



By Josh Krauter  
Senior Editor

Picture, for a moment, an imaginary United States.

This alternate United States is a place where religion and politics are inextricably linked, women's equal rights are virtually non-existent and a government board OKs and censors every piece of film shot within its borders.

Forget about films such as "Taxi Driver," "Last Tango in Paris" or even "National Lampoon's Animal House" existing, much less gaining distribution.

It may be a fantasy here, but it's a harsh reality in Iran. And, despite the strict control and repressive regime, Iran's film industry is flourishing, gaining critical raves and respect and influencing the cinematic world.

That influence will be touching down in Lincoln on April 13-16 and 20-23 for the film festival, "The Cinema of Iran: A Dream with No Awakening," at the Mary Riepma Ross Film Theater.



ABOVE: Leila Hatami plays a woman who cannot have children, and whose mother-in-law forces her son to take a second wife, in "Leila," a film by Dariush Mehrjui. The film is part of the Ross Film Theater's Iran Film Festival.

TOP: "Divorce Iranian Style," a telling documentary about the double standards women face in Iranian divorce courts, is directed by Kim Longinotto and Ziba Mir-Hosseini. The film is one of 10 being shown at the Ross this weekend.

Dan Ladely, director of the Ross Theater, said the festival idea was sparked five years ago during a trip to the Telluride Film Festival in Telluride, Colo.

Ladely saw an Iranian film, "The White Balloon," and it piqued his interest. Before the film, German filmmaker Werner Herzog gave a speech about Iranian cinema, in which he called it "the most important national cinema today."

Ladely said he was skeptical at first, but after seeing more Iranian films, he was hooked.

"I just started paying attention to Iranian films and realized Werner was telling the truth," he said.

Ladely began planning the festival a few years ago, getting the money from the Nebraska Humanities Council, the Nebraska Arts Council, the Friends of the Mary Riepma Ross Film Theater and members of Lincoln's Iranian community.

And because of warmer diplomatic conditions between the United States and Iran, the films were more widely distributed than in thornier times.

"It's a really great sampling and very timely," he said. "We were able to raise the extra funding, and I finally decided we'd better do it now if we're going to do it."

The festival's roster includes 10 films made by some of the most respected directors in filmmaking. These include:

■ "The Mirror" - At first the story of a young girl making her way home from school after her mother fails to pick her up, the film turns into a comment on the barriers between the film and the audience watching it.

■ "The May Lady" - A divorced documentary filmmaker begins work on a film about mothers while battling with her teenage son at home.

■ "Divorce Iranian Style" - A documentary about Iranian divorce courts and the tremendous double standard women face in the Iranian legal system.

■ "A Moment of Innocence" - In a real incident, director Mohsen Makhmalbaf attacked a policeman in protest of the militant Iranian regime. Years later, he met the policeman again.

In this film, he and the policeman tell both sides of the attack.

■ "The Silence" - The story of a 10-year-old blind boy and his relationship with his mother in a small village. This film has been censored in Iran for its political stance.

■ "Children of Heaven" - A boy loses his younger sister's shoes, setting up a chain of complications.

■ "Leila" - A woman and her husband are in love, but she can't have children. A domineering mother-in-law forces her son to take a second wife so she can have a grandson.

■ "Two Women" - This feminist film attacks brutality inflicted on women who question Iran's sex roles.

■ "Taste of Cherry" - The story of an intellectual who can't find the will to live and spends the day picking up hitchhikers in hopes of finding one who will put him out of his misery.

■ "The Apple" - Twin sisters have been confined to their home since birth. A social worker finally frees them at age 11.

Gwendolyn Foster, an associate professor of English and film studies, said she's seen most of the films on the roster and has high praise for them.

"The most exciting thing going on in cinema now is going on in Iran," Foster said. "In the vacuum of predictable films on the foreign film circuit, Iranian films are unpredictable."

Foster said she was amazed that such strong films came out of a country with such a repressive regime.

Ladely agreed. "It's phenomenal, the circumstances these films are being made under," he said.

Most of the repression in Iran is doled out to the women, and it's been that way since Iranian cinema began in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

At first, women weren't even allowed in theaters. Then, a large curtain was placed in the center of movie houses, separating the men from the women. Now, women are writing, directing and starring in films, but they still have to get everything approved by the government censors.

In fact, men and women can't even touch each other on screen in Iranian film, not even married couples. Directors have to be tremendously skilled to convincingly portray love stories, Ladely said.

Most of the films on the festival schedule are made by or about women and have a strong feminist perspective. How did these films get past the censors?

"It's amazing how they do it," Ladely said. "Quite often they have to do it subtly. Unless you're really astute, you might not know it's a metaphor."

These films are proof that government officials don't really understand art. In "The Mirror," a woman argues with a cab driver about women's limited roles. The woman makes some astute observations, which surprisingly made it past the censors. The cab driver gets the last word, which is probably why the scene was allowed, but the film portrays his viewpoint as ridiculous.

Ladely said films such as these are important for Western audiences to see to understand the culture of Iran.

"It's really important to see and to get to know what the people are like," he said. "The media focuses on the right-wing government, but the people want the same thing as us. They're striving to improve their lives and their culture."

Ladely said it might be hard for some audiences to see these films, but they will be rewarded.

Please see FILMS on 10

THE CINEMA OF IRAN: A DREAM WITH NO AWAKENING				
THURSDAY, APRIL 13		FRIDAY, APRIL 14		SUNDAY, APRIL 16
TIME	TITLE	TITLE	TIME	TITLE
3 P.M.	A MOMENT OF INNOCENCE	DIVORCE IRANIAN STYLE	1 P.M.	THE SILENCE
5 P.M.	THE APPLE	LEILA	3 P.M.	TASTE OF CHERRY
7 P.M.	LECTURE	TWO WOMEN	5 P.M.	TWO WOMEN
9 P.M.	CHILDREN OF HEAVEN	THE MIRROR	7 P.M.	A MOMENT OF INNOCENCE
			9 P.M.	THE APPLE
				TWO WOMEN
THURSDAY, APRIL 20		FRIDAY, APRIL 21		SUNDAY, APRIL 23
TIME	TITLE	TITLE	TIME	TITLE
3 P.M.	THE MIRROR	TWO WOMEN	1 P.M.	THE MAY LADY
5 P.M.	THE SILENCE	TASTE OF CHERRY	3 P.M.	PANEL DISCUSSION
7 P.M.	TASTE OF CHERRY	THE SILENCE	5 P.M.	LEILA
9 P.M.	THE MAY LADY	THE MIRROR	7 P.M.	DIVORCE IRANIAN STYLE
			9 P.M.	CHILDREN OF HEAVEN
				TASTE OF CHERRY

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