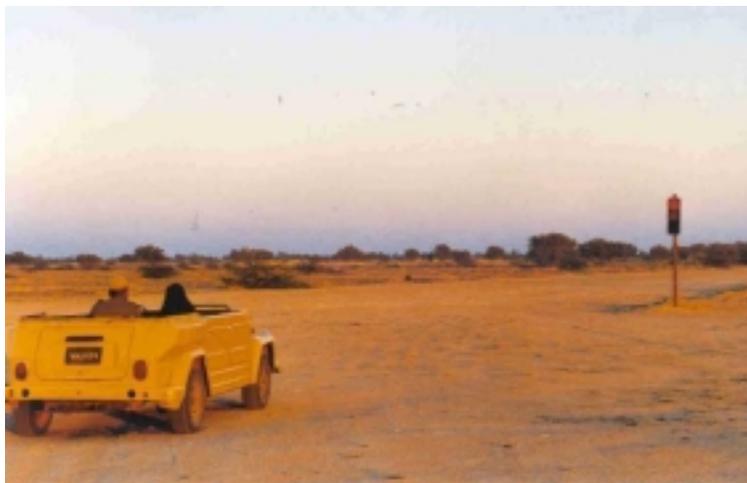


SECRET BALLOT



Written & Directed by Babak Payami

Winner of the special Jury Prize – Best Director
Venice International Film Festival 2001
San Francisco International Film Festival 2002
Seattle International Film Festival 2002
NY Human Rights Watch International Film Festival 2002
Florida Film Festival 2002
Lake Placid Film Festival 2002

A SONY PICTURES CLASSICS RELEASE
105 minutes. Rated G by the MPAA.
An Iranian film in Farsi with English subtitles.

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Cast

Girl
Soldier

NASSIM ABDI
CYRUS AB
YOUSSEF HABASHI
FARROKH SHOJAI
GHOLBAHAR JANGHALI

Crew

Written and Directed by
Based on an idea by
Produced by
Executive Producer
Director of Photography
Sound recordist
Sound Designer
Editor
Original Music

BABAK PAYAMI
MOSHEN MAKHMALBAF
MARCO MÜLLER & BABAK PAYAMI
HOOSHANGH PAYAMI
FARZAD JODAT
YADOLLAH NAJAFI
MICHAEL BILLINGSLEY
BABAK KARIMI a.m.c.
MICHAEL GALASSO

SECRET BALLOT

Synopsis

An unsuspecting soldier awakens to discover that he can forget about another uneventful day at his lonely seaside post. It's Election Day!

A ballot box is parachuted down as a young woman pulls up to the shore of the remote island. To the soldier's surprise, she's actually the government bureaucrat in charge of local voting. The couple gets off to a rocky start since the soldier expects election agents to be men.

Whether he wants to or not, the soldier is thrown into an elections adventure that just may put him out of a job. Orders from above force him to accompany the female agent in an army jeep across the island's dusty desert. The agent literally leaves no stone unturned in her search for ballots. Many a surprise lies along their route, as they find themselves in one absurd situation after another.

So much can happen in a single day, especially when opposites attract. Views can change, hearts can melt. By sunset, a woman's idealistic notions can come back down to earth. And a lonely man can discover there's more to voting by secret ballot than he ever imagined

SECRET BALLOT

About the Director

Babak Payami received critical acclaim for his first feature, ONE MORE DAY, which was presented at the 2000 Berlin Film Festival (Panorama). ONE MORE DAY received the Special Jury Prize in Turin and the Best Artistic Contribution Award in Tokyo later in the same year. Born in Tehran in 1966, Payami studied cinema at the University of Toronto during the early 90s. In 1998 he returned to Iran after an almost two decade-long absence to produce and direct ONE MORE DAY, his feature directing debut.

Babak Payami on ***SECRET BALLOT***

Interviewed by Jamsheed Akrami

***Secret Ballot* is based on an idea by Mohsen Makhmalbaf. What was the idea?**

Makhmalbaf made a short “pseudo-documentary” entitled ***Testing Democracy***, which became the inspiration for a feature film idea he shared with me. I wrote a script loosely based on his notes.

What attracted you to the idea?

The absurd contradictions in the society at large especially those in countries like Iran. Given the importance and sensitivity of the subject matter and how I wanted to approach it, I felt very much like a tightrope acrobat at a dangerous height with no safety net! To me, the elements of absurd and comedy were like the balancing stick that helped me to avoid being judgmental. I was also attracted to the universality of some of the issues in the film. While making the film, I was receiving news of the US presidential election controversy and, in fact, I added a scene to ***Secret Ballot*** that was to remind the audience of the Florida events deciding the election. I will not disclose which scene it is!

How did you cast the film?

With non-professional actors whom I encountered in their normal daily lives while scouting for locations and looking for people to cast.

How did you work with them? Did they know the script in advance? Did you improvise much with them?

