

THERE IS NO EVIL

(Sheytan vojud nadarad)

A film by Mohammad Rasoulof



150 min/Germany/Czech Republic/Iran/Farsi with English subtitles/2020/Cert tbc

Winner of the Golden Bear – Berlin International Film Festival 2020

Release 2021

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SYNOPSIS:

Every society that enforces the death penalty needs people to kill other people. Four men are faced with an unthinkable but simple choice. Whatever they decide, it will directly or indirectly corrode themselves, their relationships, and their entire lives. In four thematically connected episodes, Mohammad Rasoulof tells their stories, which inevitably are also the stories of the people who surround them.

1 - THERE IS NO EVIL

40-year-old Heshmat is a kind and pleasant family man. He has a peaceful life with his wife and young daughter. He feels caught up in a daily routine. He makes enough money to support his family, but we see in his eyes that they are living with a secret.

2 – SHE SAID, “YOU CAN DO IT”

Pouya has just begun his mandatory 2-year military service. With an honorable discharge, he will be able to apply for a passport and realize his dream of leaving Iran to live abroad with his girlfriend. After only one week of basic training, he is faced with a dilemma. He has a long night ahead of him; a night when Pouya must decide between his dreams or what he believes.

3 - BIRTHDAY

Javad is a young soldier who has been given three days leave from his base. He travels to a small town near the Caspian Sea to be with Nana for her birthday. He has brought a ring and plans to propose to her during the party. After arriving at Nana's home, he learns that a death of a close family friend has caused them to cancel the celebration. The secret of this stranger's death disrupts Javad and Nana's lives.

4 – KISS ME

A pleasant middle-aged couple, Bahram and Zaman, live in the countryside where they keep honeybees and are well liked and respected by their neighbours. Darya, at Bahram's request and Zaman's approval, goes to stay with them at their farm for a few days. Darya's presence at Bahram and Zaman's farm greatly alters their lives.

Further information and downloads [here](#)

Photo set for download [here](#)

CAST

Heshmat	EHSAN MIRHOSSEINI
Razieh	SHAGHAYEGH SHOURIAN
Pouya	KAVEH AHANGAR
Hasan	ALIREZA ZAREPARAST
Salar	SALAR KHAMSEH
Tahmineh	DARYA MOGHBELI
Nana	MAHTAB SERVATI
Javad	MOHAMMAD VALIZADEGAN
Bahram	MOHAMMAD SEDDIGHIMEHR
Zaman	JILA SHAH
Darya	BARAN RASOULOF

CREW

Writer, Director, Producer	MOHAMMAD RASOULOF
Cinematography	ASHKAN ASHKANI
Editing	MOHAMMADREZA MUINI, MEYSAM MUINI
Music	AMIR MOLOOKPOUR
Sound Design	PHILIPP KEMPTNER, HASAN MAHDAVI
Sound	HASAN SHABANKAREH
Production Design	SAEED ASADI
Costumes	AFSANEH SARFEJO
Make-up	MAHMOUD DEGHANI
Assistant Directors	SAMRAND MAROOFI, MEYSAM MUINI
Production Managers	ALI HEMMATI, MARYAM YAVARI
Producers	MOHAMMAD RASOULOF KAVEH FARNAM, FARZAD PAK
Executive Producer	FARZAD PAK

150 min/Germany Czech Republic/Iran/Farsi with English subtitles/2020/1:2.39

MOHAMMAD RASOULOF

Iranian independent director, writer and producer Mohammad Rasoulof was born in Shiraz, Iran in 1972. While studying sociology at university, Rasoulof started his filmmaking career with documentaries and short films. His first film *Gagooman* (The Twilight, 2002) won Best Film at the Fajr Film Festival in Iran. Following the release of his second film, *Jazireh Ahani* (Iron Island, 2005), he faced some issues with censorship laws in Iran and as a result his opportunities to further produce and screen films were largely limited and banned. To this date, Mohammad Rasoulof has produced seven feature films, none of which have been screened in Iran due to censorship, even though his films enjoy a wide audience abroad.

In 2009, following the aftermath of the Iranian presidential election, he was arrested along with Jafar Panahi, while on a film shoot. During an initial trial, he was sentenced to six years in prison (five for gathering and collusion against national security and one year for propaganda against the system). He was acquitted on appeal of the first accusation and his sentence was reduced to one year. It was not enforced, but it came with a ban from leaving the country.

