

TORONTO
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2008

TWO-LEGGED HORSE

A FILM BY
SAMIRA MAKHMALBAF



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MAKHMALBAF FILM HOUSE
AND
WILD BUNCH
PRESENT

TWO-LEGGED HORSE

A FILM BY **SAMIRA MAKHMALBAF**

IRAN/FRANCE • 101' • 35MM • 1: 1,85 • MONO DOLBY • COLOUR • 2008

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SYNOPSIS

A man from the city visits a poor village and offers a peasant boy a chance to work. To get the job, the boy has to compete with other poor children. The man will employ whoever can carry a crippled child - whose legs were blown off by a land mine - to school on his back.

The peasant boy wins. For one dollar a day, he carries his crippled charge to school and back. Like a horse. He races with donkeys in the street. He bathes his rider; he plays with him and tends to him. But the crippled boy is not happy: he had asked his father to buy him a horse, not a boy.

CAST

Ziya Mirza Mohamad
Haron Ahad
Gol Gotai Karimi
Khojeh Nader
Yasin Tavildar

CREW

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| DIRECTED BY | Samira Makhmalbaf |
| SCREENPLAY | Mohsen Makhmalbaf |
| EDITOR | Mohsen Makhmalbaf |
| ASSISTANT EDITOR | Dilovar Sultonov |
| ASSISTANT DIRECTORS | Marziyeh Meshkini Farid Pirayesh Mehdi Zafari Farzad Jodat |
| DP | Abbas Rahmani |
| CAMERA ASSISTANTS | Davood Ashrafi Dilovar Sultonov Farokh Fadaei |
| SOUND | Shahab Rezaei |
| SOUND ASSISTANT | Hosein Mahdavi |
| SOUND DESIGNER | Tolibkhon Shahidi |
| MUSIC | Akbar Meshkini |
| SET DESIGNER | Hana Makhmalbaf |
| STILLS PHOTOGRAPHER | Hana Makhmalbaf |
| 'MAKING OF' | Zahra Kamalian |
| PRODUCTION MANAGER | Fakhuddin Ayam |
| LOGISTICS | Mehrdad Zonnour |
| EXECUTIVE PRODUCER | WILD BUNCH |
| PRODUCTION | MAKHMALBAF FILM HOUSE |

INTERVIEW WITH SAMIRA MAKHMALBAF

Where did the original idea come from?

From my dad. One day I woke up and he handed me the script for TWO-LEGGED HORSE and said: *"I wrote this all night. If you like it, make it."*

I read the story and was shocked. I asked my father why it was such a desperate, bitter and violent story. He answered: *"What else do you expect me to write when I'm living in such difficult political-social conditions in Iran? How can I describe people's hidden relationships in a seemingly modern but indeed primitive society? And how else can I express the social relations with such a totalitarian authority?"*

All night I was telling myself this was not a script I wanted to make. *"No, I will not make it."* It was too surreal and reading it made me feel like I was crumpled into a box. Here and there around the house I would yell, *"No, I won't make it, I won't make it."* Finally, my dad came and took the script from me and asked me to forget about it and calm down. But I couldn't calm down. TWO-LEGGED HORSE wouldn't leave me alone.

It was bitter and hopeless but more real than reality. It was the essence of what I could express of my times. TWO-LEGGED HORSE is a nightmare. But when you open your eyes in the morning tragedy unfolds concurrently with the nightmare. I told myself, *"Open your eyes and look around yourself. Can't you see all these horses and horseback riders around you?"*

Before, I was infatuated with Darwin's theory on how animal gradually became human. Now I had TWO-LEGGED HORSE theory before me. How man gradually becomes animal. And that is under the oppression of a power that he himself has created. This becoming an animal is not confined to the relationship between society and a totalitarian authority. It also involves individual relationships. Even in marital life, in two friends' or two colleagues' lives, it is worth the review. Whether a healthy, human relationship is involved or one is gradually becoming the other's horse. I don't think two people ever exploit each other unless both have changed their nature first.

Why did you make TWO-LEGGED HORSE in Afghanistan?

For various reasons. First, because they didn't let me make it in Iran. Second, because the primitive appearance of Afghanistan suited the spirit of this script. Third, because half of Afghanistan speaks my language and we share the same roots and I could communicate with the actors I was directing in my mother tongue. And the last reason was because TWO-LEGGED HORSE is a story about humans and it could have happened in many places, Afghanistan to name just one.

