

Iran's Brave Leading Lady

by *Lila Azam Zanganeh*

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Actress Shohreh Aghdashloo has been nominated for an Oscar in America, but her name is blacklisted in Iran. She talks to Lila Zanganeh about growing up during the 1970s revolution, being smeared for playing a prostitute, leaving her native country, and re-emerging as an Academy Award contender. In her latest film *The Stoning of Soraya M.*, Aghdashloo hopes to inspire a new generation of Muslim women to act and rebel against her country's "mad race to the Dark Ages."

"You are limited," actress Shohreh Aghdashloo was told by an agent in Los Angeles, when she started out 20 years ago. "Well yes," she replied in her deep, dark, velvet tones, "with an Iranian accent, jet-black hair and no experience in Hollywood, of course I am." Yet somehow, in an industry known for typecasting mercilessly, Aghdashloo has carved a unique career for herself, taking on a wide array of unconventional roles. In the past 10 years alone, the comely Iranian actress has appeared in Hollywood productions such as *X-Men: The Last Stand* or *The Lake House*, television series (she played a terrorist in Fox's *24*), art films and Persian plays. Most notably, she was nominated for an Academy Award as Best Supporting Actress for her role in *The House of Sand and Fog*, in 2003, opposite Ben Kingsley and Jennifer Connelly.



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But her latest, and most harrowing, film is *The Stoning of Soraya M.*, directed by the Iranian-born Cyrus Nowrasteh. Based on a book published in France in 1984 by a French-Iranian journalist (the screenplay is by Nowrasteh and his wife), *The Stoning* recounts the story of Soraya Manouchehri, executed for adultery in an Iranian village after being framed by her husband, who sought to marry an adolescent girl and rid himself of the mother of his six children. Aghdashloo portrays Soraya's aunt, Zahra, the diffident feminine voice of the village, its lone crying conscience and the one witness who will tell the story to a chance journalist driving through the village. "Yesterday the Devil himself visited this town," she whispers to him at the beginning of the film. And it is Aghdashloo's superb performance—supported by the very talented Iranian-American actress Mozhan Marnò—that lends texture and truth to this daunting film.

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For Aghdashloo, playing Zahra was at once an extraordinary and a horrific acting experience. The stoning scene, she explains, took six days to shoot in an Arab village (the country remains undisclosed for fear of negative publicity), and tens of villagers acted as extras and got to throw stones. The stones, by law, are small, so as to make the punishment for adultery last longer. On the set, a hole was dug in the middle of a cul-de-sac, surrounded by dilapidated clay houses overlooking a shady canyon. On the screen, one sees Soraya buried to her waist, her elbows tightened with ropes. The mob is restless, and stamps the ground furiously, fists in the air, clamoring for death. When the stoning begins, the air fills with dust, and a hail of cries.

“Day after day,” recalls Aghdashloo, “I watched the scene in horror, trying hard to define the line between cinema and reality. At night, I had this recurrent dream that I’d finished my work and needed to take a bath, but there was a dead infant floating in the tub... Dreadful as it was, the urge of getting the story out kept me going.” Mozhan Marnò, who portrays Soraya, notes for her part that only when she was in the ground herself, with her arms tied to her sides, did she come to understand one of the most barbaric aspects of stoning. “Since your arms are tied, or in some cases, since you are buried to your neck, you are deprived of your natural instinct to shield yourself, which is terrifying.”

When she first heard about the screenplay, in Los Angeles, Aghdashloo instantly remembered that she had seen on tape the actual stoning of two young Iranian men accused of homosexuality. The tape had been smuggled out of Iran in the early '90s. "I could not sleep or eat properly for days after watching this stoning being conducted by the local cleric and a young crowd." So as soon as she heard about Nowrasteh's project, Aghdashloo realized the film could convey a powerful humanitarian message on behalf of women and gay men in the Islamic world.

The problem, she believes, is that the world is divided in two, and that one half doesn't seem to have the faintest idea as to how the other half lives. "Women here keep asking, 'Is this still happening?' It's just incredible to what extent Americans have a hard time grasping the brutal realities of rural societies in the Muslim world." And indeed, no later than January 2009, Amnesty International denounced the stoning of two more men, which likely occurred in December 2008, in the northeast of Iran, and stated that 10 people were currently known to be at risk of stoning across the country's major cities, including Tehran.

Evidently, neither the statements made in August 2008 by the spokesman of Iran's judiciary—in which he declared that stonings in Iran had been halted—nor the directives announced by the head of the judiciary ordering a moratorium in 2002 actually halted the practice. Before it is passed into law, the call for a moratorium has no legal weight and judges are simply free to ignore it. But Aghdashloo hopes that viewers of *The Stoning* will log on to the film's Web site (thestoning.com) and write millions of emails to signify their support and ask for updates on worldwide campaigns. So far, she feels heartened that all those who have seen the film want to reach out and help. And this seems especially important at a time when Iranian women are in desperate need of international support. Of the recent election uprising, Aghdashloo says with horror, "A relative of mine, a 21-year-old girl, has been shut in the face and lost her eyes. She is now in critical condition in a hospital and the whole family is devastated. These protests have all at once carried enormous hope and enormous pain for our country."

