

DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2023/24 SEASON



WINNERS
(Language: Persian)

Director: Hassan Nazer, 2022. Running time: 85 minutes.
Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 20 March 2024.

“Scotland-based Hassan Nazer (*Utopia*) has crafted an homage to the fabled — and persecuted — directors of his native Iran in the decidedly [sic.] meta *Winners*, a cine-literate piece about an impoverished young boy who stumbles across an Oscar statuette in the dust of remote Padeh Village on the edge of the Kavir desert. The spirits of Jafar Panahi, Majid Majidi and, ultimately, Asghar Farhadi inhabit *Winners*, literally in some cases. Ostensibly a film in the vein of *Cinema Paradiso* — which it references on several occasions — this is a curio for cineastes and festivalgoers, especially given the presence of Reza Naji in a lead role.

Outside of Iran, where it would enchant crowds should it ever be shown, those who aren't familiar with Naji, Majidi's *The Song Of Sparrows* (2008), or the Berlin Silver Bear may be cast adrift in the beautifully shot Semnan Province and Tehran. Still, given the imprisonment of so many figures in Iranian cinema, the picture — which was fully financed by Scotland, where Nazer arrived as a refugee in 2000 — is a good reminder of how much their success has meant in their home country. Visually, *Winners* also harks back to the distinctive work of the Iranian New Wave; to Kiarostami and Makhmalbaf and everyone who came before. One thing is for sure: Nazer, and everyone in his film, loves Iranian cinema.

Winners starts in Tehran, in the back of a cab which is moved along by police as it waits for its occupant to return. She has left an Oscar statuette in the back seat, which, in the post-Trump era, is finally being delivered to its owner. It ends up in the Garmsar post office, where an elderly worker decides to bring it home to his village — Padeh — for the night for some photo opportunities. Unfortunately, a bump in the road means he loses it along the way.

Jump to young Yahya (Parsa Maghami), a refugee from Afghanistan who lives with his widowed mother and is obsessed with cinema. In fact, the very opening scene of *Winners* involves him watching Panahi's 2015 Golden Bear-winning *Taxi* long beyond his bedtime. Obviously, he's destined to find Oscar, but less predictably, Nazer has inserted a subplot where Yahya works scavenging plastic from a huge local dump to be brought to a Fagin-like set-up for cash. Running the scrapyard are Nasser Khan (*Sparrows*' lead actor and Silver Bear-winner Naji) and his sidekick Saber (played by Hossein Abedini, who broke through in

Majidi's *The Father*). The twist is that they really are Naji and Abedini, but in disguise, trying to evade the attention of audiences and the authorities.

This is a whole load of plot, meta or otherwise, over 85 minutes including credits and shot in a remote part of Iran, for a director to take on board. It may be too much for Nazer to pull off, but it's certainly valiant and more than a little touching. His reverence for his country's considerable cinematic heritage courses through *Winners*, right through to the very fabric of his compositions. In particular, there are moments of golden-hour joy in a gang of urchins running through this dust bowl brandishing what looks like colourful pillows in the squinting sun. When it turns out they're sacks in which to scrounge the plastic rubbish from the dump which dwarves them, he gets his image to stand up with the best of them."

Fionnuala Halligan, *Screen International*, 15 August 2022

"This film from British Iranian director Hassan Nazer was the British entry in the international feature section at this year's Academy Awards; sadly it was not nominated. It is a likable, gentle comedy about two children in which an Oscar statuette plays a part: the ultimate MacGuffin, perhaps. It's also a rather cinephile film which ponders the enormous prestige of Iranian cinema abroad.

The premise is that the great Iranian director Asghar Farhadi, having boycotted the 2017 Oscars in protest at Donald Trump's anti-Muslim travel ban, cannot be there in person to pick up his Oscar for *The Salesman*. But the producer bringing it to Iran for him manages to lose it after a chaotic mishap involving a taxi (that key trope of contemporary Iranian cinema) and, once handed to the authorities, the Oscar is boxed up to be sent on to him via the mail. Then a local postman loses it and the gleaming, mysteriously exotic and heavy statuette is finally discovered on a dusty road by two little kids, Yahya (Parsa Maghami) and Leyla (Helia Mohammadkhani) who are profoundly, almost religiously awestruck by their secret find.