The ban was lifted in 2011, when his film *Goodbye* was selected for the Cannes Film Festival, where he won the Un Certain Regard best director award. His next two films, *Manuscripts Don't Burn* and *A Man of Integrity*, were screened at Cannes in the same section, in 2013 and 2017 respectively. *A Man of Integrity* received the Certain Regard Grand Prix. It was also presented at the Telluride Film Festival.

When Mohammad Rasoulof returned from the United States, his passport was confiscated upon arrival at Tehran Airport, and he was deprived of freedom of movement and work. Following several interrogations, he was sentenced in July 2019 to a year of imprisonment, followed by a two-year ban from leaving the country and a ban on attending any social or political event.

All these limitations have not stopped Rasoulof from working. In the past year, he has worked as a producer and scriptwriter on the features *Hatchback Ghermez* (The Red Hatchback) and *Pesar-Madar* (Son-Mother). Then, Rasoulof completed his work as a scriptwriter, director and producer on the latest feature *Sheytan Vojud Nadar* (There is No Evil). The film won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival in 2020 and the award was received in his absence by the film's actors.



FILMOGRAPHY

- 2002 *Gagooman (The Twilight)*
- 2005 *Jazireh ahani (Iron Island)*
- 2008 *Bade dabur (Head Wind (The Dish))*
- 2009 *Keshtzarhay e sepid (The White Meadows)*
- 2013 *Dastneveshtehaa nemisoozand (Manuscripts Don't Burn)*
- 2017 *Lerd (A Man of Integrity)*
- 2020 *Sheytan vojud nadarad (There Is No Evil)*

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Last year, I spotted one of my interrogators coming out of the bank as I was crossing a street in Tehran. Suddenly, I experienced an indescribable feeling. Without his knowledge, I followed him for a while. After ten years, he had aged a bit. I wanted to take a picture of him on my cellphone, I wanted to run towards him, reveal myself to him, and angrily scream all my questions at him. But when I looked at him closely, and observed his mannerisms with my own eyes, I could not see an evil monster.

How do autocratic rulers metamorphose people into becoming mere components of their autocratic machines? In authoritarian states, the sole purpose of the law is the preservation of the state, and not the facilitation and regulation of people's relations. I come from such a state.

And driven by such personal experiences, I wanted to tell stories that asked: as responsible citizens, do we have a choice when enforcing the inhumane orders of despots? As human beings, to what extent are we to be held responsible for our fulfillment of those orders? Confronted by this machine of autocracy, when it comes to human emotions, where does the duality of love and moral responsibility leave us?



INTERVIEW WITH MOHAMMAD RASOULOF

There Is No Evil consists of four episodes resembling four facets of a diamond; four stories that each deal with a common thread differently. What gave you the idea to break up the story like that?

Knowing how I'll make my next film is an obsession for me, even when I'm currently on another film. Even today, while living in total uncertainty, I have a fairly specific idea of how I'm going to shoot my next film. But when I returned to Iran after my previous film, *A Man of Integrity*, featured in foreign film festivals, I was bombarded with so many problems that I couldn't look ahead to another film. This very disconcerting situation lasted for two years, when I tried to find a solution to film again. I realized that the best way to avoid censorship was to officially make shorts. The shorter a film shoot is, the less the censorship authorities are interested in it, so there's less risk of being caught. So I started to think of several stories. The common theme came quickly to me: how we take responsibility for our actions in a totalitarian context. Resisting totalitarian orders is an appealing idea, but it has a cost. It leads to giving up many aspects of life and sometimes the disapproval of your peers. I wanted to create characters who were proud of having had the strength to disobey, and who face the consequences. Despite everything they've lost, they stay true to their own moral standards.

More than the death penalty, the thread that runs through these four stories is the issue of individual responsibility. But each episode occurs in different surroundings. How did you tackle that?

The first idea came to me upon my return to Iran, when to my great surprise, everyone I bumped into asked me why I'd come back. What had I done that was so bad? I had made a film that dealt with corruption; I had told a story. People expected me to subject myself to repression, that I go on the run because I had disobeyed. Thinking about this situation inspired the second episode: the story of a young man whose future seems mapped out, but due to a refusal during his military service, sees his life tip into the unknown.

