

## Persepolis

*Persepolis* is a film like no other you may see this year. Based on a series of French-language graphic novels of the odyssey of a young Iranian woman, this animated film, devoid of computer-foolery but rich in artistry, is a worthy coming-of-age story presented in a most intriguing and attractive package.

*Persepolis* tells the story (basically autobiographical) of Marjane Satrapi, an Iranian woman born around 1970, who experienced the fall of the Shah of Iran and the Khomeini Revolution as a child, eventually was sent abroad to Austria to study by her parents, only to return and try to make a life under the newly restrictive Islamic regime. Wholly frustrated by the latter, she, like so many before her, fled to begin a new life of freedom in the West (to France, in her case).

From the sketch of her life the film offers, we find that Marjane's parents were basically secular Iranians (though Muslim) who were happy to see the Shah go, but ultimately just as troubled by the rules of the mullahs that came after. A voice of wisdom and sense in her life is her grandmother, no traditionalist, who encourages her granddaughter to express herself. Her family represents one among hundreds of thousands in Iran who have suffered both under the Shah's regime and the Iranian Revolution. It is this sensible, more worldly class which has produced Iranian refugee colonies by the thousands in Paris and London, in Los Angeles, New York, and also in the Washington area.

The title, by the way, is oddly misleading. Persepolis is, of course, an ancient 6<sup>th</sup> century BC city of the great Persian empire which was left as a monumental ruin after being destroyed by Alexander the Great. The site of the film, in fact, is the current capital, Tehran. The filmmaker has said that, for her, the name implies a grand civilization that is "deeper and more complex" than present-day stereotypes of Iran, but, it strikes me that the use of the title in the novel and the movie is also purely euphonic, and reminds me of the Coen Brothers calling a film *Fargo* which has no significant action in that town.



It is the *way* Marjane's story is told which is just as fascinating as its storyline. Its imagery is taken quite directly from Satrapi's graphic novels, done almost entirely in black-and-white drawings, where the figures are simply but arrestingly drawn, with faces sketched in just a few lines (see illustration at left). Still, from those images, Satrapi and her co-director Vincent Paronnaud, another animator, have made a *film* of great fluidity.

*Persepolis* is built up of only drawn images yet it exhibits cinematic effects like jump cuts, a "moving camera," and a most sophisticated variation of point of view and "shot placement." Most strikingly, Satrapi and Paronnaud create a surprisingly lush look by the combined use of clever perspective drawings, deep and varied background

shadings, and the insertion of strong silhouettes, among other effects. The co-directors and their team of 20 animators produced 80,000 drawings for this picture.

Satrapı calls her method “stylized realism,” and suggests that she has been most influenced by earlier filmmaking styles such as German Expressionism and Italian neo-realism. Though done with pencil and ink, this is animation of great sophistication and strength, and—Hollywood take note—there isn’t one frame with a computer-generated image.

The voice talent (in French with English subtitles) is effective—and partly familial. Marjane’s voice as a teenager and an adult is that of Chiara Mastroianni, daughter of Marcello Mastroianni and Catherine Deneuve, who voices Marjane’s mother, Tadjı. The grandmother is voiced by another grande dame of French cinema, Danielle Darrieux (*La Ronde, Madame De..., The Red and the Black*), who was 90 when this film was being made. All perform their “roles” with elegance, the youngster combining poignancy as well as spunk, while the Grandmother is especially effective exhibiting both warmth and worldly skepticism.

Marjane Satrapı, in an interview about the film after it was released in France, expressed hopes for her effort: “if Western audiences end up considering Iranians as human beings just like the rest of us, and not as abstract notions like ‘Islamic fundamentalists,’ ‘terrorists,’ or the ‘Axis of Evil,’” she said, “then I’ll feel like I’ve done something. Don’t forget that the first victims of fundamentalism are the Iranians themselves.”

*Persepolis* works above all because it is a true, telling human story of one dogged, curious personality seeking the wider world and finding it, even through personal pain and loss.

(“*Persepolis*” is rated “PG-13;” 95 mins. running time.)

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