Festival films

by James M. Wall in the October 17, 2001 issue

Shrapnel in Peace opens with a close-up of a woman in traditional Muslim attire who is chopping into hard ground with a small shovel. As the camera pans back, we see that she is digging a hole beside a large metal plate. In the distance are the remains of a downed fighter plane. When the hole is deep enough, she moves under the plate and laboriously lifts it over her head. Staggering out of the hole, she begins to walk across the desert.

This woman is one of a small group of scavengers working along Iran's border in the aftermath of that country's long war with Iraq. Director Ali Shah-Hatami shows these desperately poor people risking their lives for the small amount of money that they earn for the scrap metal, which is sometimes part of a live bomb shell. *Shrapnel in Peace*, one of 20 Iranian films showing at this year's 25th annual Montreal World Film Festival, centers on Joneh, a young scavenger who has the exuberance and daring of any 12-year-old. Joneh enjoys his work in spite of, and perhaps because of, its danger.

Joneh works hard at finding bomb shells because his sister needs money for her marriage. Ali Shah-Hatami's film artistry is evident in the images he employs to depict compassion, friendship and death in desperate settings. In one scene, the faces of scavengers riding to work in an open truck reminded me of the Alabama sharecroppers in Walker Evans and James Agee's *Now Let Us Praise Famous Men*, their faces worn by sorrow and struggle, but showing the determination to survive.

Given the profit obsession of American film distributors, few of these Iranian films will be shown in the United States. A happy exception is the latest picture from Iranian director Majid Majidi, whose earlier films *Children of Heaven* (1997) and *The Color of Paradise* (1999) won both the Grand Prize and the Ecumenical Prize at earlier Montreal festivals. Both are now available in video and DVD formats, and, according to reports I have received, are growing in popularity for church programs, in part because they are suitable for viewers of all ages.

Baran, shown at this year's festival, reveals Majidi's growing maturity as a filmmaker and his remarkable ability to evoke authentic performances from nonprofessional actors. *Baran* takes place in war's aftermath, one that produced a mass exodus of between 1.4 million (the official count) and 3.5 million undocumented refugees who fled into Iran from Afghanistan. The wars in Afghanistan started in 1979 when the Soviet Union occupied the country to prop up its puppet regime. Civil war continued after the Soviets left in 1989, prompting the desperate exodus by Afghan refugees.

Baran is a young Afghan girl who dresses as a boy to work on a Tehran construction project when her father can no longer work. Because the refugees have no papers, they work cheaply. An Iranian worker, Lateef, resents the Afghans and directs his anger at Baran, who takes his job as a cook. His anger shifts to awe and then love after he sees Baran combing her long hair, a visual image of enormous effectiveness because it is seen by both the viewer and Lateef through a curtain reflected in a mirror. Another director might have shown Baran in a titillating bath scene, but Majidi is subtle with his revelatory moments.

Baran keeps her secret but gains an admirer in the hotheaded Lateef, who becomes her protector in the work place. When officials discover that there are illegal Afghans working on the site, they close it down. Lateef is forced to look for Baran in refugee camps. His success or failure in this quest provides the film's conclusion, as well as a series of strong images. Baran's footprint in a muddy patch of dirt, for example, is as provocative, sensual and full of promise as the earlier hair-combing scene.

Veteran festival director Jan Troell's best-known films shown in the U.S. are *The Immigrants* (1971) and *The New Land* (1972). Both deal with Swedish immigrants in the U.S. In *As White as in Snow*, Troell, now 70, tells the true story of Elsa Anderson, the first Swedish woman to become an aviatrix. In the early 20th century, young women were expected to remain on the farm as dutiful wives. But Elsa is different: she is first shown in the film as a young girl in the corner of a family group photo who, instead of standing with the family, is peeking out from behind a limb high in a tree.

When Elsa makes her first solo flight in 1920, a reporter asks her, "Why do you want to fly?" She pauses and then retorts, "Why do you write poetry?" Self-expression drives Elsa. Her ambition leads her to frustration in love and vulnerability to commercialization by a German businessman, who convinces her she can make money as a barnstorming parachutist.

Catherine Martin offers her view of feminine self-expression in 19th-century Quebec in her first feature film, *Marriages*, an ironic title, since the goal of Yvonne, 20, is passionate love instead of an arranged marriage. Yvonne seeks self-expression through her sense of oneness with nature. To depict the contrast between Yvonne's restricted surroundings and nature, where she feels alive, Martin use images of trees stirring in gentle and sometimes strong winds in the forests. On her return from a daily swim in a secluded pond, Yvonne stops to smell and touch the leaves of trees, and then rolls around on the ground, savoring her presence in nature.

This is a work of film art as far from a rapidly edited MTV-style commercial picture as a country lane is from a jammed freeway. And like a quiet country lane, a film like *Marriages* is hard to find, but worth the search.