

 71st Internationale
Filmfestspiele
Berlin
Competition

2021 | DRAMA | IRAN, FRANCE | COLOR | 105'

BALLAD

A FILM BY

OF A

BEHTASH SANAAEHA

WHITE

& MARYAM MOGHADDAM

COW

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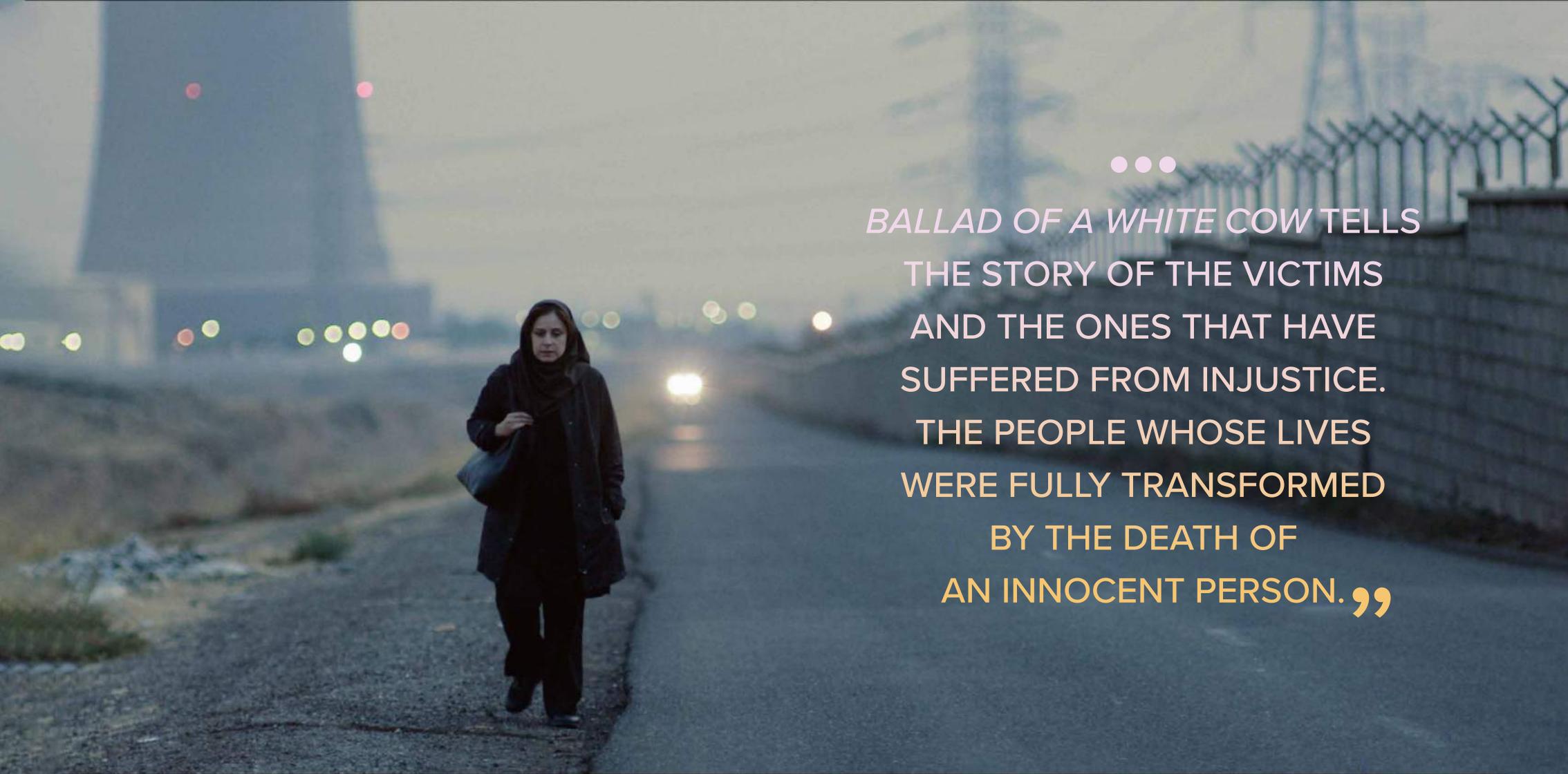
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DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

“

IT ALL STARTED WITH A PAINFUL
AND BITTER MEMORY: AN OLD
WOUND WHICH TORMENTED OUR
SOULS. WITH FEAR AND HOPE,
WE TOLD THE STORY OF OUR
PEOPLE'S ENDURING AGONY.
THE STORY OF MINA'S ANGUISH,
LONGING FOR LONG-LOST
JUSTICE. THE JUSTICE WHICH
HAD FADED BETWEEN THE LINES
OF A LAW.