How did you cast your actors?

It was very hard. I searched the streets of about 10 cities in Afghanistan. I needed two actors whose appearance and personalities had to be different from others. For the little boy with no legs I was looking for someone weak and feeble to the extent that he couldn't move without help from others, but on the other hand he had to have the capacity to climb a tree when in power. And finding someone with both weakness and power was almost impossible. All the children who had stepped on mines had died of hemorrhage because of their small stature and those remaining were only weak and disabled. I finally located him in north Afghanistan. He was a beggar in the street. Experience has taught me that beggars are good actors because they can raise the sympathy of passersby.

About the second actor who was supposed to become a horse in the film, before anything, I was after someone whose behavior could convince me that he could become a horse. Finally, in central Afghanistan I found a boy washing a car in the street. In the film he had to carry a 25 kilogram boy on his shoulders and run for the two months of shooting. But because of the deformity of his body resulting from an explosion, he could neither run nor carry anyone. We practiced with him for 40 days. After two weeks' practice he managed to run well. Then we gave him a backpack filled with one kilogram of salt and he ran with it. Every day we added another kilogram of salt to the bag until on the fortieth day he was able to run a few kilometers

with a 25 kilogram bag of salt. This was a kind of therapy for him. His deformity was corrected a little. Afterwards, for a whole month he carried a boy on location on his shoulders and ran in the streets so they could get used to each other. Then we would spend many hours with horses so he could learn their behavior. I would ask him to imagine, if he had been born a horse, how would he eat or sleep. All these rehearsals and practices took place gradually, like a joyful game, so he could internalize the behavior.

Is it difficult to work with non-professional actors?

Hard but attractive. They don't know cinema but they are filled with real life. In order to record their real life on the negative one must be very patient. And I have my own style of working with them. My sister Hana has made a documentary on that called SAMIRA & NON-PROFESSIONAL ACTORS. In this film you can see the details of my relationship with non-professional actors and the way I direct them. This method is not taught in any school. You have to learn it in the university of life.

What is your own interpretation of this film?

I am the creator of the film not its interpreter. I leave the interpretation up to the viewers and the critics. I also believe in the theory of the 'death of the author'. When an artist creates a piece of work it is like a mother giving birth to a child and it is not the mother's interpretation and analysis that determine the child's character. The art or the baby begins its independent life and everyone will have their own interpretation of that child upon seeing him. On one hand this film can have a certain interpretation and another in Japan, for example. Now, after a difficult labour, I have delivered a child that has different meanings: philosophical, social, psychological, literary and political meanings and other things, even mythical and religious. I can look at this film as to how Jesus was crucified and how Judas became a traitor. I imagine in the myth of Jesus, Judas did not become a traitor at once. Perhaps in his daily life he committed sins and Jesus, in order to practice his forgiveness, always forgave him. As a result, Judas gradually practiced to become Judas. The myth of the forgiving Jesus needed the anti-myth of the

disloyal Judas otherwise this story would not have formed and lost its balance. If the first time that Judas committed a small disloyalty Jesus did not forgive him it might not have led to that huge cross and that huge betrayal. On other hand this film for me is like a Pavlov laboratory. A kind of neo-Pavlovism. The story of a perfect animal called human and his conditioning.

Is this a film about violence?

The feeling resulting from seeing the film is one of pressure. A pressure that crumples one into a box. A pressure that results in a human turning into an animal. A gradual metamorphosis, because this film speaks of the violence dominant in human behavior. But this is not the kind of violence that is used in Hollywood to raise the box office sales and one that the viewer enjoys. This is a show and criticism of the kind of violence that disgusts the viewer with hopes that if he has violent behavior he will relinquish it after watching the film. This film is a mirror that reflects the violence of the contemporary human soul. Freud says that the whole history of human civilization is as thin as a layer of ice on an ocean of ignorance and savagery. That is why with the slightest snap of wars and social revolutions and individual hostilities this thin layer cracks and that deep ocean of ignorance and savagery breaks loose. My reason: all of the news we hear about the contemporary world day and night.

