari
Screenplay	Jafar Panahi & Shadmehr Rastin
Sound Engineer	Reza Delpak
Sound Recordist	Nezam-e-din Nezam Kiaee
Set Designer	Iraj Raminfar
Make-up Artist	Parmis Zand
Assistant Director	Ramin Rastad
Production Manager	Saeed Hashemi
Production Coordinator	Davood Samavatyar
Production Substitute	Ali Baradari
Sound & Editing Assistant	Mehrdad Jelokhani.

TIME Europe Magazine
May 29, 2006
By Jumana Farouky

“Blowing The Whistle”

With Offside, Jafar Panahi continues his cinematic crusade against Iran's social ills and asks why football is only for the boys

Six girls wearing baseball caps and baggy shirts mope around in a makeshift prison just outside the walls of Tehran's Azadi Stadium. From behind the flimsy cage, the girls can hear cheers erupt as Iran and Bahrain battle it out for a place in the World Cup. Under arrest for trying to sneak into the football match disguised as boys, the girls await their punishment — but being so tantalizingly close to the game is torture enough. One of the captives debates with a reluctant guard about the logic of Iran's law banning women from stadiums. "There are lots of men in there," he argues. "They'll be cursing and swearing." Without missing a beat, she replies: "We promise not to listen."

In his newest movie *Offside* (released in Britain on June 9, the first day of the World Cup), Iranian director Jafar Panahi uses such back-and-forth to highlight the absurdity of a rule that doesn't allow women to enjoy the beautiful game. But the conversation could easily apply to Iran's film industry as well: the Islamic republic is the prison guard, defending its heavy-handed censorship as a way to protect its citizens, and filmmakers like Panahi are the upstart prisoners, arguing that citizens should be free to make up their own minds. "When I come across a problem in society that pains me, it's my responsibility to make a film to address the problem," says Panahi, 45. "I make films, first, for Iranians. This is their problem, so I want to show it to them." So far, he hasn't been able to. All of Panahi's films, including *Offside*, have been banned from public theaters in Iran.

Denied an audience at home, *Offside*'s fate is that of many Iranian films when they dare to question the status quo: it has become a hit on the international festival circuit and in Western art-house cinemas. But a funny thing happened on the way to the foreign box office. *Offside* was granted a screening at this year's Fajr International Film Festival in Tehran, which is organized by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Then, in advance of February's Berlin International Film Festival, at which Panahi's film picked up the Silver Bear, a group of participating Iranian directors was told by Ministry officials to speak freely to the foreign press. And last month, after women protested outside Tehran's stadium, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad lifted the ban on women attending games. Some of the protesters were carrying signs saying we don't want to be offside anymore, using the film that almost nobody has seen — but everyone's heard about — to further their cause.

Could this be the stirrings of an impending cultural renaissance? Probably not. *Offside* was relegated to "a guest slot" at Fajr. "It was not shown as an important film," says Panahi. "They didn't give any value to it." Even with the freedom to speak their minds,

the directors at Berlin didn't say anything controversial. And two weeks ago, Iran's supreme religious leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei vetoed Ahmadinejad's decree, reinstating the ban that keeps women away from football matches. Nevertheless, there are signs that making movies in Iran could be getting a little bit easier. "Because the former government, under President Mohammed Khatami, was moderate, it was always afraid of upsetting the conservatives," says Panahi. "Now that the conservatives are running the government, they have nobody to answer to. So they should be more willing to give us permission to make and show these sorts of films."

The glimmerings of openness have surprised other local filmmakers who expected to hit more walls under the new government. Even a mainstream filmmaker like Saman Moghadam had to fight to get his films onto Iranian screens during Khatami's rule. When Ahmadinejad took power in August, the director feared his latest political comedy, *Maxx*, would never see the inside of a movie theater. Instead, the film was given the go-ahead for domestic release. Iranians packed theaters to see the story of a traditional musician invited back to Iran from the U.S. for a tribute concert, and the gauche pop star who mistakenly shows up in his place. "Under Khatami we had a short period of blossoming in the arts," Moghadam says. "It was a golden era unprecedented in Iranian history. But the rest of the time, we faced many restrictions. It would seem natural that a conservative government would restrict our ability to work even more, but that seems not to have happened."

For his part, Panahi warns against giving the current regime too much credit — especially as he waits to see if *Offside* will be given permission for general release in Iranian theaters. "If anything has been achieved in Iranian cinema, it has been due to the creativity of the filmmakers," he says. "They have decided when and under which conditions to make their films, and what ways they could find for their films to be produced and screened." But all too often creativity means leaving sensitive bits on the cutting-room floor. Moghadam agreed to make several edits to *Maxx* — the government found 140 "questionable" points in his 80-page screenplay — before it hit Iranian screens. Other directors alternate their unseen social projects with blockbuster family films that keep their names circulating back at home. But Panahi refuses either to self-censor or to sell out. Instead, he's on a one-man mission to project his country's social ills onto the big screen. "Every three years I make one film which I think is necessary and important," he says. "If I didn't make these kinds of films, I'd be making much more money. But that's just not my way."

Panahi may still not have the international reputation of Iran's cinematic grand masters like Cannes winner Abbas Kiarostami (*Taste of Cherry*) or Mohsen Makhmalbaf (*Kandahar*), but his unblinking, gritty style is quickly turning him into the country's most courageous social filmmaker. Poverty, censorship, the justice system, women's rights — the subjects he tackles read like a list of hot-button issues guaranteed to tick off the authorities. In his 1995 feature debut *The White Balloon*, a little girl out to buy a goldfish is preyed upon by hustlers trying to separate her from her cash. *The Circle* (2000) explores the intertwining stories of different women, all victims of a sexist society. And *Crimson Gold* (2003) is an exposé of economic inequality wrapped in a crime thriller. "I

regard myself as a social filmmaker, not a political filmmaker," he says. "But every social film, at its base, comes into contact with political issues. Because every social problem is clearly due to some political mistake."

Panahi was denied a license to shoot *Offside*, so, using a fake name, he submitted a phony synopsis about a group of boys attending a football game and got the Ministry's approval. Without the equipment or funding that the government hands out to other directors, he shot with a digital camera and small crew. Five days before the shoot was finished, the authorities discovered they'd been duped. "The police in Tehran were under orders to arrest us if they saw us shooting," Panahi says. "Luckily, the only scenes we had left were in a minibus, so we drove out of the city borders where they couldn't find us."

Despite all the hassle, Panahi has made a film that's lighter and more lively than anything he's ever done. It's also his most amusing film yet. "It's a funny because they are women, cannot," he says. "I didn't need to add anything to it." Panahi hasn't decided what his next film will be, but it's a safe bet the authorities won't like it. But he won't leave. "In 2004, I was summoned by the Ministry of Intelligence and they told me I was making 'black' films," Panahi says. "They asked me why I stay in Iran and told me I should leave. I replied that I would stay in Iran for as long as I can make films." And situation anyway — 100,000 men watching a football game but all these other people, as long as someone, somewhere, is watching them.