...

BALLAD OF A WHITE COW TELLS
THE STORY OF THE VICTIMS
AND THE ONES THAT HAVE
SUFFERED FROM INJUSTICE.
THE PEOPLE WHOSE LIVES
WERE FULLY TRANSFORMED
BY THE DEATH OF
AN INNOCENT PERSON.”

SYNOPSIS

Mina's life is turned upside down when she learns that her husband Babak was innocent of the crime for which he was executed. The authorities apologize for the mistake and offer the prospect of financial compensation. Mina starts a silent battle against a cynical system for her own and her daughter's sake. Just as her money is running out, a stranger named Reza knocks at her door, saying he has come to repay a debt he owed to Babak. Mina is guarded at first, but increasingly lets Reza into her life, unaware of the secret that ties them to one another.



WATCH TRAILER





In a system that leaves no place to doubt,
a quest of justice will blur the lines between
two connected fates.

BIOGRAPHY

BEHTASH SANAEEHA

Behdash Sanaeeha was born in Shiraz. After completing his degree in civil engineering, he began writing scripts and directing short films, documentaries and commercials, and wrote and directed two animated series and a film for television. His first fiction feature, *Risk of Acid Rain* (2015), deals with the struggles of the Iranian middle class and was screened at more than thirty international festivals. Behdash then co-directed a documentary feature with Maryam Moghaddam, *The Invincible Diplomacy of Mr Naderi* (2017), about an eccentric Iranian man who wants to reconcile the US and Iran. In 2018, he was a jury member for the Ingmar Bergman Award in Sweden.



BIOGRAPHY

MARYAM MOGHADDAM

Maryam Moghaddam was born in Tehran. She is an actress, screenwriter and director. She graduated from the Performing Arts School of Gothenburg, Sweden. She has worked as an actress in various Swedish theatres, including Göteborgs Stadsteater. She starred in a number of Iranian films, including Jafar Panahi and Kambuzia Partovi's *Closed Curtain*, which premiered at the 63rd Berlin International Film Festival in 2013 and won the Silver Bear.

Behdash Sanaeeha and Maryam Moghaddam's collaboration dates back to when they co-wrote the screenplay of *Risk of Acid Rain* and co-directed *The Invincible Diplomacy of Mr Naderi*. They wrote and directed *Ballad of a White Cow* together.



AN INTERVIEW WITH CO-DIRECTORS

BEHTASH SANAAEHA & MARYAM MOGHADDAM

Where did you find the story for your film? Was it inspired by people you know or by specific stories you heard or read about?

Behtash Sanaeeha: This story is the story of many people around us, and definitely of many people in the world. The main characters are shaped and inspired by people we know. In the final credits of the film, we dedicate it to Mina, the real Mina, Maryam's mother. The woman who inspired us. Of course, we also did a lot of research and interviewed many people who had to face similar experiences.





BALLAD OF A WHITE COW feels like an intense collaboration between the two of you. Please tell us about the way you worked together in the making of your film. Has your approach changed over the course of the three films you have made together? How did Maryam approach the double role of lead actress and co-director while shooting?

Maryam Moghaddam: We have always worked together as a team and not individually, and we always move step by step as we go from the basic idea to the finalization. All decisions before filming starts are made together. That creates an almost instinctive trust. During the shoot, when I was in front of the camera and Behtash behind it, I knew I could trust his choices completely.

The picture you show us of contemporary Iran is that of an everyday

modern country, while the title refers to an ancient parable related in the Quran which hints at an older, more symbolic level of meaning. Why this choice of title?

Maryam: Despite the modern aspect of Iranian life, laws are based on Islamic Sharia. A cow in religious ceremonies is usually a sacrifice. In our film, a white cow is a metaphor for an innocent condemned to die. The “Cow Surah”, a chapter of the Quran, is related to ‘Qessas’, a Sharia law term for the violation of other people as expressed in the maxim “an eye for an eye”. The penalty for a Qessas is some form of restitution, where a monetary value is allotted to human life and even body parts.

