

## UNDER WESTERN EYES



## First experiences of Iranian hospitality

(Last Part)  
By Flowergyaru

After wandering around at the top, watching the Iranian families on their outings, picking flowers, and picnicking (everywhere you go...) we made our way down the hill, taking the real path this time. It was a pleasant half hour walk back to the car, through the quaint villages.

On the way back to town, we had a brief stop at Lake Evan, a picturesque small wee lake in the middle of the mountains. Being a Friday (day off) and despite the rain, the car park was packed with cars and tents of Tehranis picnicking.

### Tehran, our next destination

The next day I moved on to the capital of Tehran, only a short 2 hours away. But first, a random hour sightseeing in Qazvin itself. A nice wee town.

How to even start to describe my four action-packed days in Tehran and all the amazing people I met...? At the beginning, I guess! And the beginning is a website.

This site puts you in touch with people in other countries who are willing to put you up for the night (or two) - usually on their couch. I searched this site and found Fahimeh who lives in Tehran, who oh so kindly agreed that she would love to have me for a few days and to give me a glimpse into 'real' life in Iran.

The accommodation was better than a four star hotel - I had a whole room to myself in a beautiful apartment and food prepared constantly - even my own laundry service!

Fahimeh and her husband are both artists, and their friends are from a very widespread background. Through them, I met musicians and artists, students, homemakers, and photographers.

A great variety of people who, from morning till evening arrived at the house to take me to see different parts of Tehran. I had not a moment to myself, which at times was exhausting, but for most of the time was most welcome. I visited downtown Tehran, the mountains, drove the streets of the city, and the bazaar.

One of the biggest highlights was my day out with a struggling photographer a few years younger than me. He spoke little English but was the perfect host, guide, and photographer!

First stop was Golestan Palace - a 400 year old palace right in the heart of Tehran that was used right up until the Islamic Revolution. It is a beautiful complex, filled with old pictures and photography that gave a great glimpse into life before the revolution.

It was here that we came across a TV camera crew who wanted to interview me. I have no idea what it was about - I think they were a comedian act - all I had to do was stand and smile and answer their questions in broken English about my time in Iran. Fun fun fun! Imagine that - Hannah the TV star!

From the palace we wandered around town, taking photos of regular street life before heading to the National Museum (pretty good) and the National Jewelry Museum housed in a bank vault.

This was a spectacular museum with the most amazing jewelry I have seen (at least on par with those at the palace in Istanbul).

A whole globe made out of precious jewels, a throne, and the largest pink diamond in the world. Security was incredible, and of course, no cameras were allowed so no pictures.

After the drooling done at the museum we sat and drank juice at a cafe before heading home to talk some more. A thoroughly enjoyable day!

Another day was spent with an Iranian girl who went to my same university in Japan. Shiva invited me to her house for lunch - a feast served by servants! From there, Shiva her sister and I headed north of the city to the residence of the last Shah, the amazing Saad Abad Complex.

There are several palaces and museums in the complex - in the hills overlooking the city. It was such a lovely surrounding that its not wonder that the Shah had no idea that the Islamic Revolution was going on in the city below - if I was him I would have spent all my time here as well!

Another day was spent doing the rounds of the city. I visited the old US Embassy site where the staff were held hostage for 444 days. This for me was a highlight, I had been told not to even bother going, that it is just a wall.

But nobody told me the size of the complex (the 'wall' is about 200m long) and that the graffiti on it would be so amazing. Everywhere, mainly in Persian but also occasionally in English, were death to America slogans.

In many places were vivid drawings of the Statue of Liberty depicted as skull and crossbones. From there me and my guide for the day visited a small arts museum, the Contemporary Arts Museum (fantastic) ... and even Tehran University! Another lovely day learning more about Tehran and Iranians.

After four days of constant attention and sights, it was time for me to move on. To the most beautiful city in the world - Isfahan.

(Source: Tourists' personal blog)

# Ambitious filmmaker searching for his roots

## ◆ A review of Rafi Pitts's filmmaking career



Rafi Pitts looking for a bright future in the motherland

Compiled by our staff writers

Rafi Pitts (born 1967 in Mashad, Iran) is an internationally acclaimed Iranian film director.

Educated in France and England, Rafi Pitts belongs to the new wave of Iranian cinema, which received numerous prestigious prizes in the international festival circuit.

In 2006, he was nominated for Golden Bear award of Berlin film festival for his movie, "It's winter."

The following is written by Joan Dupont on Pitts's filmmaking career.

