

Property rights

By [John Petrakis](#) in the [January 27, 2004](#) issue

Before the advent of drug traffickers and serial killers, films often focused on conflicts over real estate. Think of the red dirt of Tara in *Gone With The Wind*, the stately mansion in *The Magnificent Ambersons* or the contested open plains in *Shane*. Property is also the focal point of *House of Sand and Fog*, based on the 1999 novel by Andre Dubus III. The film is directed and co-written by first-timer Vadim Perelman, who emigrated from Russia to Canada when he was a teenager. The immigrant past is significant, since the movie is in many ways a story of immigrants and how their concept of the American dream can go awry.

The house in question is a modest bungalow in northern California owned by Kathy Nicolo (Jennifer Connelly), a tired beauty whose husband has recently left her, in part because of her alcoholism. (The house is an inheritance from her father.) Kathy has been in a funk for months, and since she has not been opening her mail she has not responded to repeated requests for a tax payment, and this neglect leads to her eviction. Before she can pull herself together, the house is auctioned off.

The buyer is Massoud Amir Behrani (Ben Kingsley), a one-time colonel in the Iranian Air Force who was forced to flee when the shah was deposed and the ayatollahs took over. He has been trying for years to reclaim his former glory, but after being reduced to hard manual labor and a position at an all-night convenience store (jobs that he keeps secret from his family), he sees the cut-rate purchase of this house—which he plans to resell for a huge profit—as the first step back to respectability. The idea of property defining a man is beautifully portrayed during an early flashback of Behrani, in full uniform, standing proudly on the balcony of his massive home in Iran, staring out at the Caspian Sea.

And that's pretty much the story. Kathy has lost her house and wants it back. Behrani appreciates her problem, but isn't willing to sacrifice his family's security (or his pride) to fix her mistake. Along the way, Kathy gets involved with Deputy Sheriff Lester Burdon (Ron Eldard), the officer who helped her move out the day she was evicted. He's in a loveless marriage, and he sees in Kathy a woman who not

only wants and needs him, but presents him with a concrete problem to solve, namely, getting her house back.

To the film's credit, there are no creepy scenes of windows shattering in the night or half-naked women being chased down empty beaches. For the most part, the film plays by the rules. The characters do what people might actually do under the circumstances. Kathy seeks out an inexpensive lawyer. Behrani adds a balcony to increase the value of the house. Lester leaves his family for Kathy.

In between confrontations, the film introduces us to Behrani's family, most notably his wife, Nadi, played with great sincerity by Iranian actress Shohreh Aghdashloo. She is terrific throughout, and especially powerful when Lester, who has come by the house unannounced, starts talking about deportation. Nadi knows that a return to Iran means certain death for all of them, and she lets the stubborn Behrani know.

It is the acting, in fact, that keeps this story driving forward. Though Eldard seems over his head in the later scenes, he is convincing early on as a simple cop who finds himself falling for the woman he is evicting. Connelly is outstanding as the groggy Kathy. But it's Kingsley who holds the film together. From the opening shots of him in uniform, through his series of daily humiliations, to the moment when he finally realizes what chaos he has wrought, Kingsley carries the film on his back, even through some significant story flaws.

The flaws include the inconsistencies in Lester's character, the way the "tax problem" plays out, and an ending that is first confusing and then over the top. But thanks to Kingsley, we are willing to forgive and forget.

Ultimately, *House of Sand and Fog* is about two desperate and hurting people who are unable to work out their differences. In that sense, it doesn't matter that she's an addict and he's an immigrant. What matters is that for both of them, ownership becomes a burden that weighs them down morally and spiritually. They realize it eventually. But as in all great dramas, the realization comes too late.