I do not disclose the script to anyone. However, a much closer relationship with my actors was required. Given the relatively more stylized structure and makeup of the film and the subtle comic elements, I had virtually no improvisational freedom as is sometimes customary with Iranian films. This required a much more precise approach in dealing with the actors without being too technical. The learning experience for me was vastly valuable. At certain points, I felt very much like the girl in my film where normal people on the street have much more to teach us about real life than we ever have to convey to them.

Did you go through a rehearsal period with the actors? How long was your shoot?

No rehearsals. 55 sessions in 65 days.

Why did you decide to use the Persian Gulf island of Kish as the backdrop?

Kish Island had the perfect combination of a barren landscape and living facilities for the crew.

The film is a co-production. How did that come about?

As an independent filmmaker, I remain open to support from sources that understand and appreciate the independent nature of my work. The production was partly supported by the Montecinemaverita Foundation and the Hubert-Bals fund. Subsequent to the shooting of the film, I came into contact with Marco Muller of Fabrica who had previously expressed interest in involvement with my projects and we came to an agreement where Fabrica funds the post-production of the film in Italy under the auspices of a co-production deal with Payam Films Institute.

Did you have to go through the same stages of inspection by the censors as other Iranian films do?

There are no exceptions. However, the censorship regulations in Iran change as frequently as films are made!

Did you receive a screening permit without making any alterations in the film?

Yes.

You are obviously a long take director. The second shot in the film is nearly 2 minutes long; the fourth is 3 min 20 sec, and you have similarly long takes throughout the film. Why do you use long takes?

In making this film, I had the following in mind: Cut only when you have to, talk only when you have to, and move the camera only when you have to. What exists beyond the frame, the unsaid dialogue and the reactions are as important as what is within the frame, the dialogue and the action.

You have a shot near the end of the film where the woman is waiting for a boat to pick her up. At 3 minutes and 35 seconds, this turns out to be your longest take. Were you trying to convey the same sense of waiting to the audience, as the woman is experiencing by lengthening the shot?

Hopefully the film communicates with the audience on various levels of meaning. The shot in question is very much the girl's shot. It represents her doubts, desires and unanswered questions. Her chador getting stuck on the thorns, her leaving the ballot box behind on the bench (where the soldier normally sits while on duty), her return to the car without the box, the soldier's return (while he has left his gun in the

car!) and what we subsequently learn (the soldier having fetched his ID from under the bed) are all integral to the duration and stylistic approach. **Secret Ballot** is about the problems of the integration process. It is about lack of effective communication, it is about the distances in approach and mentality, it is about remoteness in thought and physical location. The only close ups in the film are where the girl and the soldier are attempting to relate on an emotional/human level.

You keep camera movement in the film to a minimum.

The film didn't need any more camera movement than what it asked for!

You were not concerned that the film's naturalistic pace, lengthy long shots, limited camera movement, and dearth of close ups may create a psychological distance between the audience and the characters?

On the contrary, in my view, those aspects were exactly what helped tune the audience into the film and increase their sensitivity to detail. It also gives the audience a sense of "being there" which adds to the participatory nature of the audiences' role in the film. The sound design in the film contributes greatly to this. **Secret Ballot** requires exactly the opposite of a temporary suspension of disbelief from its audience!

In both your films, you stage most of your scenes outdoors. While the nature of Secret Ballot necessitates this, you did the same in One More Day as well. What is the appeal of the exterior scenes to you?

One More Day had many interior shots. This is not a conscious effort. I try to provide my film with whatever it needs to communicate with the audience.

Your opening shot, in which a ballot box is parachuted down from an airplane, is the most unusual shot in the film. It is set at dawn, has a different texture and tonality compared to the rest of the film, and seems almost surreal. Since you use a democracy-starved country like Iran as the backdrop, are you implying that a ballot box and, by extension, the right to vote are heavenly gifts?

As in all aspects of the film, this shot also has various layers of meaning for me. True, the concept of democracy is a potentially heavenly gift for any liberty-starved people. However, look at the details: the military plane that delivers it and the surreal, cartoon-like silhouette of the box, which in fact I had done digitally! They imply the potential dangers of this apparent heavenly blessing! **Secret Ballot** is also a road movie about the problems of integration. How the illusions of freedom and democracy are potentially as dangerous and counter-productive for any society as dictatorial autocracy. From a stylistic standpoint, the shot tries to emphasize the surreal nature of the film.

You follow the road movie genre conventions in constructing your plot: two fellow travelers go through a process of meeting, experiencing discord and reaching a final accord. The emotional turning point in their relationship happens in a scene in the middle of the film when the young woman helps the soldier wash his hand and shares a meal with him. As in *One More Day*, you have an undeclared relationship developed between the two main characters as the story unfolds. In both films, there is a great deal of resistance to having the love story break out in the open. Are these relationships meant to be commentaries on the muted state of relationships between men and women in Iran?