Yahya in fact knows a thing or two about cinema, having been educated by the film-loving guy running the local scrap-metal yard, for whom they scavenge material from the dump. This is Saber (Hossein Abedini), a former actor; his mate Naser is also in the business, having actually won the Silver Bear acting award at the Berlin film festival in 2008. He is wittily played by Reza Naji, who did indeed win this prize, and Naser now can't come to terms with the massive anti-climax of his post-award life.

Like many "magic of the movies" films there is something a little prescriptive about it and I have to confess my heart sinks at people going dewy-eyed about

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Cinema Paradiso, however sincerely. But I liked the free-spirited innocence here, and the film has something of British classics such as *Local Hero* or *Whisky Galore*.”

Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 14 March 2023.

“Hassan Nazer was in his first month at university in Iran when he realised that he would have to leave his homeland to fulfil his dream of becoming a film-maker. As a fledgling theatre director, he had been “red-flagged” – a possibly irredeemable offence – for putting women on stage in the holy city of Mashhad. His father, who ran a family confectionery business from a factory outside Tehran, had been opposed to his career choice from the start, but one of his uncles was on his side. “He said, after you get a red flag in this age, they’re not going to let you work. So basically, if you want to go into cinema or continue with theatre, this is not your place. You need to leave.”

Nazer had avoided military service, and had no passport or visa, so his uncle paid for him to be smuggled across the border into Turkey. “I didn’t have a destination at the time, I just wanted to go somewhere else,” he says. It took six gruelling months, often travelling on foot, to reach Europe, where his uncle put him in touch with a Kurdish family who had found asylum in Scotland and were willing to help, as they had been helped by his family back in Iran at an early stage of their own migration.

This global refugee story is a quiet presence in Nazer’s new film, *Winners*. The protagonist is the nine-year-old son of an Afghan immigrant, eking out a living in an isolated Iranian village. Like the director himself, Yahya pursues a passion for the movies in the teeth of parental opposition, staying up late to watch old classics lent to him by the supervisor of a scrapyards, to whom children sell bags of rubbish they have scavenged from a rubbish tip. Being of lowly status, Yahya is only allowed to collect plastics, with disastrous results when he is discovered by the local bully to have a mysterious gold figurine secreted beneath his jacket. The film, which won the audience award at the Edinburgh film festival last year, is both a love song to Iranian cinema, set in a gloriously photogenic landscape of derelict desert settlements, and a heartwarming story of childhood ingenuity and friendship. It’s the most autobiographical of the five films he’s written and directed, says Nazer, who replaced the first actor he chose to play Yahya, “because he wasn’t enough like me”. Did the immaculately groomed 43-year-old man who is talking over Zoom from his home in Aberdeen really

once pick over rubbish dumps? Yes, he says with a laugh, and he too was relegated to plastics rather than higher value metal objects.

The difference is that, whereas Yahya's earnings support his widowed mother, Nazer's financed a surreptitious film habit. While Yahya is enthralled by Cinema Paradiso, nine-year-old Nazer's favourite film was *Seven Samurai*. He was introduced to the work of the Japanese maestro Akira Kurosawa by Abbas Kiarostami, one of four Iranian directors to whom *Winners* is dedicated. "In television interviews, Mr Kiarostami was always talking about Kurosawa. I said, 'Who's this director, I need to see his work.' I got very much attached to it and still I think there's nobody like him."

On arrival in Scotland in 2000, Nazer worked in a takeaway and took a language course. He then signed up for a degree in film and visual culture at Aberdeen University and began to build a restaurant business on the side. "Even though my father is a wealthy person, so he could have helped me, he didn't want me to go into the cinema, so I was determined to stand on my own two feet," he says. Eventually he raised enough money to start producing his own low-budget films.