### Modern face of an imposing tradition

Iranian cinema, perceived in the West as a new force over the past decade, was not born yesterday.

The Festival d'Automne retrospective, programmed by critics from the Cahiers du Cinema, lifted a veil on the modern face of an imposing tradition — from Amir Naderi's early gangster genre to his magnificent "The Runner," and recent made-in-Manhattan movies, from Bahram Beyzai's anti-war cry, "Bashu, the Little Stranger," to a generation of young directors.

"The tradition is so rich," said the director Rafi Pitts, "that it's hard for my generation to make a first film. You have to escape so many influences to find your own writing, to be yourself."

The director made his mark with a comedy, "Season Five" in 1996, and has just completed a tragedy, "Sanam." After 17 years away from home, he made "Season Five," he said, "as a present to my country and to see if I was really Iranian. I found that the 17 years away meant nothing."

Adapted from a screenplay by Beyzai, the film takes place among villagers from warring clans who watch their leaders' schemes and ploys. "Each season counts to these people who work the land; the fifth season is something they've never known — the season of reconciliation.

"The film is set in Abyaneh, the oldest village in Iran — it's like a painting of my country. I wanted to make my people laugh; in hard times, Iranians like to laugh. My best time in an Iranian movie theater was when I heard a man say to his neighbor, 'I wonder what's going to happen next,' just before my screen character says, 'I wonder what's going to happen next.'"

The story opens with a wedding ceremony meant to reconcile the clans, interrupted when the groom repudiates his bride. "It's a couple at war who don't even know why they hate each other. We could have shot the film in Yugoslavia, in South Africa, Northern Ireland, or Palestine, but it had to be in Iran because of the woman character. People in the West think Iranian women are submissive — but you cannot submit an Iranian woman easily. I have a strong mother."

Born of a British father and Iranian mother who worked as an art director in film, Pitts was raised in the lap of cinema: the basement apartment of a post-production Tehran studio.

"I was lucky. My mother was only

17 when I was born. We are close, like sister and brother. My parents divorced when I was 5; my father didn't like living in Iran — he left." When he was eight, his mother told him he was offered the lead in "The Nightingale," a neo-realist film. "She wanted me to sign the contract myself, so I took a taxi to the producer's office and told him that instead of money, I wanted three things: a soccer ball, a dog and a bicycle — three things my mother didn't want me to have." His three wishes were granted, but he hated the acting job.

"They got me up at 4 a.m. to run across the desert as the sun rose. It took 10 days to get that shot with all of them crying, 'Run! Run!' When the producer took me to buy the bicycle, I rode off from the bazaar and got a glimpse of him in my rear-view mirror, a chubby man, running anxiously after me. I thought, someday, 'I'll make a movie and make him run every day.'"

Pitts lost the ball in a neighboring yard, the bicycle was stolen. "And I had to give the dog away when we left the country." After the revolution that toppled the Shah in 1979, "we came to Paris, but my mother thought it was good for me to attend school in London, which is how I grew up with three languages."

He studied film and photography at the Polytechnic School in Central London and went on to direct shorts, including "Salandar," a film in Russia. "The English aren't obsessed like the French with the history of film," he said. "They like documentaries and that's a good way to learn. You have to believe in yourself — 'Don't follow trends, make them,' Capra said.

"Season Five" was also the first Franco-Iranian co-production since the revolution. "My producer, Sophie Goupil, took a risk. A lot of people were against the project; the film was released after Khatami came to power." He was referring to Mohammed Khatami, who was elected president of Iran in 1997.

Pitts named his second film, "Sanam," after the heroine, played by Roya Nonahali, who played the injured bride in "Season Five." He set the movie in Ahmad Abad, his grandfather's village, near the border with Afghanistan. "I found Ismail Amini, who plays the child, by accident. It's not so easy to find a good child actor, and I was about to phone the producer to tell him we had to halt shooting, when I spotted this boy sitting next to the booth."

The film is about a widowed mother and the son's attachment to his rebel-hero father, shot as a horse thief. "The lack of the father is something I identify with. I try to be faithful to the child's point of view, which is why there's no music; the landscape is beautiful, but cold; music would have made it too warm."

"Sanam," with its theme of rebellion, would not have gotten permission to be made five years ago, he says, "because of the violence in

the characters, the tragic end." But the film has yet to be released. "Iranian film has been built on working within boundaries. I don't know what they would be like if you took those boundaries away. In Europe, too, you have boundaries: Films are funded by television and TV likes trends, certain scripts win favor over others, which can stifle creativity."

