

The Salesman

Ashgar Farhadi is on a roll. The celebrated Iranian director came to worldwide attention when his film “A Separation,” won the 2012 Oscar for Best Foreign Language Picture. His talent was confirmed with “The Past” (2013), a drama set in Paris but with Iranian elements. Positive critical reception for these films led international film distributors to scope out Farhadi’s backlist, and, in the last two years, two earlier works of his have surfaced in the West: “About Elly,” made in 2009, received a delayed release in 2015, and this past year, “Fireworks Wednesday,” made in 2006, debuted in the US (see a review of the latter and “A Separation” on my website).

Part of Farhadi’s recent acceptance in the West is due to the fact that he peoples his films with relatively ordinary, middle-class characters with no overt religious leanings; protagonists who show no traits of the revolutionary Shiite fanaticism that fills so much Western media coverage of and commentary about Iran. Now that Euro-American audiences have caught up with Farhadi’s oeuvre, it’s time to relish his most recent film, “The Salesman” (*Forushande*), a recent effort (2015) which echoes his earlier works with a wholly contemporary Iranian setting, a discursive yet intriguing plot which features an out-of-the-blue domestic trigger, and finely calibrated acting from an ensemble from some of Farhadi’s favorite actors.

In “The Salesman,” Emad Etesami (Shahab Hosseini) and his wife Rana (Taraneh Alidoosti) are a middle-class couple living in Tehran. He is a literature teacher by day, and both he and his wife are rehearsing lead roles in a local production of Arthur Miller’s “Death of a Salesman.” After their apartment almost collapses around them, they are forced to rent a new place owned by one of their acting colleagues Babak (Babak Karimi). There are unsettled when they find that the previous tenant, a woman of ill repute, has left much of her belongings in the place, yet they try to settle in. In a nasty turn of events, one of the ex-renter’s clients comes to the door of the apartment one day while Rana is alone at home taking a bath. Thinking it is Emad coming home, she invites him in, only to be knocked unconscious in the shower.

Rana avoids serious injury, but the incident leaves her shaken and Emad outraged. The questions then become how the couple will identify the assailant and what action can be taken. That halting effort to answer these questions, at home and during play rehearsals, transforms the peaceful life of the Etesamis into a seething tension between them. Eventually the play is performed, the surprise culprit is found, and a kind of recompense is exacted—in an extraordinary confession sequence—but the film ends with uncertainties facing a now strained marriage.

This column is coming out just after the Academy Awards nominations have been announced: “The Salesman” is an excellent bet to be on the short list of the five films nominated for Best Foreign Language motion picture. I would argue rightly so, because Farhadi has again tapped his country’s *Zeitgeist* to produce a thoughtful, ruminative drama fraught with modest but plausible dilemmas that allow his stable of actors to shine.

Farhadi regulars will recognize his leads. The sturdy Hosseini was featured in “A Separation” and was a co-lead in “About Elly.” The delicate Alidoosti was a lead in

“Fireworks Wednesday” and had the title role in “About Elly.” Both here are used splendidly as a loving, striving couple quietly, remorselessly driven to question each other and themselves and to test each other’s ethics. They personify not so much a marriage breaking apart as exhibiting hairline cracks that may be hard to seal.

Except for his lengthy Parisian sojourn to shoot “The Past,” the 54-year-old Farhadi has resolutely stuck to his Iranian roots for filmmaking since 2003—with estimable results. His next as-yet untitled project, however, is filming in Spain and stars Penelope Cruz and Javier Bardem. Let’s see if he can again transfer his Tehran Touch to another culture...

(The film runs 125 minutes and is rated “PG-13”.)

(January 2017)