

refined reflections

'The Mirror' offers a mesmerizing visual experience for audiences

By Josh Krauter

Senior editor

In Jean-Luc Godard's 1969 film, "Weekend," a pivotal scene centered on a traffic jam. This scene dramatically altered the film's atmosphere, sending it to a whole other place.

Jafar Panahi's "The Mirror," currently showing at the Mary Riepma Ross Theater's Iranian Film Festival, contains a scene that produces a similar effect. To give this scene away would take away some of the film's power and impact, though not entirely.

The film opens with a little girl named Mina (Mina Mohammad Khani) sitting on a bench in front of her school. She's small, maybe 7 or 8, and her arm is in a sling. She talks with her friends, but soon they have all been picked up by their parents.

Mina waits and waits, but her mother never arrives. By now, Mina's teacher has gone home. Mina's brow furrows. She's worried.

Mina decides to walk home herself, but she's not too sure how to get there. Thus begins her journey by foot, taxi and bus through the crowded streets of Tehran, which is the bulk of the film's first half.

And what a masterful film, it is. Panahi's close attention to detail makes every frame compelling. This eye for detail and craft is apparent early in the film. A great moment occurs when Mina decides to get off the bench and walk home alone, and her sling prevents her from just hopping off. Instead, she scoots, little by little, down the long length of bench and ambles off the end in an awkward sidestep.

This scene shows just how vulnerable Mina is on the busy streets of Tehran, but it also shows how determined and strong the young girl is. Along the way, people offer to help her, but she refuses, preferring to find the way home herself. She asks for directions, then runs off before anyone can follow her.

Khani as Mina is in nearly every shot and is a wonderfully understated and natural actor. She singlehandedly carries the film with her tiny frame and big, piercing voice.

Playing just as large a role in "The Mirror," though, is the traffic of Tehran. Anyone who's been in traffic jams in Kansas City, Denver, New York or even Los Angeles hasn't seen anything like this traffic. Cars constantly whiz by, seemingly hap-

hazardly. There seems to be no clearly defined lanes or even destinations.

Waiting to cross the street is a futile exercise. The constant procession of metal, wheels, exhaust and noise is never going to end, at least not any time soon. Pedestrians, including the tiny Mina, run right out into oncoming traffic, dodging and weaving around the vehicles just as they dodge and weave around each other.

There is no musical soundtrack, just the continual honks, beeps and revs of the traffic.

This is the film's first half, and it's gripping and mesmerizing. Then comes that surprise in the film's center. It's jarring, but it's supposed to be.

Without giving too much away, "The Mirror's" second half shatters the barrier between audience and film, showing viewers how wrapped up we can get in an imaginary story. The second half also picks up with Mina's attempt to get home, but the meaning has changed.

Panahi's and Khani's talents make this jarring change work, but "The Mirror" is also a success because of its many complex themes, including but not comprising feminism, the struggle between modernity and tradition within Iran, adults' and children's perceptions of each other and the relationship between the viewer and what's being viewed.

"The Mirror" manages to subtly convey all this with a simple story full of sharp details that's also funny and entertaining.

"The Mirror" is showing at the Mary Riepma Ross Theater on Thursday at 3 p.m. and Friday at 9 p.m.

REVIEW The Mirror

STARS: Mina Mohammad Khani, Tehran traffic
DIRECTOR: Jafar Panahi
RATING: not rated (nothing offensive)
GRADE: A
FIVE WORDS: Not your typical children's movie.



Melanie Falk/DN