

Friday, October 17th 2014

The Past (12a)

dir: Asghar Farhadi

starring: Bérénice Bejo, Tahar Rahim, Ali Mosaffa

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The Past, shot in France by Iranian director Asghar Farhadi, is his much anticipated follow-up to the award-winning *A Separation* (2011) and his first film made outside Iran. Like the earlier film, *The Past* is a family drama, a slowly unfolding yet intense tale with several revelations in store and it similarly deploys superb performances from all the actors, including the children. More surprising is the dexterity with which Farhadi films Paris and its suburbs, offering a view at once realistically familiar and unexpected.

The film begins with the reunion of Marie (Bérénice Bejo) and Ahmad (Ali Mosaffa) at Charles de Gaulle airport. She has summoned him from Iran ostensibly to complete their divorce proceedings following their separation several years earlier. From the very beginning, the *mise en scène* instils a feeling of tension. Though Marie and Ahmad are civil to each other, the details of their meeting tell another story: the panes of glass that separate them at the airport, the silences and gazes they exchange in the car, the discreet but insistent evocation of small problems on the road and parking on the trip to her home, the pouring rain outside. Their arrival at Marie's house, in a quiet suburban cul-de-sac next to a railway line, continues this theme. Two young children play in a messy garden, their bicycle chain broken: they are Léa (Jeanne Jestin), Marie's daughter, and Fouad (Elyes Aguis), the son of Samir (Tahar Rahim) her new lover, whose child she is expecting. The broken chain, the clutter of the garden, the house in the process of being redecorated, the arguments about who sleeps in which bed – again, all these things economically suggest the complex and volatile nature of the relationships between the different members of this modern *famille recomposée*. Similarly, the theme of the hold of the past over the present, announced in the film's title, is brilliantly woven through the décor and myriad incidents: the new paint on the walls, which is an attempt to erase Ahmad's presence but which stubbornly sticks to him; Ahmad's belongings in the shed; the stain on a dress that, as in a fairytale, will not go away; the memory of Samir's cologne that may yet awaken Céline, his wife (Aleksandra Klebanska, from her coma.

Ahmad is from the start a calming, avuncular figure (none of the children is his) and he succeeds in quietly asserting his authority, especially when Marie asks him to talk to her rebellious teenage daughter Lucie (Pauline Burlet). Actually and symbolically,



Ahmad is the fixer: the one who mends bikes, unblocks drains, mops up spilt paint, puts a bandage on a child's finger and even cooks dinner, while Marie ineffectually screams at the kids or is away at work. Although Marie is portrayed – for instance in the film's posters – as the central character caught between two men (Bejo received the Best Actress prize at Cannes), the story is in fact told in two major movements, first from Ahmad's point of view and then from Samir's. It is the two men, who in a series of beautifully orchestrated revelations, gradually unveil the painful mystery at the heart of the narrative – the suicide attempt by Samir's wife Céline that has left her in a coma.

Despite its nuanced depiction of complex emotions – from affection to, more often, fear, anger or resentment – the film does not escape gender stereotyping. The men resemble each other physically and in their behaviour – they are dark, bearded, with a calm, authoritative demeanour – while Marie and Lucie are both tall, long-haired beauties prone to hysterics, tears and violent outbursts of emotion. We are told that Ahmad deserted Marie four years earlier and has been unreliable since; she reproaches him several times for failing to turn up in response to her call the previous year. Yet what we witness on screen is his impeccable behaviour in the present, and in the absence of access to Marie's subjectivity it is hard for the viewer to imagine otherwise. Similarly, while the two men almost immediately get on, the burden of guilt for Céline's suicide shifts between Marie, Lucie and eventually Naïma (Sabrina Ouazani), Samir's employee, who are in effect pitted against each other. Samir's part in this, meanwhile, is erased by the strong last image of his hand clenched by Céline's.

