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Argo, Orient Yourself!

ARCHIVES > NINE > | REVIEW | BY KAZ RAHMAN



While living in Hyderabad, India and doing pre-production work on what would eventually be my feature film *Deccani Souls* (2012) I often encountered the cultural presence of Iran. The historic architecture of regional monuments, the linguistic influence and the continued diplomatic and cultural programs in the modern city. I even met the Consul General on one occasion at a film festival inauguration. My press-photographer cousin suggested I go to the Consulate and inquire/ request a cultural visit to Iran to scout locations for my work in progress film script.

After talking to one official I wrote a brief on my interest in the Islamic Architecture of the Deccan region and its roots in Persia and my desire to go and scout/ document some of the surviving structures in Iran. I photocopied and included the details page of my Canadian passport. As it turned out my film project developed in a different direction and I would shoot it mostly in and around Hyderabad and Ontario, Canada but I never heard back from the Consulate and after watching the film *Argo* wonder if they had a good laugh about my Canadian proposal to go to Iran and 'scout film locations...'.

The story of *Argo* (2012) centers around the 'rescue' of 6 American diplomats who are hiding in the home of the Canadian ambassador after the 1979 revolution in Iran. Director Ben Affleck plays Tony Mendez the CIA operative who creates a phony Hollywood film production (a sci-fi story called 'Argo') to lay the foundation of flying in to Tehran and bringing the Americans (under the guise of a Canadian film crew scouting locations) back out to the comfort and normalcy of America.



Argo is problematic on many counts. The film opens with a cartoon historical overview which gives context to the hatred most Iranians feel towards the Shah and points out American complicity in the 1953 coup that overthrew democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh. The closing shot is a lineup of Star Wars action figures and toys in the bedroom of Mendez's son. This bracketing is noteworthy because it reflects Affleck's desire to come across as credible by acknowledging the American involvement in 1953 while also playing to his action-fantasy childhood memories of the time (I also grew up collecting action figures in suburbia and my bedroom looked quite similar to the one in *Argo*).

The fallout from the political decision by the Canadian Ambassador to receive and clandestinely protect the 6 Americans is never touched upon. Canada would have a complete sever in political, economic and cultural relations with a 2500 year old country/civilization. The embassy and all diplomatic ties were cut for 8 years and normal relations would never again be established (in late 2012 the Canadian government closed the Iranian embassy which had been operating on a restricted level in Ottawa since 1996 in another extremely dubious move). [1]

A film set in the historical Tehran of 1979 and shot in contemporary Istanbul and California has no major Iranian characters at all. The one marginal character is the obedient Canadian Ambassador's housekeeper who is presented as a hard-working but potentially dangerous local despite her still limited access to what is going on in the house. At one point she is questioned by a revolutionary 'militia' and by choosing to protect her 'master' rather than disclose the whereabouts of the 6 Americans Affleck has reiterated the dominant discourse of the last 34 years- the pressure to denounce post-revolutionary Iran socially, politically and culturally and the faux legitimacy it creates coming from a person of Iranian origin. Angry mobs of bearded and chador-clad extras pooled from California's Iranian-American community complete the environment of paranoia throughout the picture- at various turns surrounding the van of Mendez's crew and screaming obscenities to them in a crowded market.

The 'climactic' moments when Tony Mendez and his 'Canadian crew' (why would Hollywood hire a Canadian film crew?) try to pass through Iranian customs seems very sedate compared to much of the real-life tough immigration scrutiny Muslims receive in North America and Europe. At one point one of the 6 Americans (the only one who can actually speak Farsi) starts detailing the plot and genre of the fake sci-fi film 'Argo'- he uses blaster sound effects and explosions as if the Iranian is a child who he has to animate to. The customs official later calls the production office of the phony film in Hollywood and the 'drama' is that Mendez's makeup/costume advisor and the obnoxious producer manage to answer the phone after being delayed by a shoot on one of the lots; in 1979 (long before cheap long-distance calling) would a busy Iranian customs agent really go to the trouble of placing a call half way around the world to confirm that it is a production office?

By adding this scene Affleck manages to make the Hollywood producer one of the 'heroes' of the entire operation while the wider story of the 'Iran-Hostage crisis' and Carter losing the 1980 presidential election and the subsequent muting of American power in the region is glossed over- almost as if the North American viewer should take solace in this one 'victory'.

Costumes, set design and schlock sci-fi imagery at Hollywood launch parties are all meticulously re-created with great success yet it is surprising and regressive that in the 'global village' of the 21st century the place of the imagined 'Orient' still looks so heavy-handed. It is somewhere to go in, rescue people, cause damage, create an elaborate charade and come out and back to the 'West'. The city of Istanbul serves this purpose on the big screen both by playing a form of itself (a location which is a bridge between East and West) and by standing in for Iran.

As stated earlier the film *Argo* ends in the bedroom of Mendez's son but the symbol of a war of ideals and values comes in the scene on board the British Airways plane when the stewardess announces they have now left Iranian airspace and to great cheers declares:

"....Alcohol can now be served..."

FOOTNOTES

1) Ken Taylor sets the record straight about *Argo's* take on the 'Canadian Caper' | Simon Houpt | The Globe and The Mail | Feb. 25 2013 <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/awards-and-festivals/film-awards/ken-taylor-sets-the-record-straight-about-argos-take-on-the-canadian-caper/article9044112/>



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