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Aghdashloo launched her acting career in Iran, in the early 1970s. Her family's high social rank had precluded her from becoming an actress, so she married an artist, Aydin Aghdashloo, who assured her he would let her do as she pleased. Soon after her marriage in Tehran, Shohreh joined the Drama Workshop, created by one of Iran's most celebrated architects and painters, Bijan Saffari. To this day, living in exile in Paris, Saffari recalls the actress with utter clarity: "She was absolutely unique, and completely free. Iranian culture is all about inhibitions; yet she breathed singularity and boldness. The moment she stepped into the Workshop, she transformed it, by the sheer force of her presence."

Aghdashloo's breakthrough came in 1976, when she starred in *Gozarash (The Report)*, a film directed by the now-famous Abbas Kiarostami. She then became a national sensation when she accepted the role of a young prostitute in *Souteh Delan (Broken Hearts)*, a film by the legendary Ali Hatami. Soon, some fiercely negative voices arose against Aghdashloo's portrayal of a prostitute. "Yet today," she points out with a melancholy smile, "the film is considered one of the classics of Iranian cinema."

A year later, in February 1979, Aghdashloo's life—like that of millions of other Iranians—would take a decisive, and often fateful, turn. Demonstrations had spread throughout the streets of the entire country, and Shohreh remembers driving in Tehran through crowds of young Iranians chanting in unison, "Khomeini rahbar, Akho akbar" ("Khomeini is our leader, God is great"). "Witnessing these events," she explains, "was as macabre as reading *The Trial* by Franz Kafka, only this time a nation was being tried by its own youth. They were demanding the fall of the shah's dynasty and the return of Khomeini. Naïvely, they believed the ayatollah would be their Gandhi. Time and history proved them wrong."

It was 4:30 a.m. on February 28, 1979, when Aghdashloo started her journey to the West in the company of two friends. She left with a few articles of clothing, several photographs of her family and her early years in theater and cinema, along with two costumes she had worn in Mishima and Strindberg productions. Driving at 30 miles an hour, it took her seven days to reach the Turkish border. "The scene at the border was terrifyingly chaotic," she recalls, "we all knew the airports had been shut down, and thousands of cars, bumper to bumper, were filled with Iranians desperately trying to flee their country." Claiming they were

on their way to a short vacation in Turkey, the women made it across the border, before reaching the former Yugoslavia, then Venice, Paris, and finally London. “The entire trip took us 31 days. And I remember that when I set foot in London, all I could think of were the words ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy.’”

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The day she left Iran, on the dawn of a violent cultural purge, Aghdashloo decided to study politics, and later received a B.A. in international relations in England. “I was convinced that I had left my acting career behind in Tehran, but this was not to be my fate.” Following the graduation ceremony, an Iranian playwright suggested that she take a look at a play he had written—with a lead in it for her. The play was about the complex aftermath of the Islamic revolution for those living in exile, and—just as she did when taking on *The Stoning of Soraya M.*—Aghdashloo realized that she could make a compelling political statement by bringing this story to existence on the stage.

In the end, it was this decision that brought her to Hollywood, and eventually to *The House of Sand and Fog* 20 years later. In it she played the role of Nadi Behrani, a voiceless Iranian woman, trapped in a web of tragic circumstances brought about by her family’s migration to a new land—America. Suddenly, after years of Aghdashloo’s name being banned in Iran, it was printed again for her Oscar nomination.

Earning this nomination, says Aghdashloo, primarily meant that she had acquired a voice as an Iranian woman. “Above all else, I hoped it would send a message to millions of talented women in Iran: that if it could happen to me, then it could happen to them.” Her presence in the United States, she remarks, is of a political nature, thus her professional choices are intrinsically political. “It was the pursuit of freedom and democracy that brought me to this country, and every character I play speaks to the freedom of choice that is the very principle of my existence as an Iranian woman émigré.” Her second husband, Houshang Touzie, an Iranian playwright residing in Los Angeles, has offered her the lead in all his plays (the couple has created a traveling theater group, Drama Workshop ’79, for Farsi-speaking audiences), and she has since starred in two of Shirin Neshat’s acclaimed art films—*Possessed* and *Pulse*—featured in galleries and museums around the world.

Through films such as *The Stoning of Soraya M.*, Aghdashloo hopes to lend a face to the forgotten women banished or brutally assassinated by the Iranian regime. Iran, she says, has lost with this regime its sense of dignity and integrity. “The Islamic revolution, while pretending to reinstate dignity, took it away and humiliated its people. But through everything they have endured, our women have become the unwitting heroines of a new Iran, which one day will turn around this mad race to the Dark Ages.”

The Stoning of Soraya M. will premiere June 26 at the Los Angeles Film Festival and open in 10 theaters nationwide.

To get involved in the human rights issues raised by *The Stoning of Soraya M.*, visit www.moralcourage.com. New York University’s Moral Courage Project, a program that encourages speaking truth to power, is led by Muslim reformer Irshad Manji.

Lila Azam Zanganeh has taught literature and cinema at Harvard University. She is a literary contributor to Le Monde and a host of other European and American publications. In 2006, she edited a collection of narrative essays on Iran. Her first book—*Light of My Life, or How to Net the Incredible Happiness of an Extraordinary Writer*—will be published in 2009.

