

## UNDER WESTERN EYES



## Bleary eyed in Tehran

(Part 2)  
By Skiwiman

My head was still asleep apart from the eye and motor-function department (and even they weren't fully staffed) as I stumbled to the shower after a far from restful two and a half hours sleep - having collapsed on my bed at 4.30 am, shortly after checking in.

Trying to sleep in the greenhouse conditions (Iranians seem to like their rooms the tropical side of comfortable) was not easy.

Still when it came to the morning briefing, the subdued group of 17 (Russ had still to appear) we were charged for our US\$ 150 local payment. Bang went another US \$50. At this rate of going I'll be out of money and I haven't even left the hotel!

Our paddy wagon (christened as such by me as it was a pea green color and there were three Irish on the trip. No logic whatsoever, but it worked for me!) collected us once again - having done so at the airport, although it could have been pink with a large bow on the front and I wouldn't have noticed, I was so tired. Mohammad was our soon to be much-revered driver. His assistant was also called Mohammad, and so began the legend of Mohammad No. 1 and Mohammad No. 2.

Driving a car in Tehran is akin to the children's cartoon, The Whacky Races. Imagine driving a large coach!

As the guidebook rightly indicates, you initially think the drivers are crazy, but it takes a special skill to drive in country where anything appears to go and rules of the road are for weak-willed Westerners, and not have utter carnage on the roads! Taxis weave in and out of lanes. Cars overtake stationary buses and then turn left in front of the bus. And pedestrians....



PADDY WAGON

Well, there are pedestrian crossings.

Okay. That does not however mean that the cars will actually stop. Three of the lanes may stop, but the other two will simply drive on without slowing down. Simply stepping out when the green walking man appears on the opposite light is likely to get you a stay in the local hospital - or worse!

Crossing the road where there is no pedestrian crossing requires a special act of bravery. Jaywalking is too weak a phrase to describe crossing a four-lane road, which the Iranian drivers have turned into five lanes all by themselves, where the traffic is still moving.

The trick seems to be to make eye contact and hold your hand in a semi-brave "stop" action at the driver. Most (note, not all) will stop or at least slow down to give you a fighting chance of escaping unscathed. Makes you feel alive!

First on the agenda was the Tehran Gate which was the original entrance gate to the city of Tehran. The architecture was really rather impressive as was the background mountains with their snow-capped peaks.

The National Museum was next with rather clinically presented artifacts from the numerous historical sites around Iran such as Persepolis and Susa. I was clinically presented as they were mostly in glass cases, but they did have English signage.

The various artifacts did "sell" themselves though, and you were amazed by the level of skill, artistry and detail in items small and large which were created hundreds and indeed some were 1500 years old. I had my first brush with the friendly locals when an elderly man asked me where I was from. He was most pleased that I wasn't in Iran on business and he said he hoped I had a very happy time in Iran.

The Golestan Palace was next on the agenda. This is a complex of fine buildings with ornate decoration and tiling which according to the guidebook is a "monument to the glories and excesses of the Qajar rulers."

It was all very impressive and good to photograph but my lack of sleep was ruling my enjoyment of the day. I did enjoy the Ethnographical Museum within the complex which had "tableaux" of various scenes such as a Qajar wedding and one of a teahouse (big respect to those tea drinkers!).

I can't recall now at what point luncheon fitted in, but we were carted off to the Ferdosi hotel where we had the option of a buffet lunch. Cost - R100,000 (or US \$10 for you and me).

Now this may not seem like the most forbidding of sums, but when the tour guide has told you during the day that you're going to need about US\$ 500 just for food and drinks and you've only got US\$ 478 in your wallet, then the sum of \$10 just for lunch starts to be of concern. A tired mind, as I'm at risk of being repetitive, was not a great help at that stage in working out just how much money actually would be needed. More of that later.

Well if you like rabbit food the buffet was fine. If, like me you like meat of whatever variety then very small chicken legs brought seemingly randomly to the buffet table, and even then in small quantities, then the buffet was far from ideal.

(Source: Tourists' personal blog)  
(To be Contd.)

# Exemplary commercial comedy

◆ A review of "The Lizard" directed by Kamal Tabrizi



Compiled by our staff writers

"The Lizard" (2004) is a blockbuster feature film directed by Kamal Tabrizi, and written by Peyman Ghassemkhani.

Parviz Parastui, Rana Azadvar, Mehran Najafi, and Shahrokh Forutani starred in the hit.

