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1226 N Salsipuedes Unit C 1(805)704-5994 |https://hollywoodglee.com Larry@HollywoodGlee.com

Censored Mohsen Makhmalbaf film to open Venice Classics

Description

The **opening film** of the **Venice Classics** section of the **73rd Venice International Film Festival** (August 31st â?? September 10th) is ***Shabhaye Zayandeh â?? rood (The Nights of Zayandeh â?? rood)*** by **Mohsen Makhmalbaf** (Thursday 1 September, 3:00 pm, Sala Giardino; Friday 2 September, 9:30 am, Sala Volpi).
This is a film that the director made in Iran in 1990. At the time, the Iranian censorship committee decreed that the film betrayed the spirit of the Iranian revolution and so cut 37 minutes out of the original negative. Even the mutilated version was banned however and all public screenings were prohibited; furthermore, no copies of the film were allowed to be made. In 2016 some parts of the original negative were found in the archives of the Iranian censorship committee. The copy, restored by **Makhmalbaf** himself, is 63 minutes long instead of the original 100. The missing parts have been lost forever.
Mohsen Makhmalbaf has sent the following account of the story surrounding this film.

Itâ??s easy to silence the filmmaker, but itâ??s impossible to suppress the cinema
by Mohsen Makhmalbaf

*I made **The Nights of Zayandeh-rood** in 1990 (about 26 years ago) in Iran. After watching the film, the censorship committee in Iran asked me to cut out 25 minutes from the film in order to obtain the screening permission. I refused to accept their order. Nevertheless the committee themselves, having ignored my demand, cut those 25 minutes from the original negative of the film.*

I was so heartbroken and frustrated, that I couldnâ??t think of watching the film with the audience in the cinema. It would have felt like going to see a mutilated and maimed body of a living thing on the screen.

Having heard the censorship news, people poured in tens of thousands to watch the film at its premiere during the Fajr Film Festival in Iran. They lined for kilometres outside the cinemas during the screening day. Some had waited through the whole night until morning to be able to get into the theatre to see the film. Those who managed to watch it, liked the film and perceived the message behind it. In the film, they saw the horrible and sad future which the Islamic government was going to bring for them.

After the festival, the censorship committee asked me to cut a further 12 minutes from the film. Once more I declined, and again the cutting was done without my approval. So the authorities reduced the 100 minutes of the original film into a version of just 63 minutes!

After the festival, the film became well known, and many demanded its screening. However the hard line media belonging to the state, put me and the film under constant attacks and accusations for a full six months! Some even demanded my execution. Eventually I was arrested by the secret police and after long hours of interrogation, all the film material was seized by them.

Finally the Iranian supreme leader wanted to see the film. He watched the film in a private screening in his office. Then he accused it of being against the revolutionary objectives and a threat to national security. Therefore he put a ban order on the film and gave the mutilated negative to the censorship committee to be kept in the archives forever. Subsequently The Nights of Zayandeh-rood was never released from the archives to be screened in any film festival, in or out of Iran. Nor could it be shown to the public.

Twenty six years later (in 2016), the existing negative was stolen and saved from the censorship archives. (I canâ??t give any details about how this was done.) When after twenty six years I watched the film again, I was surprised to notice that in spite of all the mutilations (nearly one third of the film), the story and the main structure of the film still remained rather unharmed. The film looked like a living thing with no limbs but it was still breathing, and its story and meaning were not lost.
I decided to work on what I had recovered from the remaining negative and the sounds in London. I managed to make the film ready for the screening and sent it to the Venice Film Festival. However the Festival had passed its submission date and was about to announce its lineup and I didnâ??t expect it to have any chance of being selected this year. Nevertheless, a few hours after the film was sent, I received the following email from Mr. Alberto Barbera, the director of Venice Film Festival.

â??Iâ??ve just finished watching your beautiful film and am deeply moved! It is really strong, audacious and touching. Thinking that the film has been slaughtered and cut down to 63 minutes makes me crazy! I can only imagine how even greater was the original version. I definitely want to present it in Veniceâ?¦â?•

After reading Mr. Barberaâ??s words, it felt like the film had been given a new life. I remembered the day all those years ago, when the Iranian supreme leader had sent someone from his office to me. His

messenger was a clergy man (Mullah), and he was there to make threats about my execution. I replied to him: â??Itâ??s easy to silence the filmmaker, but itâ??s impossible to suppress the cinema.â?•

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Mohsen MAKHMALBAF
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Category

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