

Fireworks Wednesday

Since the 1990's, Iranian cinema, relatively unknown before and after the Iranian Revolution (1979), has produced a complex mix of movies from a series of able director/writers who are able to craft personal, domestic dramas of high quality. Though still little seen in the West, some of these films (and their filmmakers) have been able to reach wider audiences at international venues. Prominent among this new Iranian wave is Asghar Farhadi, writer/director of the newly released "Fireworks Wednesday" (*"Chahrshanbeh suri"*).

Farhadi came to prominence when his study of a broken family, "A Separation," won the 2011 Oscar for Best Foreign Language Picture, thus declaring a new cinematic talent. That talent was corroborated two years later with "The Past," another intricate domestic drama of Iranians set in Paris. The positive critical reception for these films apparently caused international producers and distributors to check out Farhadi's oeuvre and, in the last two years, to search his back catalogue for earlier works worthy of release.

Last year, his intriguing work "About Elly," made in 2009, received critical raves after its delayed release. Now, ten years after "Fireworks Wednesday" was shown in Iran, it finally debuts in the US. Farhadi himself encapsulates it as "a day in the life of an Iranian family set against the explosive New Year's festival when things may get out of hand." It was worth waiting for.

The picture begins with the routine rhythms of urban life in Tehran but slowly morphs into a gripping, suspenseful drama set against the backdrop of the Persian New Year. Rouhi (Tareneh Alidousti), a bubbling bride-to-be, is hired as a maid for the affluent Samii family. Upon arriving at their apartment, she is thrust into an explosive domestic conflict between the troubled Mojdeh (Hedieh Tehrani) and her beleaguered husband Morteza (Hamid Farokh-Nejad). Mojdeh is convinced her husband is having an affair with the recently divorced Simin (Pantea Bahram) who has a salon next door, and she promptly enlists Rouhi as a spy to check on her husband and confirm her suspicions. What Rouhi discovers, however, threatens not only their marriage but also her own future.

Mojdeh, from the first, seems peculiar, mired in remorse, while her husband appears henpecked and frustrated. Rouhi becomes a reluctant witness to their rancor and inadvertently becomes a player in a conflict in which she never expected to participate. The ignorance of her presence by the couple also points up the Iranian class difference between the well off and the servant class: the Samii's tend not to even notice Rouhi's bewildered gaze even as they argue.

Farhadi works out his plot with subtle care: key moments and clues to behavior are carefully dropped, only to resonate later. The actors, including the bit parts, are all distinctive and form an intriguing mix that comes together with force in revelations both temperate yet devastating.

Besides Farhadi's newfound fame, there is another reason, I think, why "Fireworks" never saw a broad release: it is way too Iranian.

The film's title itself needs explaining. The holiday being celebrated is

“Chahrshanbeh suri,” an annual festival of public fire-making and fireworks on the Wednesday before Now Ruz, the ancient Persian New Year’s Day which falls on the spring solstice (March 21), a ritual long outdating Islam. Part of that ritual is a top to bottom cleaning of one’s home before the holiday (which is why Rouhi is hired in the first place). Part of it also is setting off firecrackers and cherry bombs during the day, which is why the listener constantly hears on the sound track what sounds like gunshots that no one notices. Getting past these and other cultural tidbits, however, the viewer steps into a totally believable world with real humans in turmoil with which we can all identify.

(The film is unrated, though it contains nothing racy by US standards, and runs 104 mins.).

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