

LES FILMS D'ICI presents



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Panorama
Opening Film

THE SIREN

INTERNATIONAL SALES



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SCREENPLAY
JAVAD DJAVAHERY

A FILM BY
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COMING IN 2023

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SYNOPSIS

1980.

1980. Southern Iran. The people of Abadan have been fighting an Iraqi siege. Amongst them is the 14-year-old Omid, who chose to stay in the city with his grandfather, waiting for his elder brother to return from the frontline. But how can you resist in a war without taking up arms? Then Omid finds an abandoned ship in Abadan's harbor. Is this the answer to saving the people he loves?



ABOUT SEPIDEH FARSI

COMING TO TERMS WITH THE PAST

After directing a dozen documentaries and feature films, Sepideh Farsi set out to make her first animated film, *The Siren*, based on an idea she'd been developing since 2009. Farsi explains that the Iran-Iraq War was one of the bloodiest of the second half of the 20th century, but also one of the least documented. *"I thought it was key to revive this forgotten war that some historians have dubbed 'the First Gulf War'. I wanted to reflect on those events through the journey of a teenager trying to save the residents of the besieged city of Abadan as he locates a lenj – a traditional ship from southern Iran that he dubs The Siren and that becomes his Ark,"* she says.

But how could she portray the war? The director knew it was impossible for her to return to Iran to make the film as she's been denied entry since 2009. Abadan was one of the martyred cities of the war. *"It has been all but entirely destroyed and so it was inconceivable to shoot there as it's become an altogether different city since the war,"* she relates. Besides, Farsi didn't want to shoot on a studio nor use heavy visual effects. *"I thought the best way was to use the possibilities animation offers and enhance them with the experience that I've acquired through directing live-action films. So, I chose to direct an animated feature with a touch of historical fact,"* she continues.

Farsi says it is a kind of war where *"the images that were passed down to us had always been created by the authorities. The regime had total control over war footage."* As a result, images that were created had been manipulated and so Farsi had to be even more watchful and, later on, guide crew members to not reproduce propaganda images. *"When dealing with those books and photos that helped us recreate Abadan's atmosphere, we had to keep some distance. With this film, I gave my take on the conflict based on historical facts,"* explains the director. She meant to leave a new mark in the distorted narrative of the war.

Animation acts as a filter to create the necessary distance from the violence of the war, even if the conflict was to be depicted accurately. Animation can also bring us closer to the emotions of the characters by creating metaphorical sequences.





FROM PARIS TO TEHRAN

Sepideh Farsi is not a designer, but when she met Zaven Najjar in 2014, she found in him the ideal partner for the project. He actually ended up serving as *The Siren's* art director. For the script she turned to her old collaborator Javad Djavahery who is a *persona non grata* in Iran, too. In 2015, she met with the Films d'Ici team and *The Siren* could actually get off the ground. As the script was refined, Farsi chose to tell the story of a broken young generation that, as they were grappling with the war, struggled between the nostalgia of what life could have been like in a free and peaceful Iran and the urgency desire to leave Abadan, which was gradually turning into a death trap. The script grew and developed and so did the graphic design and the moodboard. *"We paid great heed to each and every detail – the makes of cars that people actually drove at the time, billboards in movie theaters, watches, shoes... From a screenwriting and visual standpoint, the pace of the animation process is very different from that of live-action films. It takes a long time to develop an animated film."*

In 2019, the script was ready to go. The lockdown began just as *The Siren* went to production in 2020. *"All things considered, the lockdown periods helped us feel what people hiding in a besieged city could experience,"* Farsi remarks. To add to the film's realism, she looked into books of those days and reached out to Iranians on the inside. *"Since I can't go back to Iran anymore, this was very helpful. I felt like an archaeologist trying to revive memories. Next, we assembled archive documents. It all had to be painstakingly redesigned. I also included names of people who were actual dissidents, victims of the regime, on the walls."* Reality nourished the film.

A LESSON IN RESILIENCE

Throughout the film, Omid keeps coming across charismatic people who all feel differently about the war. This is a love letter to the Iranian people, as Farsi portrays their ingenuity and yearning for freedom – and also praises their desire to go off course. Farshid, a friend of Omid's brother's, breaks the rules. This is a grey area that the residents grapple with – each one is standing firm in their own way, be it against the war or against the restrictions of the new regime. Farsi comments on her decision, *"I wanted the film to be multi-layered and not preachy, so that the audience could have their own view."*

The director has scattered many symbols that the audience will relate to in different ways. Many elements strongly echo today's Iran. *"The film takes place in 1980, but keep in mind that many Iranians have been fighting against the regime since the beginning. There had already been social upheavals – back in 1999, then in 2009, 2017, 2019... before the one that broke out in 2022. And the government's response has always been repression, violence and terror. We've had ups and downs, moments of despair. But we knew things were going to blow up one day."*

The setting of Abadan also inspires hope as the city was under total siege as soon as the war broke out in 1980. Although it was all but entirely destroyed and drained of its population during the war, the population is back to over 200, 000. This is a story of Iranian resilience.