Yes. I am also preoccupied with the fact that in societies such as Iran, internal inhibitions are at play just as much as external imposition of inhibitions. What we are used to construing from such societies is that they are people oppressed by a system from the outside. While this is true, there is more to this social dilemma than meets the eye. Both films touch on the fact that while the society frowns upon open relationships among people (in these cases, of the opposite sex), there are deep-rooted cultural undercurrents within the psyche of the individuals in such societies.

We see a clash of conservative and liberal thoughts in almost every conversation between the soldier and the young lady, whom the soldier refers to, as “the city girl.” Their interactions seem to represent the ongoing clash of ideas between conservatives and reformists in the Iranian society today. Also, you take a stand against some social conventions in the film. In a scene the point is made that a 12-year old girl is eligible for marriage but not for voting.

Surely, I take a stance on many issues. However, the intention is not being judgmental or waving political flags. *Secret Ballot* is also a demonstration of the fact that society at large has much more integrity than the forces that govern it. This is as true in Iran as it is in the United States.

Your film can also serve as a public service announcement for voting. An early scene in the film about who can vote and why one should vote sets up the rest of the film for dealing with every conceivable voting scenario. A line by the young lady, when she suggests voting encourages discussion while guns suppress people, seems to compare the symbolic significance of the voting box with that of the gun, which are the two prevalent tools of bringing about political change in a society. Interestingly, the soldier votes for the lady poll watcher at the end. He is not politically conscious, but seems to have realized voting gives him a voice to express himself.

Hopefully the film works on both layers of meaning: the pure humanistic/emotional layer and the iconoclastic layer.

Humor is the saving grace of the film. The soldier’s character could have been difficult to relate to if he had lacked a sense of humor. His Turkish accent gives

him a common-man dimension and positions him as a fitting compliment for the more serious and task-oriented poll watcher. Did you write the accent into the script?

No. The actor complimented the inherent and subtle comedy in the film with his beautifully sweet Turkish accent. I had to work with him during the shooting not to abandon his native accent as is customary with people from different ethnic backgrounds when they speak Farsi.

Why are the characters nameless?

Names would have limited the universality of the film.

Music is spare but effective in the film. It helps fill in the character's moments of introspection. Why did you decide to use non-Iranians to do your music and sound design?

I am hoping that the film as a whole is not ethnically specific. There are hopefully issues in the film that are more global than being specific to societies like Iran. I myself have been more of a citizen of the world with a mixture of cultural influences, from Afghanistan where I spent almost 9 years of my childhood to Canada where I grew up and was educated. Nationality did not play a role. In a way, the production and post-production of the film was indicative of some of my own views on the inevitability of a colorless, borderless global community. Michael Galasso is a very creative musician who has been to Iran and understands eastern musical structures. I did not want what is known commercially as "world music." I was avoiding ethnically specific music for the film. My collaboration with Galasso provided a suitable audio sensation for the film. As for Micheal Billingsley, he is vastly experienced in international cinema. Films like *Barabbas* and *Last Tango in Paris* show the range of his experience as sound designer. Our collaboration opened a new technical avenue for Iranian cinema. *Secret Ballot* was the first Iranian film for which the sound work was done entirely using modern digital Dolby Surround Technology. However, it is important not to allow this technological upgrade interfere with the true nature of the film.

Why did you choose to do your post-production work in Italy?

The film was a co-production with Italy and I was personally interested in working in Cinecitta studios.

You lived in Canada for a long time, and studied filmmaking there, but went back to Iran to make your feature films. Do you live in Iran now?

I am self-taught in practical filmmaking. My studies in the University of Toronto were theory-based and academic. I live partly in Iran and partly in Canada.

Has the film been shown in Iran yet? Have Iranians and non-Iranians reacted differently to the film?

Secret Ballot was shown in the Fajr Film Festival in Tehran and the audience response was good. The international reaction to the film has been similarly enthusiastic.

What do you hope your audiences will get out of the film?

I hope my audiences will get at least what I got from the film: The need to talk, understand and appreciate differences. To abandon the illusions of progress, reform and democracy and replace them with a true effort towards building a universally progressive society.

Any major literary or cinematic influences?

Sohrab Shahid Saless remains my most favorite Iranian filmmaker.

Your next project?

A man and a woman in a remote desolate location attempting to connect!

Jamsheed Akrami is a professor of film at William Paterson and Columbia universities. He has made two feature-length documentaries about Iranian cinema before and after the revolution.

SECRET BALLOT

Awards & Nominations

Venice Film Festival 2001

Nominated - Golden Lion
Winner - Special Jury Prize for Best Director
Winner - Netpac Award (tied with Zuotian).
Winner - OCIC Award
Winner - Pasinetti Award
Winner - UNICEF Award

Toronto International Film Festival 2001

Official Selection

Rotterdam International Film Festival 2002

Winner - Netpac Award

London Film Festival 2001

Winner - FIPRESCI Award

São Paulo International Film Festival 2001

Winner - Special Jury Award

Valladolid International Film Festival 2001

Winner - Best New Director
Nominated - Golden Spike