

Singapore International Film Festival

An interesting experiment in cinematic education

Richard Phillips
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“Children are the vision of our dreams; they are the embodiment of life more than anything else. The adults are all mentally devastated. They suffer from the past, from a state of despair. You can only find the hope and passion for life in children. Part of the reason Iranian films are beaming with life is because of the presence of children in them.”

Mohsen Makhmalbaf

These conceptions seem to have animated Iranian film director Mohsen Makhmalbaf's decision four years ago to establish a special film training school for his young family and their friends at his Teheran home. The school began after his daughter Samira, at that time only 16 years old, left school wanting to become a filmmaker. Unconvinced by teachers that she should complete her diploma, Samira told her father that all she wanted to do was make movies and demanded that he teach her.

As she explained in one interview: “Little by little he started talking to me about cinema, more than five minutes, maybe one hour, two hours, three hours. And then some of my friends wanted to know about art, so they came to these sessions and then some of my father's friends who were artists came, and we had discussions... So after a few times it was like a private art school. We learnt about painting and books and film.”

The Makhmalbaf filmmaking course, which runs for four years with alternating years of theory and practical work, has already produced some extraordinary results. Samira directed *The Apple* in 1998, in the second year of her studies, and has followed this internationally-acclaimed movie with a second film. Meysan, Mohsen's 18-year-old son, has been studying cinematography and

just published a book of photographs. Hanna, 11, has directed a short film, *The Day The Aunt Fell Ill*, during her second year in the cinema course. And Marzieh Meshkini, Makhmalbaf's wife, has just completed her first film.



Hanna Makhmalbaf with her father Mohsen

We had the opportunity to meet and speak briefly with Hanna Makhmalbaf, one of the film school's youngest pupils, at last month's film festival in Singapore. According to her father, the festival was part of Hanna's education because it gave her the opportunity to watch some of the best international films and to see “how the film festival juries select the prizes, watch the movies and how they judge the films.” Hanna also introduced *The Day The Aunt Fell Ill*, which was screened at the festival.

The Day the Aunt Fell Ill is a light-hearted and inventive tale about the games Hanna and her friends play at home one day. Hanna and some other girls are making chalk drawings on the ground when her grandfather tells them to stop playing and return to the house. The children are reluctant but he says that if they come inside they can paint on his head. They agree and he lies on the floor allowing them to paint his bald head.

After this game Hanna tells the girls that she is going

to make a film and begins auditioning them for various roles. One of the girls becomes jealous and bursts into tears because she has not been picked to play the leading role. She calms down after Hanna explains that she can play the lead in the next film.

In the meantime, grandfather has fallen asleep and so the children begin painting his back and stomach. He eventually wakes and angrily tells the children to leave the house. Hanna tells him that he too should be in her film but that he must act like a parent angry because his children have not done their homework. He begins rehearsing this part but is interrupted by the sound of schoolgirls outside the house. The schoolgirls, who are wearing veils as required of women by Iran's Islamic government, are ridiculing Hanna. "She is brainless," they chant. Soon after, grandmother returns to the house. She has had surgery on her nose. The film concludes with Hanna's brother Meysan introduced as the cameraman and final shots of the children's chalk writings.

While Hanna Makhmalbaf's playful film demonstrates the artistic potential of this young girl, *The Day the Aunt Fell Ill*, like many Iranian films, also highlights some of the cultural and religious differences gripping Iranian society. In the film Hanna and her friends are relatively free to play as they please—to make films or even draw on their grandfather's head. This freedom is contrasted with the veiled schoolgirls who regard this with suspicion and try to mock Hanna.

Hanna, although a little nervous about her first media interview, proudly told us that she did not attend regular school but was learning how to make films. She said that although she enjoyed painting she had decided to make films because "I like directing the actors and relating with people." She said that she was inspired to make *The Day the Aunt Fell Ill* after attending an exhibition. "I saw a photo of children painting in the desert and thought that this would be a good subject for a film."

Asked if she would like to make films in other countries, Hanna quickly replied in the affirmative. Where? "Afghanistan, because there are so many subjects there and their faces are very interesting. I would like to make films there about the poor people and women."

Her nervousness soon dissipated when I asked about her next film. "It will be about a girl," she said, "who

goes to buy something, but when she arrives at the market every basket she sees is empty. No one has anything for her and so she finds someone to ask about this problem.

"Finally, she sees a man with a full basket and is happy, but falls and drops her money in the gutter at the side of the street. The water is not clean and she cannot see to pick it up. She returns to her house to get a plastic bucket and clean water so she can see her money in the gutter. Eventually she finds her money and runs back to the man with the basket full of things, but when she returns the basket is empty."

I naively asked Hanna whether many Iranian children had seen *The Day the Aunt Fell Ill*. Hanna explained that the film was banned in Iran. She seemed a little puzzled by the ban—after all, the film was being screened in Singapore and had been shown at film festivals in Hanover and Locarno in Europe. "The government thinks they should be wearing scarves," she added, "but I don't know why this is a problem. I don't know why small children should have to wear a scarf."

Mohsen Makhmalbaf's unique experiment in cinematic education indicates that if the imagination and artistic potential of children is allowed to flourish they can produce some extraordinary work. Makhmalbaf's film school is even more remarkable given that it was established in Iran, where there is tight control on filmmakers and artists by the ruling Islamic regime.



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