During the same period, when I drove past a bank near my home, I saw a man coming out, the same man who, ten years earlier, had given me a tough interrogation in prison and took part in my arrest while on a shoot. An immense anger spread through me. I stopped to watch him. The traffic was heavy. He crossed the street, got into a car and started the engine. I followed him for a long time, enraged. But while I followed him, I gradually started to ask myself what I would have thought of him if I didn't know him, if all I had to judge him was his appearance. And I wondered if, in all the cars around us, there weren't some even worse people, more permeable to oppression. It was highly likely. This realization helped me calm down. I instantly made the connection with the "banality of evil", the concept developed by Hannah Arendt. I thought to myself, this man has probably never thought about the meaning of his actions. It was highly likely that the only way he had found to provide for his family was by carrying out these actions. That gave me the idea for the first episode. The fourth episode is, for me, a kind of leap forward from the second. It was inspired by my relationship with my daughter. When she was younger, she often asked me what the point was in my fight against power, because nobody showed the slightest interest in my fight. She thought it would have been better to focus on my personal and family life. This dilemma, between maintaining one's standards or one's family, inspired me to write the last episode.

The third episode came from my faith in women. I am convinced that if one day, there is a change in the cultural and political structure of Iran, it will come from women. So I wanted to write a story that shows the influence women have on their surroundings. This mother builds her family in such a way that her daughter won't hesitate to give up her true love to fight against repression.

This aspect seems to be fundamental to your film. Underlying the political dimension, intimate relationships are a central theme in each of the episodes. The characters confronted with the dilemma of obedience or revolt are men, but what drives them, their anchor, is systematically a woman. The first episode is fascinating in this sense: right up until the final shot, we know nothing about the dramatic and moral issue that the character of Heshmat is dealing with, but what we do see throughout is his submissiveness to the women around him!

Yes, it was very important to me to show this couple that had completely took on the mechanisms of repression. He with submission, and her reproducing the repression. These attitudes are first and foremost the result of a social education.

In the second episode, Pouya can only overcome his fear and his reluctance thanks to the confidence that his fiancée sends him from the end of the phone line.

In the third, a woman is at the centre of this family who celebrate the beauty of life and freedom, despite the adversity they encounter. And the mother who instilled in her daughter enough strength to leave the man she loves because he has given in to authoritarianism.

In the last episode, the perspective of the man that left everything for his freedom and beliefs is that of his daughter. She is proof of the serenity that this man has achieved. He has nothing, if we refer to the modern day comforts as they are portrayed in the first episode, but he has the vastness of nature all for himself.

The first two episodes take place in closed, claustrophobic spaces, which hint at obedience. The second ends with view of the city and the next two reveal people who, having chosen resistance, live on the margins of city life, in the radiance of nature. Are freedom and resistance exercised in the margins of the system?

That is one of the *modus operandi* of a totalitarian regime: causing society to be homogenized, by depriving people of their free will, their right to question, by defining and enforcing a single law. Going against this hegemony causes a general outcry, provoked by fear. Caution therefore becomes a factor for intelligence. A person who decides to overcome their fear to go against the dominant law is therefore automatically marginalized.



Indeed, since it is all about hegemony and fear, one might wonder how a collective act of resistance such as making a film like this one was possible in Iran today, even more so in your situation.

Yes. Everyone who took part in this film was carrying out an act of disobedience against censorship. With my production partners, Kaveh Farnam and Farzad Pak, we gradually put together a close-knit team that shared the belief. But the theme of the film goes beyond the Iranian context. Resistance to authority and questioning obedience is based on self-esteem, a universal notion.

Your team must have been particularly dedicated, because in addition to the risks, they had to deal with the extreme conditions on the shoot. Can you describe that a little?