Nazer's status as an outsider director was never clearer than in 2015, when his fourth film, *Utopia* – a drama involving three intersecting stories in three languages – was nominated for a foreign language Oscar by Afghanistan, but disqualified because it had too much English in it. "They count every word of English and we just crossed 50 per cent," he says. "It was very unfortunate because it was so last minute that we couldn't do anything about it. But I think there is an advantage for a director if you can bring different cultures into a movie, because you have a wider audience." *Utopia* was in Hindi as well as English and the Afghan language, Dari, and Nazer has since gone on to direct a film in India.

Iran's incident-strewn history with international film awards – including the refusal of another of the film's dedicatees, Asghar Farhadi, to pick up his Oscar for *The Salesman* in 2017 in protest over Donald Trump's travel ban – becomes a running gag in *Winners*. The golden figurine that Yahya and his best friend, Leyla, find in the desert turns out to be an Oscar, which has been lost on its journey from Hollywood to Tehran thanks to a series of comic misadventures. Parsa Maghami and Helia Mohammadkhani, who play the two children, join a long line of untrained Iranian child actors including the stars of *The White Balloon* (1995) and *Children of Heaven* (1997), made by the other directors that *Winners* is dedicated to, Jafar Panahi and Majid Majidi.

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Why do so many Iranian films feature children? It's partly because all Iranian children seem born actors, Nazer says, but also because portrayals of relationships between the sexes are only permissible before puberty. In *Winners*, the children dress the Oscar in a skirt to preserve Leyla's modesty. There is a lovely moment when Yahya buys Leyla some goldfish that they release into a well, then sit around it, dangling their legs together in the water. It's as clearly a love scene as any that could be made with adults.

But Nazer has to be careful not to offend the Iranian censors. It is important to him to be allowed to film there, but also, as a hand-to-mouth independent filmmaker, Iran's thriving movie culture – in a country where most foreign imports are banned – makes his films financially viable. “The thing about making a film in Iran,” he says, “is that if you make it past the censors, and get through all the procedure with the ministry, you're going to get released. There is home video, there's cinema, and there's a lot of television, so basically some income is guaranteed.”

Winners is supported by Screen Scotland, but his films have only recently started to attract any funding. He financed his first three himself through his earnings as a restaurateur and chef. At one point, he ran three takeaways and a cafe, but he has now retrenched and owns just one, the Cafe Harmony. It specialises in Italian and Mediterranean food and “is kind of very well known in Aberdeen”.

Now that he has dual nationality, he is no longer under such scrutiny in Iran, where *Winners* was filmed only minutes away from his family's confectionery factory. The trickiest moment involved a late scene where Yahya carries the Oscar to Tehran's Cinema Museum in a taxi that, unbeknown to the boy, is driven by Jafar Panahi. It is very coded; all you see is the back of the driver's head. However, it is not only an in-joke but a gesture of political solidarity. “You are in the cinema too?” Yahya asks. “It depends what you mean by ‘in the cinema’,” replies Panahi, who won a Golden Bear in Berlin in 2015 for his film *Taxi*, but was unable to collect it in person because he was under house arrest and banned from filming. Any remotely knowledgeable Iranian filmgoer would understand the significance.

Nazer sat behind the censors in the accreditation screening. “I was very nervous. I was watching them as the taxi scene began. They were looking at each other and I thought, ‘Oh my god, I'm not going to get through’.” The censors deferred their decision, but ended up giving the film the go-ahead. “Usually you get a

few notes and have to make some edits, but I got none with this; I was very surprised.”

He’s now the father of a seven-year-old son, who has a poster for *Cinema Paradiso* on his Aberdeen bedroom wall, along with a few Disney films. “He loves watching films with me, particularly ones involving children.” But though the family’s main home is now in Scotland, Nazer is adamant he will never stop looking towards the land of his birth. “I always try to bring Iranian culture into my movies, because it’s something I cannot get away from myself,” he says. “Even if the story is happening somewhere completely different, there will always be a character from Iran.””

Claire Armitstead, *The Observer*, 26 February 2023.