SO GOES THE MUSIC!

The hypnotic beat of the *dammam* – the traditional South Iranian drum – is heard as soon as the film begins. It serves as an overarching motif that accompanies the whole plot and demonstrates the diversity of the film's soundtrack – *Ney-anban* (a kind of Iranian bagpipe), pop rock, Armenian organ music, and even the *Grendizer* TV showsoundtrack. For this rich score, Farsi turned to Iranian musicians and to French trumpet player and composer Erik Truffaz, who had already scored her *I Will Cross Tomorrow* in 2019. The jazzman incorporated rich Iranian patterns into his own compositions. The resulting musical abundance feels like a nose-thumbing gesture towards the regime that has nothing but contempt for music.

Omid's main encounter with music happens through a diva, Pari's mother. Hiding in the dark and seeking refuge in her memories of being on stage, she cannot perform in public anymore. This goes for all women singers in Iran ever since Khomeini took power in 1979. This warm-voiced character refers to several Iranian women singers, including Soussan, whom Farsi heard when she visited Abadan as a child; pop star Googoosh who now lives in the US; Hayedeh, a contralto singer who sang a lot about exile before she passed away in 1990 in San Francisco; and Elaheh, another Iranian diva, whose song *Raftam* is heard in the film, and who died in 2007 without being able to sing for many years.

Music shows the way to Abadan's combative people. Omid's *dammam* pushes violence away and tries to drown out the artillery. But how many will follow the beat of his drum and take to sea with him – and so give in to the Siren's song?

A PERSONAL AND UNIVERSAL STORY

In 2022, Farsi's father passed away in Iran and the film pays him tribute. It was he who took his daughter to Abadan for the first time when she was very young – a city with which she has developed a very special relationship even though she has never actually lived there. The city helps the director show how Iran's move towards modernity was cut short. *"After he visits the photographer who takes pictures without film, Omid experiences something fantastic and uchronic and travels back to a time before the highjacked 1979 revolution,"* explains Farsi.

Based on this premise, the director combines fiction with her own memories, including a scene of a movie theater that was actually set on fire, with over 400 casualties or an episode of *Grendizer* being watched by Iranian and Iraqi people at the same time, when there is a brief ceasefire. It's close to a treasure hunt fuelling emotion in which even names give away clues: Omid means "hope" and Pari means both mermaid and war siren. *"As I develop my projects, I begin thinking about the film I want to see,"* says Farsi. *"Then I think about the audience and the clues I will include. The film will not be experienced similarly by those who went through the war and those who were denied a true account of this conflict."*

Whatever the interpretations, Farsi pursues the same goal. *"I'd like this film to be seen inside Iran as much as abroad. The fact that it was selected for the Berlin Festival is a good opportunity to gain visibility. In Iran, people always manage to see films, including mine, that were banned by the regime. The film will either be seen on pirated copies or on a big screen because the regime will already have been overthrown."* This is the director's way of getting her revenge, as it had been challenging to work with the locals, although those who were willing would rather remain anonymous. *"I've been used to it since my film Red Rose. But even if I cannot mention their names, I think about them. I've also made this film for them,"* she concludes.





INTERVIEW WITH SEPIDEH FARSI

Where were you during the Iran-Iraq war?

I was a teenager just like Omid and Pari when the war broke out. I remained in Iran until 1984 and I experienced the second half of the war from France. I had to leave the country as I was not allowed to go to college in Iran – I did time in jail because I was an activist in high school. Back in those days, we thought of ourselves as double dissidents – we had wished to topple the monarchy and yet we did not want to see the clerics take power either. The regime considered us as enemies from the inside.

What message did you want to get across through Omid's story?

As he looks for his brother who left for the frontline, Omid, no matter how young he is, thinks about what his life could have been like without that revolution and that war. But he doesn't give up and takes action. That's how it felt for us in the early 1980s, it was as though something had been stolen from us. It was a highjacked revolution – it was a tragedy, as if we'd missed a step. And it only got worse as the years passed.

Regarding the *mise en scène*: there's a use of the camera that is often close to the ground, during the war scenes or higher, when we are with a character. Was this deliberate in the way you worked on the frames?

I wanted to have a very specific “decoupage” in the film and we worked on it a lot with the storyboard team. There is a particular use of the camera angles, many high and low angle shots, in order to emphasize a character's fear or to give a stronger narrative perspective and underline the story, especially in the war scenes of conflict and where the characters are in danger.