For each episode, I had a different assistant director who helped me with the artistic aspect and replaced me on filming locations when I couldn't be there. In those situations, the location scouting was done earlier, as discreetly as possible, the storyboard was prepared and the actors had rehearsed. My director of photography Ashkan Ashkani, my long-term accomplice, could make up for my absence alongside my assistant. We were able to work without any problems for indoor scenes and countryside scenes. The scenes at the airport and in the city were the most problematic. The documents that circulated on the set, just like the scripts and the production board, were fakes and I made sure I was unrecognizable when I was on set. I must say that several times, we had the surprise of being helped by members of the censorship system. One day, while filming, a policeman approached me. I realized he had recognized me and I was afraid. He put his finger to his lips to indicate that he wouldn't say anything. That is the proof that even people entirely owned by the totalitarian system want to help change it.

With regard to censorship, since your films are not released in Iran, and since the content of this one is openly hostile to the system, to what extent and for what purpose do you try to respect the norms imposed on Iranian cinema, for example that women must always be shown with a hijab, even in the private sphere. In the hair-dying scene, where we see a woman's hair finally freed, are you thumbing your nose to this enforced rule?

I am always very vigilant in terms of the degree of trust I ask from my actors. I need to anticipate what working with me might cost them and what they might be accused of. The mandatory hijab is one of the regime's ideological pillars. Non-compliance can easily destroy an actress's career. We have worked with extremely talented young actors, and there was no question of endangering their future. Furthermore, I think that the systematic wearing of the hijab today is clearly identified by the viewers, including foreign viewers, as a rule imposed on Iranian cinema. I therefore have no reason to violate the law. We took every precaution in the hair-dying scene. The actress doesn't expose her hair: it is a double. She is therefore protected if she were ever to be accused for doing the scene. We must never give any reason to the censorship system to attack a film for a superficial element, when the fundamental theme is what poses a problem. The fact that the film isn't shown in Iran is not enough to reassure the censors. What they cannot stand is the nerve to make such a film.

That is exactly what could be so puzzling in such a setup. Your actors wouldn't be condemned for acting in a film made secretly, and which deals with the death penalty and openly criticizes the State, but their career could be jeopardized if they don't respect the dress codes?

There you have the paradox of the censorship system. Don't forget that most commercial comedies that are released in Iran - entertainment products that can't even be qualified as "B" movies and are approved by the censorship authorities, often talk about sex. The suggestive allusions are everywhere, but they are always disguised. In the culture of hypocrisy enforced for decades now,

everything is tolerated once appearances are safe and the general dulling of wits continues. But encouraging the viewer to think and challenge the dominant value system is intolerable and everything must be done to denigrate the work that goes down that road. Of course, it is tempting to play with the enforced norms, but the actors have incorporated the risks they are running. Taking part in a film that is a political critique is something they can be comfortable with, but being accused of immorality would jeopardize their career.



Here, you approach the moral and political aspects based on the senses. Nature, bodies, water, flowers, honey, song and dance are extremely present. Does the political obstruct simple sensory life?

For me, at the heart of the movie is humanity, and the esteem a human being holds for him or herself. The political dimension is secondary, I think. It's about rejecting the violence, whether it's committed on an animal or a man that has committed an offence. I question the character in the first episode for his lack of thought about his actions, whereas he shows signs of humanity in his daily life. This questioning becomes philosophical when it means we understand that those who commit the worst crimes are not the devil or monsters, but human beings subjected to a poor education and a lack of reflection. "The banality of evil" appears to Hannah Arendt during the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, where she realizes with terror that he's just an ordinary man. The thought process I conduct throughout my films is not a direct political fight. But given the sensitive nature of the issue, and the rejection of critical thought as part of the totalitarian system, they are seen as political films both in Iran and abroad.

In terms of writing and directing, while there is an overall coherence, each episode of this film gives an opportunity to explore a different world and language, as you've done in the past in other films.

The script of each episode dictated the direction to me. In the first, I had to show the strict, bureaucratic dimension of the character's daily life. In the second, there was contained energy and

an underlying rhythm that fuelled the directing. In the third, we follow a character who enters into a harmonious environment and we stay with this intruder. Finally, the last episode opens up a perspective of nature, which becomes a refuge. Each shot demonstrates this release. The transition from one episode to the next is very gradual. For that, I must congratulate my editors, Mohammadreza and Meysam Muini who, by helping me right from the writing, managed to make this transition both strong and seamless.

Can you describe the artistic collaboration that was central to making this film? How did this synergy work with your four assistants, the actors and in particular your production designer, who has done a remarkable job?

