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The Persian Version

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The Persian Version

Abstract

This is a film review of *The Persian Version* (2023), directed by Maryam Keshavarz.

Keywords

Immigrants, Iran, Hybridity, LGBTQ

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Author Notes

John Lyden is the Department Chair and Blizek Professor of Religious Studies at University of Nebraska Omaha. He has been the Editor of the *Journal of Religion & Film* since 2011. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He also co-edited, with Ken Derry, *The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars* (Wipf and Stock 2018).



The Persian Version (2023), dir. Maryam Keshavarz

Leila (Layla Mohammadi) is a free-spirited young woman who negotiates her hybrid identity as an Iranian-American not without tension: in the opening scene, she attends a Halloween costume party in a burkini of her own devising, including a niqab that covers her face except for her eyes, combined with a regular bikini bottom and uncovered legs. She had early schooling in both Iran and in the United States, and comically juxtaposes her memories of being an outsider in both settings, as well as her early experience smuggling Cyndi Lauper’s music into Iran—which leads to a full dance number of “Girls Just Want to Have Fun.” She also breaks the fourth wall repeatedly to explain and complain to the audience about all her identity confusions, including her sexuality: she identifies as a lesbian, and yet has a one-night stand with the Broadway star of *Hedwig and the Angry Itch*, Maximilian (British actor Tom Byrne) who while himself straight, attracts her due to his transgender costuming.

Leila also does not get along with her mother Shireen (Niousha Noor), who disapproved of Leila's marriage to a woman. Leila blames her mother for her divorce, although upon reflection she reveals that she chose her career over her partner's desire for a child, which led to the breakup. It is clearly more than her sexuality which separates her from her mother, as Leila is largely estranged from her whole family, which includes eight brothers. But when her father is about to receive a badly needed heart transplant, she finds herself pulled back in.

As Leila stays with her grandmother while her father is in the hospital, she learns some details of her mother's history for the first time. Shireen's story is told in flashback and includes some losses that she has never shared with her daughter. Although Leila resented her mother's career, it is shown that Shireen had to work to support the family after her husband's first heart attack while Leila was still a child. Shireen became a successful realtor for immigrants and refugees, helping to create whole neighborhoods in New Jersey—but at the same time, she demanded Leila's help as her only daughter, without supporting any of her own endeavors. It seems that Shireen could never show love for her daughter, the tragic reason for which is eventually revealed. But an opportunity for reconciliation is presented with Leila accidentally becomes pregnant from her one-night stand with Maximilian, who very much wants to take his fatherly responsibilities seriously. The birth scene in the hospital with the entire family and *Hedwig* in drag is one of the funniest I have witnessed in a long time, as they are joined together in this unplanned moment in ways that cause them to become the unlikeliest of families once again.

Director Maryam Keshavarz admits that the story is at least partly autobiographical, as she has also negotiated an Iranian-American identity and struggled with her relationship with her mother, another strong immigrant woman. This film is an ode to such strong women and the ways in which they have held together their families through all the struggles they faced both before and

after they immigrated. The film also manages to leverage its broad comedy effectively by balancing it with Shirin's truly heartbreaking story, and that is no mean task: this film can make you laugh and cry with equal sincerity, and the audience with which I saw it clearly agreed, as they gave it a standing ovation for several minutes. This is one of this year's Sundance collection that celebrates the immigrant experience with equal parts joy and realism, managing to be hilarious and life-affirming without ignoring the challenges they face and the courage with which they deal with them.