Farhadi has been hailed before for the strength of his actors' performances, and *The Past* confirms his talent in this direction. Using his experience from the stage, he puts his actors through lengthy rehearsals and in a Method-like way encourages them to imagine the past and background of the characters they play. The result is stunning and, if Bejo deserves her Cannes award, Mosaffa and Rahim certainly merit equal acclaim for their performances of quiet yet powerful intensity. The children's

Synopsis: Paris, the present. Ahmad arrives from his native Iran to finalise his divorce from Marie, his French ex. Marie, who works in a chemist's shop in Paris, lives in the working-class suburb of Sevran, north-east of the capital, with her daughters Léa and Lucie (from a different father), new lover Samir (whose child she is expecting) and his young son Fouad. Tensions between Marie and teenager Lucie centre on the latter's refusal to accept Samir's presence. Marie asks Ahmad to intervene. He discovers that Samir's wife Céline has been in a coma for months, following a suicide attempt apparently provoked by the revelation of Samir's affair with Marie. After Ahmad tells Lucie that her mother is pregnant, she leaves home one night. When Ahmad finds her at the home of his Iranian friend Shahryar, she tells him that she brought the affair to light by sending Marie and Samir's email exchanges to Céline. Samir and Fouad move out of Marie's home and go back to their apartment in Paris, above his dry-cleaning business. Marie and Lucie have a violent fight but are eventually reconciled. Later it becomes clear that it was Samir's employee Naïma who informed Céline of the affair. Samir visits Céline in hospital to test whether she recognises his cologne; the film ends with her hand apparently gripping his.

Credits: (selected)

Marie: Bérénice Bejo

Ahmad: Ali Mosaffa

Samir: Tahar Rahim

Lucie: Pauline Burlet

Léa: Jeanne Jestin

Naïma: Sabrina Ouazani

Director/writer: Asghar Farhadi

Screenplay: Messoumeh Lahdi

DoP: Mahmoud Kalari

Editor: Juliette Welling

France/Italy 2013. 130 mins

Lincoln Film Society

Patron: Jim Broadbent

acting is impressive too, especially Elyes Aguis as Fouad. (One scene is particularly poignant, as Samir and Fouad argue in the Métro, the two closely framed in long takes.) Despite being a foreigner to the French language, Farhadi has also succeeded in assembling a subtle array of oral tonalities, from the unaccented French of Marie and Lucie to the faint echo of North Africa in Samir's speech and the stronger one in Naïma's as well as Ahmad's Iranian accent. Indeed, Naïma's accented voice, as opposed to the 'French' voice of Céline (as we are told, since we never see her), is the ultimate clue to the mystery of the suicide bid.

The Past evokes Paris and its suburbs in ways that transcend cliché. The suburb of Sevran where Marie lives on the (real) Rue de Paris, far to the north-east of the city, is one of France's poorest places. Yet Farhadi avoids the stereotypical *banlieu* depiction of tower blocks and graffiti-covered walls familiar from such films as *La Haine* (1995). We see a slightly run-down yet not miserable street, with small detached pavilions surrounded by gardens; it is the habitat of many people in the suburbs of Paris, who may find themselves cheek-by-jowl with the more deprived and 'difficult' housing estates but who live ordinary lives – as does Marie, working for a chemist in Paris. By contrast, scenes around the chemist's and Samir's dry-cleaning business display as background the classic visual grammar of tall Parisian buildings and tree-lined avenues, but without dwelling on them or turning them into a spectacle. Farhadi has said he wanted to avoid a tourist's view of the city and he has succeeded. The interiors of Marie's and Samir's homes equally plausibly evoke 'ordinary' households that are neither picturesque nor depressing.

French critics, who have enthusiastically embraced the film, have compared the film to Claude Sautet and Maurice Pialat. High praise indeed, but as demonstrated by *The Past*, the Iranian director is more incisive than the former and less abrasive than the latter. In its representation of Paris and its suburbs, and also in its combinations of emotional melodrama, family saga and suspenseful narrative, *The Past* is, in many ways more acute about 'ordinary' people in contemporary France than many French films.

A conversation with Asghar Farhadi

(Liam Lacey, *The Globe and Mail* - condensed and edited.)