The message particularly echoes today's upheavals. How much did you expect this?

There have been upheavals against the regime for more than forty years in Iran. So, what is going on today doesn't come from nowhere. With the “*Woman, Life, Freedom*” revolution, the whole of society is getting involved. Many young people – 60% of the Iranian people are under 35 – want to live in a modern, liberal society. The issues that are addressed in *The Siren* would have become relevant sooner or later.

What do you hope for Iranian society?

I've always stayed very close to my country. Despite political repression and censorship, Iranians have always found a way to create. The Iranian revolutionary movement is also inspired by other rebellious experiences – by the Ukrainian experience, or by the 2019 Hong Kong experience. For all the regime's intense crackdown, there has always been room for defiance. There are deep cracks within the Iranian state, and I believe the regime will soon fall.





INTERVIEW WITH **ZAVEN NAJJAR**

How did the project come your way? What did it mean to illustrate such a story?

I was just finishing my short film, *Shell All*, that took place during the Lebanese Civil War. A mutual friend introduced me to Sepideh Farsi. She was looking for someone to do the design of *The Siren*, while Javad Djavahery was writing the screenplay. They showed me many pictures of the war and told me a lot about the history, and their personal experience of course.

Omid's story touched me a lot. My family being from Aleppo, Syria and Lebanon, the characters in *The Siren* felt like far away cousins, uncles, aunts to me. Some of the characters actually look like some of my family members!

How did you take ownership of the war narrative in terms of animation techniques?

The starting point always has a lot to do with research, talking to people and studying the characters. *The Siren* is the story of Omid's life while his city, Abadan, is under siege. Everything can fall apart at any moment. The idea was to create very iconic images and characters to tell that all these moments are bits stolen from the destruction of the war. Then we added many details that would bring life and historical accuracy to the film.

This feels like a graphic novel that allows the audience to keep a certain distance while helping it grow aware of the story.

Can you talk about the color palette? Is it connected to Iran? Can you talk about the lighting? Does each group of characters have their own colors?

Right from the beginning, Sepideh and I wanted to work with a limited selection of colors, just as the possibilities are limited under a siege. We extended it a little bit to recreate the feeling of the region and the context vividly.

The base colors were a strong petrol blue, sand colors and vivid, lifeful reds.

The colors really do come from the region – from nature, the buildings, the cloths, the colors of the old pictures of the war. I started from there and created the atmosphere of all the locations with our amazing team of background artists.

What did you choose in terms of animation techniques? Do they vary based on memories?

The characters are made in 3D with a specific technique that will make them look like 2D drawings. Most of the backgrounds are drawn in 2D. With the characters in 3D, Sepideh could work more the way she usually does with actors. It was also easier to have complex perspectives in 3D. It allowed us to achieve a more live action look in the film. We wanted a lowkey animation, very subtle and minimal. On top of that, in the design and in the compositions, we used a lot of strong lines that would express the characters' feeling.

How liberating is animation to tell this kind of story?

First of all, animation allowed us to recreate Abadan in 1980, a whole city during a specific time, in a country to which Sepideh and Javad cannot currently return. It gave us tremendous creative freedom.

We are always in between laughter and tears in this film. *The Siren* is full of humor, poetry, symbolism... Animation allowed us to express this special combination through colors and shapes.





THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR IN CONTEXT

11 February, 1979	Overthrow of the Shah. Khomeini assumes leadership over Iran.
22 September, 1980	Iraqi invasion of Iran. Saddam Hussein challenges the Algiers Agreement and tries to gain access to the Oman Sea.
1982	Iran takes back the territories lost to Iraq during the first onslaught. Trench warfare begins.
20 August, 1988	The war comes to an end, resulting in no border changes. 1.5 million people died or went missing on both sides.

SEPIDEH FARSI

1965 Born in Tehran.

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

1998	<i>The World Is My Home</i> (first film – documentary)
2001	<i>Homi Sethna, Filmmaker</i> (documentary shot in India)
2003	<i>Dreams of Dust</i> (feature)
2006	<i>The Gaze</i> (feature)
2007	<i>Harat</i> (documentary shot in Afghanistan)
2009	<i>Tehran Without Permission</i> (documentary shot with a cell phone)
2010	<i>The House under the Water</i> (feature)
2014	<i>Red Rose</i> (feature about a romance following the controversial 2009 presidential elections)
2017	<i>7 Veils</i> (documentary on Afghanistan)
2019	<i>I Will Cross Tomorrow</i> (feature about the refugee crisis, shot in Greece)
2023	<i>The Siren</i>



