

*My Iranian Paradise* is a personal film about Iranian history and Persian culture by a Danish filmmaker who spent most of her childhood and youth in Tehran. Annette Mari Olsen relates the grand narrative through small stories, as always in close collaboration with co-director Katia Forbert Petersen. The two have teamed up in Danish documentaries for more than 20 years around a shared ambition to promote understanding and build bridges between cultures.



*My Iranian Paradise*. Photo: Katia Forbert Petersen

# BRIDGEBUILDING

BY TUE STEEN MÜLLER

The two women filmmakers first met in Poland, at the film school in Lodz, in the early seventies, and later hooked up again in Denmark. Katia Forbert Petersen originally fled Poland with her parents in the late sixties and has since, mainly lived in Denmark, working as a photographer, director and producer. The child of a Danish-Polish couple who met in Iran, Annette Mari Olsen lived 22 years in Iran in her childhood and youth. After years of preparation, she has now made a film about her former homeland, *My Iranian Paradise*.

Since starting Sfinx Film in 1988, the two filmmakers, who mainly speak Polish in the office, have produced a variety of stories about people living in the modern, multicultural reality. A significant vision for Sfinx Film/TV's productions, they say, is promoting insight into and understanding of what happens when people from different cultures meet. They know it from their own lives, and say, smiling, "Insight and understanding, that's what we hope our new film will give the audience."

## AXIS OF EVIL

Olsen is also the film's central character. Taking the audience back in time through her own family's history, she offers a far more nuanced image of a country that George W. Bush has branded a member of the 'Axis of Evil.' The film features a wealth of characters that Olsen meets on her way – men, women, families, children, women in chadors, a dervish – all held together by Olsen's monologue referring to her family's history and reflecting on present-day Iran.

"My father was a guest worker and my mother was a refugee," Olsen narrates, framing the film in the story of her father, a Danish engineer who goes to Iran for the Kampsax company to work on the famed trans-Iranian railroad. When his stint ends, her father stays in Iran. He meets a Polish woman, a survivor of Stalin's gulag who ended up in hospitable Iran on

her way back to Poland, like so many other Poles. They marry and have Annette, who enjoys a happy childhood and youth in her beloved Tehran, a city she returns to in her new film. Her family remains in Tehran until shortly before the revolution and Khomeini's takeover in 1979.

## ONLY A PRETEXT

Annette Olsen (AO): My family's history and mine are only a pretext to say what's on our minds. We wanted to craft a nuanced worldview in a film that speaks about the past but points to the future.

Katia Forbert Petersen (KFP): We both grew up in systems that have collapsed. We wanted to convey how fragile an individual is in relation to the big political picture, so we used the personal story, as seen through Annette's eyes, to follow the development of a country that the West has had very close ties to historically, but the younger generations only know very little about.

*It sounds to me that you have a message?*

KFB: Open your eyes. See what's going on in the world. Take a stand. You never know the day before the sun sets. We've done a number of what we call bridge-building films about diverse cultures. We were drawing on that experience here.

AO: We wanted to make an appeal to multicultural tolerance. There once was, and in fact there still is, room in Iran for all religions. The Catholic church that I grew up with in Tehran still exists there today, although they tread softly. Iran also has a large Christian minority, especially Armenians.

## HIDDEN CAMERA

*How did you manage such a large subject?*

KFP: We worked on the manuscript for a long time, so the film's construction was carefully planned. The manuscript was at hand to keep things from spinning out of control. We previously made two children's films in Iran, and in doing so we made friends and contacts. The manuscript, for a large part, was written to sort out the historical facts.

Most of the meetings we show in the film were pretty spontaneous.

*Tell me about the shoot.*

KFP: We shot ninety percent of the film with a hidden camera, even though we had permits. You need one permit for one street and another permit for another street. We didn't film illegally. We used a hidden camera mostly for practical reasons. Luckily, unpredictable things always happen in documentaries and we're experienced enough to know how to improvise. Take the scene of the woman at the Polish cemetery, for instance.