*Iranian cinema sometimes seems to draw more from documentaries and poetry than conventional narrative sources such as novels, but that's not the case with director Asghar Farhadi, whose 2011 film *A Separation* was the first Iranian film to win the Oscar for best foreign film.*

*Farhadi's plots, with their chains of consequences and flawed characters, often suggest the influence of European dramatists such as Anton Chekhov and Henrik Ibsen, whose work he has directed for the stage. The 41-year-old filmmaker's sixth film, *The Past*, is his first set outside his homeland, had a substantially bigger budget and presented the challenge of working in French,*

*which he doesn't speak. The story follows Ahmad (Ali Mosaffa), an Iranian who arrives in France after a four-year absence to finalize his divorce from his estranged wife, Marie (Bérénice Bejo), but soon finds himself entangled in a net of troubling family secrets. Farhadi spoke with *The Globe and Mail* at the Toronto International Film Festival through an interpreter.*

Let's start with the 2011 Oscar. What did it mean to your career? Did you get more scripts and offers to work outside Iran?

*Even before I won the Oscar, I had offers from outside, including for making *The Past*. But after the Oscar, they multiplied. That didn't really change anything for me. It just made more work for my agent.*

How difficult was it for you to direct in a foreign language?

I had a translation team with me. The process of translating and changing the script from Persian to French was a long process. It's true that I don't speak French but I knew exactly what my characters were talking about. To make the film, I lived two years in France and I got used to the melody and rhythm of the language. I also had 12 members of my crew who were Iranian, including my cinematographer and my sound mixer. When we were rehearsing, the problem of the language completely disappeared and by the time we got to the shooting, we had absolutely no problem.

What are the other main differences between working in Paris rather than Tehran?

*The budget was much different. This movie cost about €8-million [\$12-million] while my last film in Iran cost €800,000. But I feel very at home in France, which is the second-largest audience for my films outside Iran. People stop me on the street in Paris to ask me about my work, and because I'm so familiar with the country through cinema, I feel I know it. At the same time, I was very careful that *The Past* didn't show the cliché Paris of the cinema. The house of the main character was in the suburbs and, this way, I could stay away from the touristy side of Paris.*

You went through a three-month rehearsal period, which seems long, especially for holding in-demand actors. We tend to associate Iranian art cinema more with non-professional performers. Can you talk a bit about the differences?

*I rehearse eight months at home, so this was actually short for me. I found that even really big actors really like the rehearsal process. In Iran, there are also films that use professional actors, though they're probably not always the ones seen outside of the country. In my earlier films I used non-actors but in my later films, I prefer to use professionals. The more complex your characters become, the more you need pros. I don't think the characters in *The Past* could have been played by non-professionals.*

Your films don't have overtly political themes. But have you struggled with some of the same censorship issues of your filmmaking compatriots?

On every film in Iran, you have to submit the screenplay to be approved; but if you live there, you kind of know how to manoeuvre through the process and more or less make the film you want to make. All the films I've made, I completely have faith in them. I promise you there isn't a shot in them that I don't like.

Our next film: Friday October 31st, 7.30pm Locke (15)

Making a funding pitch for *Locke* must have been a real challenge for director Steven Knight. Imagine it: "It's about a man who spends the night driving back to London from Wales, talking to people on the carphone. The entire film is set inside the car and no other characters appear."

It isn't difficult to believe after that that Knight might have been shown the door. Fortunately he must either have extraordinary powers of persuasion, or he was able to convey the real drama that unfolds throughout the film's runtime. Either way, the film's backers found a winner.

Tom Hardy gives a wonderful display of acting as he creates an entirely believable character (Ivan Locke) whose professional and personal lives implodes during the course of the journey and yet who manages to attract and retain our sympathy throughout the film, which won rave reviews at last year's Toronto & London Film Festivals.

If however you decide that it sounds like an exercise in tedium and decide not to come, you will undoubtedly miss one of the film highlights of last year and a quite engrossing and totally cinematic drama.