Behtash: This metaphor is not merely the source of the film’s title. It is a recurrent theme throughout the script, for example in Mina’s dreams of a cow or the use of milk

in the final scene. Metaphor and double meaning have a very strong presence in Persian culture, literature and specifically poetry, and we aspire to this added layer of interpretation in our cinema.

Mina's battles with many of the problems that threaten to bring her down – economic difficulties, a confusing and unresponsive bureaucracy, the lack of affordable housing, little support from society for single parents – will sound familiar, especially to female audiences all over the world. What would you say is universal about her story, and what aspects of it are specifically Iranian?

Maryam: Mina lives in a society that is full of violence against women. They are subject to laws that are misogynistic, and the extreme injustice she faces exists only in a few countries today. But the decline in Mina's social

status after her husband's death and her struggles to raise her daughter on her own are universal tales. The truth is that most single parents and the majority of the poorest on our planet are women.

A question to Maryam: What was your greatest challenge in bringing Mina to life as a character? What aspects of her personality did you identify with most, and which ones felt most difficult to portray?

Maryam: Mina's personality is very different from my own, but I am acquainted with her struggle and self-esteem, and I share her grief. Mina's character was complicated, yet I found playing her interesting and challenging. She was not the normal stereotype of a weak woman portrayed in Iranian cinema, but along with her weakness she has strength. In fact, she was a real human being.





Bita, Mina's daughter, is another complex and independent character. During the writing process, what made you see her as a deaf-mute? In what ways would you say she is similar to her mother (obvious aspects being their shared love for film, or the fighting spirit when confronted with bullying at school), and in what ways she is different?

Behtash: Just like her mother, Bit

a is an Iranian woman. Although she does not have her own voice yet, she fights for herself and is hopeful for the future. As you pointed out, Bita and her mother are two parts of a whole, two innocents with a fighting spirit and a strong sense of dignity.

Film as a medium is very much present in the story you tell, from LITTLE PRINCESS with Shirley Temple and Googoosh's classic BITA to Turkish television series.

What does this cinematic tradition mean to you, and in what way did it influence you?

Behtash: Yes, to a great extent these frequent references are a result of our being cinephiles. Despite all the limitations, the culture of loving films is still very much alive among Iranian people. In fact, we thought it was important to include this element of our own childhoods in Bit

a's character.

Maryam: During our childhood, we lived through the difficult years of the revolution and the Iran-Iraq war, and our only good memories of those years are movies and the magic of cinema.

BALLAD OF A WHITE COW is cinematic, often moving between close-up portraits to wide, carefully framed, centered, and composed group shots. Architectural elements

– doors, windows, staircases – are often used to structure scenes. Could you tell us more about your choices when setting up a scene?

Behdash: We often use elements of architecture as the main ingredient to create an atmosphere in our films. We also use architecture to create meaning, the part of the form that brings out the subject matter. Things such as the doors and windows that you mentioned and that we use as a repeating motif in this film. The hallways and connecting staircases, as well as the opening and closing of doors and windows, encourage the audience to think about freedom and liberty. By avoiding both unnecessary camera movements and complicated mise-en-scene, we try to present simplicity and minimalism in our films.

Using both close-ups and long-shots, we give our characters the possibility to approach and dis-

tance themselves from the camera in a variety of dramatic situations. In such a pattern, composition and harmony take on a double meaning. This interest stems from our love for art, especially for painting.

Iranian cinema is one of the country's most respected, admired and influential contribution to global culture today. Where do you see its significance both within Iran and globally?

Maryam: One of the unique and special qualities of an Iranian film can be its honesty when it comes to social and human issues, yet with the existence of censorship, achieving this is not that simple. But films that reach this goal can be influential. They can be windows, allowing the people of the world on one side and the isolated people of Iran on the other, to see each other.

“ONE OF THE UNIQUE AND SPECIAL QUALITIES OF AN IRANIAN FILM CAN BE ITS HONESTY WHEN IT COMES TO SOCIAL AND HUMAN ISSUES, YET WITH THE EXISTENCE OF CENSORSHIP, ACHIEVING THIS IS NOT THAT SIMPLE.”

MARYAM MOGHADDAM

CAST

MARYAM MOGHADDAM

ALIREZA SANIFAR

POURYA RAHIMISAM

AVIN PURRAOUFI

FARID GHOBADI

LILI FARHADPOUR



CREW

A FILM BY
Behdash Sanaeeha
and Maryam Moghaddam

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Mehrdad Kouroshnia

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