

◀ selves. Even the mother, who is blind, looks at herself in the last scene. That's something I didn't expect. I asked her to go out, though I wasn't sure if she would – she prefers to stay inside, lock the door and make a prison for herself in order to be safe. Then she did go out, but first she stood in front of the mirror. And the only time she laughed in the film – maybe in her entire life – was in that scene, which may be a sign of hope. But all this happened in reality; I could never have thought it up myself.

So the film is a mix of documentary and fable.

It is documentary in the sense that everybody is playing themselves and I didn't tell them what to do or say. And also because everything that happens relates to an element in their own lives. But it is fiction in that it has a storyline and some of it comes from our imagination, like the idea of having the social worker lock the father up.

Are there many female directors in Iran, and what kind of pressures and prejudices did you encounter when you made the film?

There are five others apart from me. It's not easy, but

it's not impossible either. There are laws that are written and laws that are unwritten, but which people really believe in: our problem more than anything is one of cultural tradition. No one says a woman can't be a director, but the way they treat you in school, you grow up as a second-class citizen. And how, as a second-class citizen, can you have a first-class job?

When I went to the poor neighbourhood where the family lives, at first it was hard to direct all these men who were older than me. But you can always manage. After the first five minutes, I didn't care what they thought of me. The story was so powerful I was totally involved in it. And once I'd finished *The Apple* I travelled with it all over the world, and I found that everywhere women's prospects are worse than men's.

What made you want to become a film director?

There are many reasons. Of course one of them is that my father is a film-maker. And my mother loved movies too. When I was growing up we couldn't see films from other countries, only Iranian films. But

I could watch my parents at work on location and I was curious about cinema. Even so, that doesn't explain why some film-makers have children who don't become film-makers themselves.

Did you like working with your father on 'The Apple' or did you find it inhibiting?

(Laughs) I think it's always hard for two directors to work with each other. It would have been difficult for me if my father had come to the location, but he didn't. And a week after shooting *The Apple* we went off and started making *The Silence*. I would like to write my next script myself, but I'll have to wait and see what happens.

Perhaps you had a personal stake in the theme of daughters attempting to assert their independence of their father?

I think I was drawn to the story because it's about the relationship between father and daughters. And we are trying to resolve that relationship too, because we are father and daughter as well.

'The Apple' opens on 27 December and is reviewed on page 41

Rakhsan Bani-Etemad talks to Hadani Ditmars about bending the rules in 'May Lady'

Rakhsan Bani-Etemad graduated in film directing from Teheran's College of Dramatic Arts at the time of the Iranian revolution and went on in the 80s to direct documentaries for Iranian television. Her first feature *Off the Limits/Kharej Az Mahdoudah* (1989) was a comedy box-office success. After two more comedies she made her first 'serious' film *Nargess* (1992), followed by *The Blue Veil/Rusariye Abi* (1995), a poignant romance about the barriers of class and age.

Her latest film *May Lady/Banooy-n-e Ordibeheshi* focuses on a divorced documentary film-maker in her 40s. Forugh is trying to raise her teenage son, Mani, alone in Teheran. Much to her son's consternation, she becomes romantically involved with a doctor (whom we never see). Meanwhile her assignment – to find the perfect subject for a documentary about the "ideal mother" – introduces her to many women's stories of hardship and sacrifice. Forugh's name is a nod to the Iranian feminist poet Forugh Farrokhzad and *May Lady* is not only Forugh's story but that of an Iranian everywoman.

Iranian film-makers' delicate negotiations of taboo issues have created a cinema of some subtlety. Here the sensitive handling of the romance between Forugh and the doctor pushes the limits: though the two are never on screen together, their telephone conversations allude to subjects that have not been openly discussed in Iranian cinema since the revolution and the sexual nuances have a quiet power. But at certain points the restrictions become ridiculous. Though Forugh is meant to be close to her son, they cannot touch because the actors playing the roles are not really parent and child. In one scene, which seems deliberately to draw attention to this absurdity, Mani offers his mother a pair of earrings as a birthday gift. She puts them on and then asks, "How do they look?" – but they are hidden beneath her hijab.

Hadani Ditmars: Forugh is looking for the "ideal mother" for a documentary. But most of the women she interviews are martyrs.

Rakhsan Bani-Etemad: A "perfect mother" is not necessarily a successful mother. After the revolution Iranian films often portrayed women as one-dimensional madonnas. They hardly dared mention that a woman could breathe or eat, let alone fall in love. I wanted to show that a woman is a complete person.

Forugh has a modern lifestyle. To what extent are there now two separate realities in Teheran?

Class divisions are stronger than ever and the gap between rich and poor is greater than before – actually greater than you see in the film. Forugh comes from a middle-class family: she's not wealthy, but she has what she needs – an old car and a small apartment.

I didn't consciously set out to make a film about a middle-class character. At the time I was also developing a script about a woman in prison – what interests me is to show as many different realities as possible. There are lots of educated professional women in Iran: doctors,

engineers, film-makers, teachers, lawyers. That doesn't mean we don't have problems, but the perception of the Iranian woman as an oppressed, helpless victim is not accurate.

Is this the first post-revolutionary film about a divorced working mother?

I didn't intend to focus on divorce. I wanted to bring out the loneliness of my character. But women in Iran do have problems after divorce, especially in terms of child custody – if the children are over seven years old they are usually assigned to the father.

'May Lady' mixes conventional fictional narrative, fake documentary footage and interviews with prominent Iranian women.

Documentary film-making is my first love. It's a way of keeping in touch with the different layers of society. With *May Lady* I tried to make sure the documentary aspect was not overpowered by the narrative, but it was difficult to get the balance right.

The name Forugh is a nod to the poet Forugh Farrokhzad, whose work deals with the interior of women's lives.

Forugh was a pioneer of women's rights. She said and did things no one had dared

to before. That's why I wanted to make a reference to her. When Forugh's poems describe women's daily lives, domestic chores are not celebrated as poetic acts but rather show the limitations of these lives, the lack of freedom of expression. Most educated women in Iran feel an intrinsic connection to Forugh.

But there is a poetic sensibility in the way you film your character carrying out her everyday rituals – making tea, watering the plants – and your camera lingers lovingly on everyday objects.

I tried to use everyday objects to demonstrate a subtle emotional connection between the two characters – connecting the doctor's words with Forugh's reality.

When Forugh goes to the police station to bail out her son she challenges the government official. Is this realistic?

Mani and his friends have been arrested because there were boys and girls together at the same party and it's illegal in Iran to have a gathering of men and women. But it's not abnormal for a woman like Forugh to talk back to an official – Iranian women do stand up for themselves.

Did you begin production before the 1997 elections?

I wrote the screenplay a few years ago and production took place around the same time as the vote. But I'm sure that if Mohammad Khatami hadn't been elected this film would never have made it on to the screen.

What has the response been?

The film has been well received and has been showing in theatres in Iran for several months. Some men don't like Forugh being so independent and some people don't like what's expressed – but the truth has to be told.

At the screening in Vancouver a Mujahidin man implied you were complicit with the Iranian government.

I just want to be a film-maker, to do my job, but I can't get away from the political situation. People want political answers from me, but I can't give them any.



Isolation: Forugh (Minoo Farshchi) and the doctor conduct their romance by telephone