"People like to put things in boxes, to, say, 'art house' or 'commercial.' They see one Iranian film and if they dislike it, they say they don't like Iranian cinema, or if they love it, think they love Iranian cinema. Today, they think they love it, but the films you see have been chosen by Europeans who have always been interested in neo-realism."

Pitts now lives in Paris and Tehran but plans to make his next film back home. "I miss that city, it has a lot of life. I come from so many different backgrounds that borders don't fascinate me, only people. Films have no borders."

The following is written by Liz Braun on Pitts's landmark feature "Season Five."

### Not your typical Iranian film

"Season Five" is a sweet film about feuding villagers and a Romeo and Juliet-ish romance.

It is unusual, as Iranian movies go. It stars adults, rather than filtering a message through the activities of children, it has strong women characters, and it is often very funny.

In "Season Five," an age-old fight between the Jamalvandi and the Kamalvandi families is about to end with the marriage of their children. But the beautiful Mehrbanou (Roya Nonahali) and the handsome Karamat (Ali Sarkhani) never do tie the knot, and the wedding ceremony dissolves into tragedy, name-calling and cries for revenge. The feud is back on.

Then one day, Karamat shows up with a mini-bus, a novelty in the village. He intends to drive people back and forth to the city and thus make his fortune.

Mehrbanou is both jealous of his success and furious that he will put her cart-driving brother out of business.

She sells her land to buy a rival bus. Jamalvandi ride on one bus, Kamalvandi on the other. It does not take long for a major fight to break out on the road.

The hero and heroine of this piece circle each other, often trying to disguise their romantic interest in each other with anger. Eventually, one of them does the right thing.

The locals in "Season Five" -- the mayor, the men in the village square and particularly Karamat's sister -- contribute to the humor of the piece in subtle ways.

The screenplay from Iranian writer/director Bahram Beyzaie pokes fun at those who fight for reasons no one alive can quite remember -- or even care about.



## CELEBRITY

## Entezami, cinematic legend

Compiled by our staff writers

Ezzatollah Entezami (Born in 1924) began his artistic career in early 1940s, narrating stories at interludes in the playhouses. This valuable experience helped him write his thesis for a BA degree in acting from Tehran University's Faculty of Fine Arts on the theme of traditional narration of epic tales.

In 1954, Entezami went to the then West Germany to study at the School of Theater and Cinema in Hanover. One of his first works after returning to Iran in 1958 was a small dubbing job for the film "The man who suffered." He worked as an actor and a director in tens of stage and TV plays before he made his debut in cinema in 1968.

His stunning and moving performance in Dariush Mehrjui's 1969 film "Cow" as "Mashhadi Hassan" is still regarded as an exemplary role model in the Iranian cinema after more than 30 years.



Drawing on his extensive experience from stage acting and his natural gift, Entezami displayed a solid performance as the simple peasant mourning the loss of his beloved cow. In fact, his impressive role-playing made all audience forget that it was only play-acting, and brought him the Silver Hugo for acting from the 1971 Chicago Film Festival.

After starring in "Cow," Entezami went back to school at the Faculty of Fine Arts at Tehran University to continue his education. He knew any academic knowledge would be a benefit in realizing his potentials to create a different persona as an outstanding actor.

In 1970, Mehrjui invited Entezami to appear in his next movie "Mr. Simpleton." His unexpected success in this role, which was completely different from his previous one, eliminated the notion of the accidental success of the "Cow."

Up until the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Entezami took on more than 15 movies, excelling in parts such as the master sergeant in "Sadegh the Kurd," the feudal landowner in the "Postman," the blood dealer in "The Cycle" and many other memorable characters.

In the post revolution era and with the fundamental transformation in the filmmaking industry in Iran, the quality of many cinematic fields including acting started a progressively growing trend.

Entezami took his career even more seriously than before, and became more selective in choosing the parts he would play.

Consequently, he appeared in a series of various yet completely believable roles during these years, such as Namdar Khan in "The Stone Lion," Abbas Agha of the butchery in "The Tenants," Khan Muzaffar in the "Hezar Dastan" TV series, the Qajar kings Muzaffar al-Din Shah and Nasser al-Din Shah in "Once Upon a Time, Cinema," and the aging factory owner in "The Blue-Veiled."

Ezzatollah Entezami has managed to attract the jury attention in four Fajr Film Festivals and has won the Diploma of Honor and the Crystal Phoenix for best acting in 1988, 1991, 1993, and 2001.