

Mongrel Media
Presents

BLACKBOARDS

(Takhté Siah)

A FILM BY
SAMIRA MAKHMALBAF

CANNES
OFFICIAL COMPETITION
2000

IRAN/ 85 min./ Colour/In Kurdish with English Subtitles

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BLACKBOARDS: Synopsis

A group of male teachers crosses the mountainous paths of the remote Iranian Kurdistan region. Carrying large blackboards on their backs, they wander from village to village in search of students. The sudden menacing sound of overhead helicopters forces the men to run and seek refuge from an unseen enemy ... One teacher, Reeboir, ventures away from the group and confronts a group of adolescent boys who dangerously transport contraband goods between Iran and Iraq. Reeboir tries to convince the boys of the advantages of learning to read and write, but none of them are interested. There is no time for reading. They are too busy risking their lives to survive ... Said, another teacher also now traveling alone, arrives in a seemingly deserted village. No one responds to his calls soliciting his services as a teacher. He persists, but is greeted only by slamming doors and windows ... Said later meets a group of 100 or so old men accompanied by a sole young woman and child. They, too, are closed and uninterested in learning. Tired and hungry, the old men aimlessly continue their search to return to their native land to die in peace ... One of the old men feels he can only find peace if his young widowed daughter, Halaleh, marries before his death. Said has only his blackboard to offer in exchange for her hand in marriage ...

BLACKBOARDS: Cast

Bahman Ghobadi	Reeboir
Said Mohamadi	Said
Behnaz Jafari	Halaleh

BLACKBOARDS: Technical Credits

Director	SAMIRA MAKHMALBAF
Executive Producer	MOHAMAD AHMADI
Production	MAKHMALBAF FILM HOUSE (IRAN) FABRICA CINEMA (ITALY)
Screenplay	MOHSEN MAKHMALBAF SAMIRA MAKHMALBAF
Director of Photography	EBRAHIM GHAFORI
Sound	BEHROZ SHAHAMAT
Editor	MOHSEN MAKHMALBAF
Original Music	MOHAMED REZA DARVISHI

BLACKBOARDS: Director's Bio

Twenty-year-old **SAMIRA MAKHMALBAF** made her feature film debut with the award-winning 1998 film *THE APPLE*. The story of twin girls locked away from the world by their father, *THE APPLE* made its world premiere at the Cannes Film Festival (Un Certain Regard). She is the daughter of internationally renowned filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf. When she was eight years old, she acted in her father's acclaimed film *THE CYCLIST*. After attending film school, she served as assistant director on his 1998 film *THE SILENCE*.

BLACKBOARDS: An Interview with Samira Makhmalbaf

Why did you choose Kurdistan as the backdrop of your film BLACKBOARDS?

The story of my first film THE APPLE took place in Tehran, which represents a part of Iran. Kurdistan is also one of the regions of Iran. My next film could possibly be shot in some other region of the country ... For BLACKBOARDS, I travelled to different areas of Iran, including Kurdistan. I was accompanied by my father (BLACKBOARDS producer, co-screenwriter and editor Mohsen Makhmalbaf). We crossed some austere territory. My father thought of various subjects, which he talked to me about during our voyages. The idea which eventually became BLACKBOARDS pleased me more than the others.

After THE APPLE, a small-budget film with a simple story and few characters, why did you choose such an ambitious production involving the use of hundreds of persons?

Each subject requires its own structure, and each subject its own means. The screenplay of BLACKBOARDS would not allow a shoot involving three or four characters. The international recognition of THE APPLE gave me a lot of energy. That energy longed for an outlet to be released.

BLACKBOARDS is in the Kurdish language. Were you familiar with this language before?

Luckily, both Persian and Kurdish are spoken in Kurdistan. The actors spoke to us in Persian. Between themselves, they spoke in Kurdish. In directing them, I paid careful attention to their expressions to be able to understand them. Sometimes they proposed dialogues other than those in the original screenplay. I found them suitable and seized the opportunity. During the shoot, I picked up a lot of Kurdish and now I understand the language well when watching BLACKBOARDS. Said Mohamadi who plays the teacher Said was initially a consultant on the film. Later he ended up becoming one of the principle actors.

