

Source URL: <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/tehran-taboo-review-1005818>

# 'Tehran Taboo': Film Review | Cannes 2017

3:02 PM PDT 5/20/2017 by Deborah Young

•



Courtesy of Cannes Film Festival  
Elmira Rafizadeh in 'Tehran Taboo.'

## The Bottom Line

An audacious, if somewhat didactic, debut.

## The many sexual taboos of the Islamic Republic of Iran come under scrutiny in Ali Soozandeh's first feature animation.

Animation proves a cunning technical choice in the German-Austrian production *Tehran Taboo*, a first feature written and directed by Ali Soozandeh. Like Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud's 2007 *Persepolis*, it offers just enough distance to explore the highly charged theme of sexual and personal freedom in Iran without salaciousness. Women are the main victims here, whether married, divorced or single, and their lives are depicted as pure tragedy.

Every scene makes a political point about the religious and political repression of personal life in Iran so that at times it feels that the screenplay is built around opportunities to tick off the long list of repressive laws and social norms. While its frank approach is refreshing, there is a sense of too much. Certainly, the fact that the Iranian-born director is now a German citizen gives him much greater freedom to speak out than, say, Mohammad Rasoulof or Jafar Panahi, who have both been in jail in Iran. All told, it's an audacious debut that could pique the curiosity of audiences beyond festivals after its Critics Week bow.

The sex lives of a prostitute, a musician and two young women intersect in the well-written script. The characters spring to life in a particularly fine example of rotoscoping shot by Austrian DP Martin Gschlacht (*Goodnight Mommy*). This animation technique starts off with live actors, who are redrawn by computers. In addition to the realism of the faces and expressions, there is the advantage of anonymity. Consider that the opening scene shows a heavily made-up prostitute, Pari (Elmira Rafizadeh), giving a blow job to a man while he drives around town, with her small son sitting in the back seat. This would be much more shocking to watch with live action.

Far from the usual victimized streetwalker, Pari embodies the truth that no repressive system can completely quell the human spirit. There's something that recalls Anna Magnani's earthiness and great heart in Rafizadeh's many-hued performance. Pari's backstory is a failed marriage to a drug addict who is now in prison. When she tries to get a judge (Hasan Ali Mete) in the Islamic Revolutionary Court to sign her divorce papers, he barter his signature for a concubine arrangement. She moves into an apartment he owns with little Elias, which is not such a bad deal.

The neighbors, who are strangely naïve about her profession, include a young couple about to have their first baby. Sara (Zara Amir Ebrahimi) and her banker husband Mohsen (Alireza Bayram) are not as happy as they seem, however; she longs for a job that will get her out of her in-laws' house, while he wants her to be a hausfrau. Her budding friendship with Pari feels relaxed and natural, but it leads to a terrible mistake that comes back to haunt her.

A third story belongs to talented young musician Babak (Arash Marandi), who we find earning some money in a night spot for pill-popping 24-hour party people. He gets it on in the toilet with a pretty girl, Donya (Negar Mona Alizadeh), only to find himself in hot water the next morning. She lost her virginity with him and urgently needs to get it back before she marries a big bruiser the following week. His frantic search for money and a doctor to sew her up comes off as rather farcical, despite its intended drama.

There is nothing here that hasn't been seen before in other forward-looking Iranian films. The public hanging of convicts on the main streets of the city, which is quite a shocker, first appeared in Reza Dormishian's *I'm Not Angry!* and drugs and prostitution have become staples of social cinema. But never, perhaps, has there been such a compendium of grievances. What is missing is a glimpse of the flowers growing amid the garbage, some sign that love exists, or why many people still choose to live in Tehran.

*Production companies: Little Dream Entertainment, Coop99 Filmproduktion*

*Cast: Elmira Rafizadeh, Zara Amir Ebrahimi, Arash Marandi, Bilal Yasar, Negar Mona Alizadeh, Payam Madjlessi*

*Director, screenwriter: Ali Soozandeh*

*Producers: Frank Geiger, Ali Samadi Ahadi, Mark Fencerm Armin Hofmann, Antonin Svoboda, Bruno Wagner*

*Director of photography: Martin Gschlacht*

*Production designer: Ali Soozandeh*

*Editors: Frank Geiger, Andrea Martens*

*Music: Ali N. Askin*

*World sales: Celluloid Dreams*

*Venue: Cannes Film Festival, Critics Week*

*96 minutes*