But this is violence by children. We are used to seeing children's films as poetic.

First of all, this is not a children's film. It is for a general audience. Secondly, children are soft and poetic in literature not in reality. In scientific researches especially in sociology it has been proven that if children are not controlled and supervised by their parents or caretakers they are very dangerous for each other. They may stick knives in each other's eyes or press their throats for a long time not realizing the consequences. I wanted to write on the movie theatre door that if you are here to watch a soft and poetic film don't waste your time. But if you have come - as Herbert Marcuse put it - to hear the painful cries of one-dimensional humans or to listen to the painful cries of a society that, under

the pressure of power, is retreating from being human to becoming an animal, then you are welcome.

Is the relationship between the two boys also erotic? In the scene where the horse boy washes the legless boy with water and looks at him in wonder for a long time or the scene where both are half-naked lying next to each other talking about the spider on the ceiling?

The horse boy's amazement when he washes the legless boy is more out of pity. Pity to see a legless person as half-human, but a different interpretation can also be made of the relationship. On one hand this is a metaphor on the relationship of power and the powerless. For example, power and nations. I believe, at least in the East, power and nations have several relationships.

First - Fear: Both are afraid of each other. Power is afraid of being overthrown by revolution and nation is afraid of torture and imprisonment.

Second - Gradual absorption: Power and nation gradually absorb each other and their behavior becomes alike. For example, what power applies in its censorship laws the nation internalizes in its culture.

Third - Eroticism: Gradually, nation enjoys giving rides and power enjoys riding. Gradually, suffering becomes a habit and then a pleasure and I call it the mutual eroticism between power and nation. This is my feeling.

None of the characters in your previous films are black and white and all of them were reviewed in their own conditions. Even in THE APPLE, the father who had imprisoned his daughters at home for 11 years was not convicted. How about this film? Are there good or bad people?

No, at the beginning of the film we have two weak people. One jobless and lonely and willing for one dollar a day to carry the other who has no legs on his shoulders and run from a village to a town to take him to school; and the other a 10-year-old legless and weak boy who when left by his father who went to India to seek medical treatment, wails out of

loneliness. But the situation places one on the shoulders and the other under the pressure of power. This is what life does with us all the time. At first, we feel sorry for both characters but when the situation repeats, this superiority and inferiority is accepted as fact. In this film it is not the people who are presented as bad or good. It is the situation that is being reviewed. The situation of one human being in power and one under the pressure of power. Both have a share in the tragedy that is being unfolded. Modern psychology believes no one can be treated alone. A young person who has tried to commit suicide should be treated simultaneously with his parents. Because we are all players in a ping pong game and involved in an action/reaction situations. Power is also a vicious cycle. Both the smasher and the smashed have equal shares. I can't say it is about good and bad people but rather about good and bad relationships and situations.

In the film several themes are combined. Which one is your main theme?

Metamorphosis of man to animal in times where human relationships are those of abuse and consumption. One consumes the other and if he can't use him in the desired way he metamorphoses him to completely meet his demands.

Generally, films can be categorized as entertaining or educational. Which category do you think your film belongs to?

If a film does not entertain, the audience will not see it until the end and if a film is only entertaining we think of the time wasted afterwards. I don't like to make a film that doesn't aim at changing anything. The world is filled with unnecessary films: even if they were not made the world would not miss anything. These two aspects of entertainment and education are not enough yet. According to Nabokov every art work needs a magical aspect to become perfect. What takes a film beyond its entertaining aspect or its moral message is its magical aspect. The magical aspect is the perfection of creating an art work otherwise all the dolls in a toy store are also entertaining and all teachers teach in classes but not all doll makers and teachers create art unless

magic comes in their work. While making this film I became more involved with the magical aspect of this story. The two little boys are real and ordinary, yet symbolic of a man to man relationship in every way, as well as symbolic of man's relationship with power. The symbol of a human being in a one-dimensional situation who becomes estranged from himself and metamorphosed. And it is here that if Darwin was right about man evolving from animal under long and special conditions, I say under special and gradual conditions animal will come out of man. The magic of this story lies in the surgery of human soul to turn into animal, not by an adept surgeon but by simple childish games. And that's where the magic lies.

The film structure looks documentary, like the scenes of the horse in labor or the boy's race with horses.

