

## The Separation

This Iranian film received an Oscar this year, and quite rightly. I have been watching Persian cinema for years now, and wonder at how these excellent film makers get around the religious government censors. In this particular movie, the only indication of deference to the censors was that all the female characters wore head scarves (upper class) or chadors (lower class) indoors. I have heard that the moment that women step indoors, they pull off the hated head coverings.

Although this film focused on the events surrounding a marital breakup, it was not just a social drama; it was about the despair and bitterness of people living under a smothering culture. I would have called the movie "Lies" instead of "The Separation,"

because the lies were the main elements of the story.

Lies have a particularly painful history in Iran. Before Islam, the country's popular religion was Zoroastrianism, a monotheistic ancient faith that celebrated life in a round of monthly feasts honoring the foods of the earth. The human action most condemned by the Prophet Zoroaster was "the lie," which he called obedience to the devil. Persian kings were taught to ride well, shoot straight, and tell the truth.

With the arrival of Islam, Zoroastrianism was persecuted and largely drummed out of the country. Islam provided a back door for lying (particularly the Shiite Sect): that one could lie and deny that they were Muslim (or Shiite) to save their lives. Unfortunately, lying took on more of a life of its own at that point, prompted by constant oppression. Women lie to their husbands, lower class men lie to those above them, and everybody lies to the authorities, all of them goaded by fear.

In this film, every single character was compelled to lie—even though they wished they did not have to do so. The unhappy wife, a modern middle class school teacher, had to lie to the divorce judge about why she wanted to leave the country with her husband and young daughter. The judge asked if she didn't think Iran was a good enough place to rear a daughter, and she quickly denied that this was her reason.

Her husband, who had legal control over her leaving or not, would have gone with her had his father not suffered from Alzheimer's disease. He felt obliged to care for his father himself. One member of Parliament in Iran complained that the film maker was using the old man as a metaphor for the country's old Ayatollahs, which the film maker had to deny. I think he was.

A lower class housekeeper was hired to care for the old man while the husband was at work. She had lied to her husband about taking the job, and she was constantly on the phone with her religious authority to find out if what she was doing would condemn her to hell. She only asked about having to change the old man's pants when he wet himself; she did not ask about lying to her husband.

The husband lied to the divorce judge that he did not realize that the house maid was pregnant after she sued him upon having a miscarriage. She lied to the judge and her husband about how the miscarriage occurred. Her lower class husband lied to the people in the courthouse when it looked as though he was about to beat his wife. He denied that he ever raised a hand to her, which nobody believed. He was a man with a very bad temper and bitter class resentment.

And saddest of all, the 11-year-old girl who was torn between the conflicting needs of her parents; she caught each of them in a lie, and was distressed by this. However, when she was compelled to testify to the judge that her father did not know that the maid was pregnant, she realized that if she told the truth, her father would go to prison. She lied.

This marvelous film can tell us a great deal about the life of ordinary Iranians living in perilous times.

## The Secret World of Arrietty

I never miss a chance to see Japanese animated films, which certainly appeal to me more than most American animateds, with the exception of Up! What I love is the sweet dignity of these children's films, along with an artistic eye to natural beauty (something that the Japanese really care about). I also like the encouragement of bravery, kindness, and virtues that we should want our children to have.

The Secret World of Arrietty is about a family who are about four inches tall. They call themselves "borrowers" because they live by borrowing things from the human race that they are unlikely to miss. A single sugar cube can provide sweeteners for their tea that can last the winter. A single bay leaf or leaf of basil can season their food for months, and a single Kleenex can make a number of napkins and cleaning cloths. The family that we meet are the Clocks, father, mother, and teen-aged girl, Arrietty. There are no others of their kind living in the country garden house where they have made their home, living under the floorboards in an old dollhouse.

A sad little human teen-age boy has come to the country to live with his maternal aunt; he is very ill and must get rest and fresh air before undergoing heart surgery. His aunt is a kindly lady, and in the house is also her housekeeper, the comic relief in this film; she is a tough, lower class Japanese woman who has her own set of built-in prejudices.

The boy, Pod, quite by chance, sees Arrietty, and he is curious and enchanted by the idea of little people living in his home. However, the discovery of the Clock family bodes ill for them, because they have had bad experiences before with human beings. They prepare to move on, and hope to find others of their kind. But Arrietty and Pod have something to teach each other before they part.

Along with the charming and touching story is the art, which lovingly depicts all the flowers in the garden, the details of a dollhouse, and the individuated characters themselves. I sat in a theater full of little children and they were obviously fascinated. It was gratifying to see that vulgarity and noise are not necessary to entertain American children when a film this good is available.

#### The Safe House

Denzel Washington is always worth seeing. No matter what his role, I am always ready to believe him. In this film, he plays the role of Tobin Frost, a once great CIA agent who has gone rogue for the past decade, and is on the CIA's most wanted list. He suddenly turns up in Cape Town, South Africa, seeking refuge at the American Consulate. The officials spirit him off in a caravan of vehicles to the safe house, where a young American operative, Ryan Reynolds as Matt Weston, has been bored to death for the past year. This is his first "quest."

The quiet safe house suddenly turns into a killing field as it is invaded by armed men wanting access to Tobin Frost, who has some information that many do not want made public, regarding moles embedded in several security agencies. Tobin convinces Matt that the only way that Matt can stay alive is to help Tobin escape.

The rest of the film is a whirlwind of activity, car races, gun fights, and some uncomfortable exploration of the love-hate relationship that Americans have with their secret services. Paranoia is part and parcel of action movies in our time. The film is good for a couple of hours of entertainment. And like all spy movies, it is a chance to see parts of the world we might not know. In this case, Cape Town.