Are all your performers non-professional actors?

Yes. Except Behnaz Jafari in the part of the woman Halaleh. She is a talented young theater and cinema actress. Bahman Ghobadi who plays the teacher Reeboir, is actually a young Kurd filmmaker. His first feature INTOXICATION FOR HORSES was selected for presentation in the Director's Fortnight (Cannes Film Festival 2000). All of the other performers were recruited on location.

Was it difficult to direct a hundred or so persons at the same time?

It was difficult and easy at the same time. Easy, because the village people are simple, modest and unpretentious. And difficult, because they knew nothing about filmmaking and the camera.

To what extent is the subject matter of BLACKBOARDS authentic?

In fact, the film's story pivots between reality and dream. The smuggling of contraband goods, wandering and the people's struggle to survive are real. For the character of Halaleh, I was inspired by the life of a woman whose husband was killed. I asked the actress to study closely that woman's way of being.

Did the group of old men really come from Halabtcheh?

Yes. During the war between Iran and Iraq (1980-87), the Iraqi Kurds took refuge in Iranian Kurdistan to escape chemical warfare. Halabtcheh is a city on the Iraqi border. To suppress the Kurdish inhabitants, the Iraqi regime used chemical warfare. We shot BLACKBOARDS near that city. There are still land mines left in the region. Local inhabitants who knew the area well guided us to avoid the land mines.

And where did the young smugglers come from?

Those young boys cross the border every day to transport contraband goods to make a little money. They risk their lives every day.

It seems to me that in BLACKBOARDS you envision three generations of which only adults are interested in education and concerned for those who are indifferent.

That's right. The young must work hard to survive because their parents have not provided for them. Those young people don't have much time to study. The aged represent the past generation which doesn't have the patience to listen to others. For them, it's too late to learn. They'll just follow their same path. Bad souvenirs and collective memory upset them. That generation is more nationalistic than the others. That generation approaches the end of its life and wishes to die on its own land. That's why that generation wants to return to its birthplace.

How long were pre-production and shooting for BLACKBOARDS?

Pre-production and shooting were mixed together. We worked in two parts for a total of four months. There was a lot of work with extras. Every morning, we sent

eight vehicles to various villages in the area to recruit non-professional actors. We had difficulties providing them with a hot meal. And all that right in the middle of mountains very difficult to cross. Other problems created themselves. For example, when there was a funeral, a wedding or Friday religious services, work had to be stopped. But I must say that the old men were very cooperative. It was me who had to adapt to them. Like for the river scene, I had to go into the icy water first myself. That's how I began to direct them. In that way I was better able to fully understand the situation.

To what extent did you father, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, help you on BLACKBOARDS?

He produced the film and he wrote the screenplay. In fact, it was more a story with proposed scenes. For some of those scenes, he wrote several versions from which I could choose. During the shoot, I developed those which I liked. I rewrote the screenplay day by day. Today, I can say that the screenplay was written by both of us. He later edited the film.

Did you participate in the editing of BLACKBOARDS?

Yes, I was present. We discussed scenes together. My father was very democratic, in regards to both the screenplay and the editing. Aside from his own films, he has edited a dozen or so others. Sometimes during the editing, he would tell me that he didn't agree with the rhythm of a particular scene. But he essentially respected my work.

Do you already have an idea for your next project?

I'd rather take my time. Make a film each year and travel and study during the following year. I have some ideas in mind, but I'm in no hurry.

Would you be interested in making a film abroad?

Maybe one day I'll make a film abroad, but I must confess that I don't know very well the world outside of Iran. Even if I think that we are after all citizens of the world. That said, I think that to make a film in another country, it's very important to know the culture of that country. On the other hand, I'm convinced that in each country there are enough good filmmakers to make films there.

Iranian society is evolving. What is the current situation for women in general and artists in particular?

Iranian girls and women are becoming more and more active. They participate in elections and in the social world. They are starting to play more important roles. In

the media, theater and cinema, they are equally present. We have a dozen or so female directors in activity in our country.

Interview by Mr. Mamad Haghghat