The feature won the Audience Award for the Best Film and the Crystal Simorgh for the Best Screenplay at the 2004 Iran Fajr Film Festival.

Some distinguished critics such as Deborah Young, Jonathan Curiel, and Paul Hurlley have written the following reviews on the film.

### Satirical and impressive hit

Audience award winner at 2004 Fajr festival in Tehran and a national hit, "The Lizard" is exemplary commercial comedy fare. Story of a con who breaks out of prison in priest's clothing, pic points an accusing finger at religious excesses while respecting the spirit of Islam.

Western audiences should have no trouble with the message and thoroughly enjoy this curiosity item, which is much more accessible than most Iranian art films if admittedly hard to place outside TV and DVD markets. It will make a fun filler item for festivals.

Reza the Lizard (Parviz Parastui), so-called because of his remarkable ability to scale walls, is a professional burglar sentenced to life imprisonment. A tough, smart guy who talks in underworld argot, he is brought to the verge of suicide by the prison warden's unjust punishments. The latter's sanctimonious attitude is a mockery of the "spiritual cure" he purports to offer the inmates.

Reza happens to meet a good clergy in the infirmary. Seizing the opportunity (perhaps deliberately given) to don his priestly robes, turban, and sunglasses, Reza waltzes out the doors of the prison to freedom. The first gag is that no cabbie will pick him up, and the one who finally stops drives him in the opposite direction. Reza, however, pays him back by stealing his wallet.

Arranging to pick up a false passport, he heads for the border still dressed as a priest. A series of comic misunderstandings on the train, which are well-handled by director Kamal Tabrizi, ends with him being taken to a mosque by a group of ecstatic believers, who mistake him for a clergy they were expecting (we later learn the real one has suddenly died).

The scent of miracles is already in the air, and soon Reza is being hailed as a saint who roams about at night distributing money to the poor. In reality, he's just trying to get hold of his passport. His misinterpreted "example" inspires the whole town to good deeds, before the evil warden gets on his trail.

Funniest set piece involves Reza trying to prevent a brute from killing

his wife by scaling the wall of their house and beating the man up. Another good gag, a bit overused, has a young student posing an endless series of senseless questions about the behavior Muslims should adopt when at the North Pole or in outer space. Reza's down-to-earth, humanitarian advice is clearly endorsed by the film.

Parastui, unexpectedly serious in the main role, stands out in a cast of boldly drawn characters. Tech credits are basic but adequate.

### A mildly funny film

The most shocking film from Iran in recent years has little violence and virtually no profane language. "The Lizard" doesn't need any of this to accomplish its goal: satirize Iranian society through a character who's an escaped convict.

The man on the run puts on clerical garb and masquerades as a clergy, fooling prison authorities, mosque worshipers, teenage revelers -- anyone he happens to meet on his road to the border and what he hopes is permanent freedom.

A funny thing happens along the way, though: This tattooed, tough-talking robber named Reza stumbles into becoming the prayer leader at a small-town mosque, and every time he tries to leave the town, circumstances push him back. Some of the movie's most hilarious scenes happen when Reza has to fake his way through religious services.

"In the name of God, I'm very happy to be present in this radiant crowd," he says during his first sermon, whose topic is "the different paths" that lead to God. "Imagine you want to enter a house, OK?" Reza continues to his enraptured audience. "There are several ways -- you can use the key and open the door. But if you don't have a key, the other option is a master key. And if you don't have a master key, you can use a piece of wire clippers, a screwdriver, or you may climb the wall and use a rope."

The worshipers assume Reza's story is metaphorical, not based on his actual experience as a thief. The movie's tension (and laughter) stem from the idea that Reza's identity could be discovered at any moment -- if not by the worshipers, then by the police who are in pursuit of him.

Upon its release in Iran, "The Lizard" became the most popular film in that country.

The depth of the movie's satire is debatable. Director Kamal Tabrizi has said his film ultimately shows that religion and redemption are possible, and indeed, Parastui's character changes his views over the course of the film. But along the way, we see how a phony clergy is lionized by a public that treats him the way Americans treat their rock stars. And we see some of the double standards and contradictions that exist in Iran.

By Hollywood standards, "The Liz-

ard" would be considered a mildly funny film. This is an Iran where comedy -- not tragedy -- fills the void for once.

### A memorable treat

"The Lizard" mixes satire and drama in a tale told through the eyes of an escaped convict. This often very funny and thought-provoking film has a Woody Allen feel about it and its deftly comic touch makes it a memorable treat.