The production designer, Saeed Asadi, has been my collaborator since *Iron Island* in 2005. We work together from the writing phase. Here, the problem was the variety of sets from one episode to the next. The assistants took on the job of scouting locations for their respective episodes, then Saeed, Ashkan and I went to approve the sets. For the first episode, we had to first of all set the geographical boundaries of the character's travels in the city. Once his social category was defined, it was quite simple to choose the various settings he moves through. This process was a lot more complicated for the other episodes. We had to set up in an abandoned school to recreate the inside of a prison for the second episode. But the outside scenes were shot dozens of kilometres away. There were a lot of constraints which required close collaboration between the set design team and the photography team. For the third episode, we had to fully refurbish an abandoned house with significant time and budget constraints. In the last episode, with the exception of the airport scene, the sets were closer together and the house existed already, so we didn't have much to change. For the actors, the situation was complicated because of the risk they took by working with me, for the impact on their career. The casting was done by my assistants once the long work of setting the requirements for each was done, and I had shared what I was looking for with them. We sought to explore the impressive pool of talent found in the Iranian theatre and television scene, to have our characters played by new faces. Once the actors were selected to play in a short, the assistants or the executive producer told them that it was in fact a feature film that I was directing. There were very few who withdrew because they were afraid. For the last one, it seemed like the obvious choice to ask my daughter Baran to play the character inspired by her. Her personality and what she brought to the role helped me develop the character further.

What about the role of the music composer, Amir Molookpour? In the second episode, there is tension created by a percussion rhythm that leads to the Bella Ciao folk song, which appears again in the last episode.

Right from the writing phase, I had *Bella ciao* in my head to highlight the atmosphere of oppression in which the characters lived. Then we had a very in-depth discussion with the composer, who I had just met, with my editors. It turned out that Amir generally writes symphonic pieces, just like the one he composed for the closing credits. But for the second episode, the character's solitude and tension as he flees required stripped-down music. So he composed this piece for percussion, inspired by the music of a great classic of Iranian cinema, *Qeyсар*. The piece that enables the transition from the third to the fourth episode is driven by the famous Iranian songs that are being sung. Finally, using *Bella Ciao* in the last episode was very important to me. This song, which incarnates adventure and hope at the end of the second episode, takes on a tragic tone in the same totalitarian context, but at the end of the journey for this character.



To come back to the reservations that your daughter and others have about the point of your fight, since your films are not authorized for release in Iran, how do you assess the impact of your work on the society it is depicting?

One might think that films that are not publicly shown lose all of their collective reach. But the fact that they are made here, then they get out and are seen abroad, allows them to come back to Iran and exist there. Screenings abroad have a “breakthrough” value which enables my films to be seen in my country and their recognition in world festivals attracts attention from some of the Iranian public. There is a very active community of movie fans among young Iranians, and they acquire the films no matter the cost. They therefore have an impact, and provoke reflection and questioning. I often meet spectators who tell me about this impact, despite the ban that is placed on all my films. So the Golden Bear awarded in Berlin to *There Is No Evil* gave me immense joy, even if of course I wasn’t allowed to travel to accept it myself.

Your film is being released in France after a year marked by the coronavirus crisis, which caused, among other things, festivals to be cancelled and cinemas to be closed. The lockdown enforced in many countries, including Iran, placed thousands of people in an isolating situation. What has your experience of this period been?

When the COVID-19 crisis hit Iran, my mother was in intensive care because of post-operative complications. Her condition worsened, she remained in hospital for a long period and I visited her bedside very often, as the health situation was worsening. I saw with my own eyes the efforts of the medical workers to try and protect the sick despite the shortage, the people’s distress and the State’s disastrous handling of the crisis. I witnessed incredible scenes, but what marked me the most was the devotion of the healthcare workers and the immense support people showed each other. This health crisis also had an impact on my own personal situation. As soon as my film won the award at the Berlinale, the Iranian judiciary decided to apply my one-year prison sentence. Because of the heightened risk of the virus spreading in the prison system and on the advice of my lawyer, I didn’t present myself to the authorities. To this day, they haven’t yet arrested me. But I have no certainty about the future and have no idea how long this situation could last. During this indeterminate period, I have been working with charities to help patients in unstable situations and as often as I can, I try and take advantage of this extension to enjoy nature.