This is the style of the film, to make a surreal subject in a real or documentary style, to make it believable. But everything is staged. Even the racing scene. If the horses were not controlled, the boys would have been crushed by them. For example, the stable and the school scene that seems real is a set that we put up so when the legless boy studies, the other has a chance to see his growing animalistic situation reflected by the birth of a foal, and if in editing what he sees of the new foal's birth he can compare with his own behavior, it is because of the film's premeditated structure. The challenge in making this film rested on making a film with a surreal subject in an acutely real and documentary style.

Could you outline the evolution of the main characters and their relationship?

The film's situation in real life is experimental. In our relationships we also test and assess each other. If the road is open we advance and if we encounter an obstacle we retreat a little. The boy who is supposed to be the horse at first rebels and refuses but when he is left alone and jobless he returns and does not get accepted because now the wheel has replaced him. On the other hand, the boy who is using the wheel as his leg cannot have the same sentimental relationship with a metal wheel that he had with a live human being. Plus, his wheel breaks

in the middle of the way so the legless boy has to turn to the horse boy again. In this moment both have experienced different paths and have failed and found each other again. They become friends and tolerate each other for a while as before but gradually, they condition their relationship to being in power and under power again. However, this time they can not easily get out of this game. Whenever the legless boy loses his power he cries like a child again. He remembers his father and weeps over his loneliness but whenever he gains power he forgets everything except the power game. That is how the characters develop in a direction with fluctuations. The game continues to a point where the boy who is afraid of being hit by stones collects stones and hands them to the other to hit him on the head in order to stay in the game. In the psychology of power if the one who is in power desires sadism, the one under power has a tendency towards masochism.

In the film there is a beggar girl whom the horse boy falls in love with but at the end this girl too is possessed by the other boy.

Power involves at first the desire for acceptance, then dictatorship and finally totalitarianism. He who gains power desires to own your thoughts and even your dreams. Where does the desire to have power over other people's aspirations come from? Since the one in power sees his growth in violating the territory of its victims' dreams. The legless boy now owns the horse boy's body but he wants to possess his dreams too. And the one who has become a horse is happy that he is free in the world of dreams and the scale of his freedom is the love in his heart. However, when he loses his dream love, he cries from the bottom of his heart. A human being can be subdued or made into an animal for consumption by political power but when he is deprived of love he has no option but to be metamorphosed from human into stone. In this experiment power experiences totalitarianism and he who's cursed by the existence of power experiences a new metamorphosis. Can one regress even further? Shamloo the great Iranian poet recited a poem with this theme: "*They smell your mouth, lest you have said I love you.*"

One of the film's major themes involves sympathy towards the hungry and the poor.

Why not? But this is not a fantasy. It is reality. According to the UN statistics, at present, of every 100 people on earth 15 are sleeping hungry at night. After the fall of communism in particular, the world's balance has been upset and business is so dominant on the world that humans are for business, not business for humans. Everywhere, men are dominated by money and money becomes the means for their happiness.

Let's go back to the situation in which the film was made. During the shooting in Afghanistan a hand grenade was thrown at your camera that wounded 6 people. Who claimed responsibility for the incident and what was the story on that?

The hand grenade was thrown by those who do not like our family to make films and they tried to blame it on the unsafe conditions in Afghanistan. But at noon at the busiest moment of our shooting where we were filming the scene of the beggar girl with about 200 extras, suddenly a hand grenade was thrown at our camera, injuring 6 people among the extras and my assistant. One of the wounded persons unfortunately died after two months of hospitalization and if it weren't for the horse at the scene that got killed I might not have been here either to give this interview.

After the bombing incident, how did you finish the project?

It was tough. The UN forces told us that a group came to assassinate us. That we had to immediately leave the town to avoid harm to ourselves and the crew. So in order to guard the people's safety we left the town at once. On the other hand we didn't want to surrender to the terrorists. A while later, we finished the film in another city in Afghanistan.

Tell us a little about Iran's political scene today.

I express myself in my films.

Last question; Why do you make films?

Samira: I want to reduce human pains through my films. There are things in the world that are harsh. I want to change the world according to my own share. I believe many of these pains are due to the mindset of mankind.

We are what we think. Cinema can change thoughts. That is why I am in cinema...