Parastui, a comedy legend in his native country, plays Reza, the title character, a perpetual thief who at the beginning of the film is beginning another lengthy stay in an unappetizing Iranian prison. When he is taken ill and finds himself sharing a hospital ward with a local cleric he spots his chance. Stealing the clergy's robes, he stroll out of the prison and into Tehran where a friend promises to arrange some documents to get him out of the country.

In order to obtain the documents, Reza has to travel to a remote village near the border and here the comic adventures begins. The locals immediately take him for a visiting preacher and whisk him off to the mosque for a sermon. They are devout, naive and delighted that such an important visitor has chosen to speak to them. Perplexed by the unusual situation he finds himself in, Reza haltingly delivers his first sermon, and uses his background as a burglar to inform his words. Heaven is a house, he explains, which can be entered in many ways: by the front door, the fence, the chimney or with a false key. This is all lapped up by an eager and receptive audience.

Reza soon instills himself into the comfortable surroundings he is offered, barely concealing his love for the mayor's daughter, and all the time offering cryptic messages to his public who hang on his every word. Possibly the funniest moment is a truly seminal speech on the nature of space travel, although by now one or two of his audience are slowly becoming suspicious. Added to that, his documents still haven't turned up and the prison governor is personally on his trail.

Kamal Tabrizi's film is full of gentle laughs, and engaging throughout. He doesn't mock Islam as such but instead the universal way in which religious beliefs are misunderstood. "The Lizard" could have been made about Christianity, Judaism or Islam.

Parviz Parastui in the film has an effortlessly charismatic lead, and the quality of performances from a presumably local cast is also notable. Films from this part of the world are few and far between in the West, and when they arrive they are usually overpraised, but this is the real deal, and if any sharp Hollywood executive is looking for material for a potential remake, they could do a lot worse.



## CELEBRITY

## Soomekh, talent personified

Compiled by our staff writers

Bahar Soomekh (born 1975 in Tehran) is an Iranian-American Screen Actors Guild Award-winning actress and environmental activist.

She began acting in the early 2000s, and is perhaps best known for her film roles in the films "Crash" (2004), "Mission: Impossible III" (2006), and "Saw III" (2006).

Bahar speaks fluent English, Persian, and Spanish. She attended Beverly Hills High School, where she played the violin in the school orchestra.

She had played the violin for 13 years. Bahar got her degree in environmental studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara. After university, she traveled throughout Europe.

Due to some financial constraints, she took on some corporate jobs, but she wanted to pursue her real passion, acting. So she took acting classes at night from 7 p.m. to 2 a.m. before quitting her job to pursue a full-time acting career.

In the beginning of her career, in the years 2002-2004, Soomekh has guest starred on several television shows, including two different roles on "JAG".

Bahar has later appeared in several films, including Academy Award-winning movies "Crash" (2004) as Dorri, and "Syriana" (2005) as Yassi. The whole cast of "Crash" had won the Screen Actors Guild Award for Outstanding Cast in a Motion Picture.

Bahar got some more attention playing Davian's translator in "Mission: Impossible III" (2006).

She had one of the lead roles in the horror film "Saw III," which began filming in May and was theatrically released on October 27, 2006.

In the same year, she portrayed Margo on the television series "Day Break." Recently, she got one of the lead roles as Hollis in the television series, "The Oaks," which will come out in 2008.

### Activism

She also works on environmental and children's causes. Soomekh also uses her name to be involved with organizations like the "Green Cross."

"I have the ability to use my name and be involved with such phenomenal organizations like the "Green Cross" and the "Rainforest Action Network" (RAN), which was an organization I started raising money for when I was a kid, and then here I am coming back and I'm working with them now," Soomekh says.

"But also a huge issue for me has become limb deficiency for kids around the world. Kids that are neglected because of some sort of disability—you see that a lot in China and you see that in Africa—I think that's a very important thing."

With her husband, she launched the T.O. Productions to make movies about environmental and social issues.

### Filmography

- "Without a Trace" (TV) (2002)
- "JAG" (TV) (2004)
- "Intermission Hair Wearer" (2004)
- "A Lousy Ten Grand" (TV) (2005)
- "In Justice" (TV) (2006)
- "Mission: Impossible III" (2006)
- "Day Break" (TV) (2006-2007)
- "Saw IV" (2007)
- "The Oaks Hollis" (2008)