

Movie Review: 'Persepolis'

by David_Elliott

The Islamic Republic of Iran can seem as reductively bad as a living cartoon of a nightmare. But view the best Iranian films, often complex and subversive of the regime, and you discern what life teems behind beards and veils.

'PERSEPOLIS' - A friend of Marjane Satrapi flashes her love of the very non-Islamic group ABBA in the cartoon of Iranian travail, 'Persepolis.' CNS Photo courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) "Persepolis" is a cartoon movie adapted by graphic novelist Marjane Satrapi from her memoir books, along with Vincent Parronau (dialogue and narration are French, not Farsi). It may get wider play than many of those excellent movies, which seems a media joke, because this one is engagingly shallow.

Satrapi and Parronau maintain the books' style. That means simple, blocky figures densely slotted as

shadows and silhouettes. Strident black and white is rarely splashed by color, and all is clear, almost as diagrammatic as airplane instruction panels about what to do in an emergency.

Chiara Mastroianni, daughter of Marcello, voices the teen and adult Marjane, backed by cine-myths Catherine Deneuve (fretful mom) and Danielle Darrieux (smoking, progressive grandma). In this female saga, even benign men, like Satrapi's martyred Marxist uncle, tend to be hapless sideliners (meanwhile, the official Islamic "guardians" are like hairy tanks).

Modern Iranian movies such as "The Apple," "The Circle" and last year's brilliant "Offside" have been marvels of subtle feminism. Now, under a fireworks spray of press blurbs in the West, comes Satrapi's rather hokey, generic hymn of survival, with ideas and emotions perhaps even more cartooned than the cute figures.

Marjane starts as a lippy, upscale kid high on imported values - Bruce Lee's her hero, later eclipsed by Che Guevara. She seems to learn about political turmoil only through her relations and personal situations. Her first escape to Europe, her disco and punk phases, her doomed crush on a gay student, and a "great passion" that puts her (back in Tehran, oddly) in Freudian couch therapy, remain a breathless pilgrim's progress. She's the go-to gal of serial liberation.

CIA propping of the old, royal regime is sketchily noted. Ayatollah Khomeini seems unmentionable, as if he still had, for all the horrors, a glow of the sacred. The lens of vision is Satrapi Scope, with sparkle decals from the Bee Gees to Lenin, some anti-German jokes, even a rock video dance to "Eye of the Tiger."

"Persepolis" feels abstract, never deeply personal, because Satrapi offers only surfaces and push-pin thoughts while sharing here sincere but glib sisterhood with Iranian history. When she screams at hair stubble on her legs, this arrives with more socko than the slaughter of innocents in the war.

Bizarrely, in this hip, feminized slap at the Islamic Republic, the regime has the best rhetoric: "To die a martyr is to inject blood into the veins of society." Using her life as a prism, Satrapi injects a limited amount

of light.

A Sony Pictures release. Directors, writers: Marjane Satrapi, Vincent Paronnaud. Voices: Chiara Mastroianni, Catherine Deneuve, Danielle Darrieux, Simon Abkarian. Running time: 1 hour, 35 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 stars.

Movie Review: 'Persepolis' by David_Elliott