*A very moving scene ...*

AO: Yes. This woman has a life that's all her own. She has her own peace in the cemetery she tends, even though the religion it represents isn't her own. That doesn't matter to her. Nor does it matter to the man by the bridge, who asks me if I can make out the writing on one of the tombstones for the people who died building the bridge. He watches as the Star of David appears – the symbol of the Mosaic faith, I tell him.

## IRANIAN WOMEN

*You're especially critical about the situation of Iranian women?*

AO: The film should not be seen as saying that everything is well in Iran. Many different women wear chadors. One forthrightly lists what she has witnessed by way of violence, incarceration and execution. She used to be in exile, but she never really found her place abroad and returned to Iran. Naturally, she appears in the film under an alias.

KFP: Freethinking people in Iran end up in jail. That's what it was like in communist Poland, too.

AO: Iran is a land of paradoxes. Take the woman who had a nose-job, like so many Iranian women. It's almost like she's wearing a hairband. I wouldn't even call it a scarf. Women defy the rules, even when representatives of the authorities are all around. They don't speak up. One day they will, maybe, when they feel like it.



*My Iranian Paradise*. Photo: Framegrab



*My Iranian Paradise*. Photo: Katia Forbert Petersen

## MAY YOUR HANDS NOT HURT

Olsen speaks Farsi with a Tehran accent. Naturally, that was a huge advantage for the tiny crew – two directors, one front and centre and one behind the camera. One performs while the other records, as Forbert puts it. In a land of paradoxes where shooting permits are mandatory.

AO: To film in Iran, you need a permit from the Ministry of Culture. Besides, you must have a partnership with an Iranian producer, who has to show the film to the authorities, or he won't get a permit to do his next film.

We sent him the film through cyberspace and told him he had two weeks to let us know if he wanted to be listed in the end credits. He asked us to cut the beach scenes from the start of the

picture. If the authorities saw those, he said, they'd pull the plug on the film. So he is willing to take a confrontation with them.

The two filmmakers have fond memories of the film production and a sense of warm gratitude to the people they met.

AO: A beautiful thing about Persian is you don't say thank you. If I give you a cup of coffee, I say: "may your hands not hurt." So the message from our partner went: Tell Mrs. Katia, May her hands not hurt! As thanks for the beautiful shots she took ■

*For further information about My Iranian Paradise, see reverse section.*

Katja Forbert Petersen: "We wanted to convey how fragile an individual is in relation to the big political picture ... to follow the development of a country that the West has had very close ties to historically but the younger generations only know very little about."



Photo: Sfinx Film/TV



Photo: Sfinx Film/TV

## ANNETTE MARI OLSEN (IMAGE LEFT)

Born 1947, Denmark. Grew up in Iran and England. Film director, producer and editor. Master of Arts from the Polish Film School, Lodz (1973). Set up Sfinx Film/TV in 1988 together with Katia Forbert Petersen.

## KATIA FORBERT PETERSEN (IMAGE RIGHT)

Born 1949, Poland. Graduate cinematographer from the Polish Film School. Resident in Denmark since 1969. She has shot some 150 films, including a number of features and worked on camera for German television (ZDF) and the Canadian Film Board. Among others, she has received the Annual Prize from the Association of Danish Cinematographers in 1992, and The Golden Mermaid from WIFT (Women in Film and Television), Copenhagen in 2001.

## SFINX FILM/TV

Founded 1989 by Annette Mari Olsen and Katia Forbert Petersen, both graduates from the film school in Lodz, Poland. Although continuously working with other filmmakers on individual productions, the company produces films primarily by the two directors, who also edit (Annette Mari Olsen) and shoot (Katia Forbert Petersen). Specialize in contemporary issues and educational films. Of core interest are stories on multi-ethnicity and cross-cultural encounters. An important number of children's films include *Behind the Mountains* (2004), which follows two girls in a refugee camp in Iran. Another characteristic of their work is the portrayal of extraordinary women, such as *God Gave Her a Mercedes-Benz* (1992), a colourful story of *Mama Benz from Togo*, and *They Don't Burn Priests, Do They?* (1997), about a controversial Danish woman priest.