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Breaking the Rules in Iran: Ali Soozandeh Talks 'Tehran Taboo' in Cannes

06/12/2017 08:40 am ET



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At times, our collective ignorance about the country of Iran baffles me. In fact, it downright infuriates me, like when I watched some CNN anchors talking in circles during the recent hostage situation unfolding in the Tehran Parliament. While we look at this nation located at a central, strategic point in the Middle East, we forget, or perhaps refuse to take into account its people.

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Varied, many and all bleeding the same color blood as us — red! — Iranians make up a complex society where rules are many and breaking them has become almost a national sport. Iranian-born filmmaker Ali Soozandeh, who has been living in Germany since 1995, details a few of the conventions and the rule breakers in his latest film 'Tehran Taboo' which premiered at the [Semaine de la Critique](#) this year in Cannes. And you won't believe who the "bad guys" are.

'Tehran Taboo' is a spellbinding animated journey into the underbelly of Iranian society where nothing is what it seems from the outside. It would pay US media to watch films like Soozandeh's once in a while. In fact, it would pay us all to do so, since we could walk away enriched by its wisdom. But the filmmaker's genius here lies not in preaching, rather in thoroughly entertaining us, from the delicious rotoscope animation to the powerful use of characters that jump off the screen and into our conscience.

Just one recommendation, don't think 'Persepolis' or you'll be sorely disappointed. 'Tehran Taboo' lets go of the sentimental — I loved 'Persepolis' but sometimes wonder if that aspect of life in Iran could still exist today — and deals with the gritty, the streetwise and darker side of Iranian society, one that although hidden is very much present.

I sat down with Ali Soozandeh in Cannes, two other journalists joining us on the roundtable as well. I have to admit that even from esteemed



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colleagues, who typically ask insightful questions, I heard standards like “Did you give it this title so people would know right away what it’s about?” and “Are people in Iran aware of the film playing here?”

Well, OK, it left more room for me to ask away my typical, “Can cinema save the world?” questions.



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How did this project begin?

Ali Soozandeh: I was born in Iran and I grew up there and when I look back on my time there is always a big question mark in my head “why is sexuality such a big taboo in Iran?” Because we all do it and we all know about it but no one talks about it which eventually leads to a lot of social problems. And the initiative for writing this script was when I heard two young Iranians talk on a train about the experiences they have with women in Iran. One story was about a prostitute who was working with her child coming along which is what kind of kicked it off.

Your female character has a very Anna Magnani quality to her, sultry and uncharacteristically beautiful. Who did you base her on, if anyone?

Soozandeh: The story is fictitious and so are the characters, but when you start writing you automatically start putting your own experiences into the script. And that’s without being aware. I did base it on characters I knew and they didn’t even come out the way I imagined them in my head. But it’s the underlying influences I’ve had which influenced the characters.

When did you leave Iran and you must know that by making this film you would not go back, at least not under the current regime...

Soozandeh: 1995 I left Iran and went to Germany and I’ve been in Germany ever since. I know I can’t go back after shooting this film but that’s not really what is important to me. What was important to me was to address these topics of

society and the role we each have in society and the roles we play in creating those boundaries in our head.

Do you believe cinema can help change the world?

Soozandeh: I do believe film can change. However the changes are in asking questions. Film can't give any answers but it can make the audience think. And that's a start that will eventually help to change the society.

Although the film takes place in Iran and deals with the taboos there, it does relate to any personal taboo we may have, anywhere around the world. Did you plan on making such a universal film?

Soozandeh: I believe eventually people's dreams and problems are all the same all around. However it's the circumstances and backgrounds that change and I think you could identify with the characters. Everybody initially will have had problems like that but I wanted to tell it in Iran because I know Iran and it's part of me — but I do think it's universal problems.

Lets imagine that a person comes in to see your film and can only walk away with one specific image or one message from your film — what would you want that to be?

Soozandeh: I think that would be the first scene when the driver is with the prostitute and then he sees his daughter on the street with another man. That's the image of the double morality in society

which I think a lot of Iranians can identify with.

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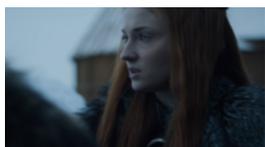
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