

believe



That the indie film heroine Natalie Portman is excellently cast as the undead-vanquishing Elizabeth Bennet in the upcoming film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*



In order to recreate the feeling of 1950s Iran, Neshat, whose work has never been officially sanctioned in her native country, and her crew were forced to film in Morocco. Uve Haussig

Art-house filming

As with her previous static works, Shirin Neshat's directorial debut, *Women Without Men*, uses beautiful and lyrical imagery to question commonly held views of Iran and its people, writes Ed Stocker

Shirin Neshat has never been one to tread an easy path. As an acclaimed artist, exhibited around the world, her video installations and photographs have tackled issues of oppression, freedom and independence for Muslim women. Her situation is complex. As an Iranian who lives and works in New York, she has the freedom to express herself without fear of political repercussions or censorship. The flipside, of course, is that she is better known to the international community and Iranian expatriates than those living within Iran, where her work has never been officially sanctioned. But this has only made her more determined to create a dialogue about the social and political plight of her beloved country.

Perhaps best known for her striking black and white photographs of Muslim women in chadors overlaid with beautiful calligraphy, Neshat admits that she needed a new challenge away from the particular social space that her work inhabits. "I got a little tired," she says candidly. "I just felt that I needed to experiment. I was really fascinated by the idea of cinema because my work has become more and more cinematic, and I liked the idea of expanding beyond the art gallery and museum world and going into movie theatres."

The result is Neshat's debut feature film, *Women Without Men*, a bold and lyrically beautiful piece of cinema. It is an adaptation of the well-known book by Shahrnush Parsipur, banned within Iran for its so-called subversive content. The story centres on four exploited women who gradually find inner piece in a mystical orchard away from the patriarchal world of Tehran.

Set in 1953, the film flits from magical, semi-surreal contemplations of universal issues to more concrete, linear storytelling, in the lead-up to the US and UK-backed military coup that toppled the democratically elected regime of Mohammed Mosaddeq. The story was a "perfect match" for the artist, fusing the duality between reality and escape that consistently features in her work. "The project had a lot stylistically in common with what I try to do," she notes. "Mystical philosophical reflections that also address sociological and political issues."

The orchard is a fascinating part of the film that transcends time and place. It is an environment where the women in the film face demons and are empowered. It is also a magical space where concrete facts are obscured by a more reflective discourse. Neshat really plays with the metaphorical and allegorical potential of this setting and in many ways the saturated colours and lush cinematography that are a feature of these scenes are the most overtly artistic part of the film.

"The idea of an orchard or garden as a concept is so loaded," Neshat explains.

The film, which picked up the Silver Lion at this year's Venice Film Festival, was an exhausting endeavour that took six years to complete. The reason was the sheer ambitiousness of the adaptation. Neshat admits that it was tough because she initially failed to realise how hard it was going to be to transfer the multilayered aspects of the book to the big screen. "We rewrote the script 100 or maybe 200 times," she continues. "We edited the film so many times because

it came back to this balance of what I was trying to bring to the movie as a visual artist and what was required within the language of cinema, which you have to respect otherwise you'll lose your audience."

Although there is a clear continuity between all her work as highly visual pieces of art she found making a movie a steep learning curve, which she calls a "cinema school": having to relearn the importance of narrative dialogue and pace, as well as making sure the audience would be entertained. "In theatres people get bored very quickly," she adds, "and you have to keep their attention span going." It was also a completely different experience to work with producers and fundraisers for the first time. For one, she had to take into consideration their fears and suggestions, something she had never had to do working on her own in the art world.

Neshat has dedicated *Women Without Men* to all those who have fought for Iranian democracy over the years, singling out the green-clad supporters of Mir-Hossein Mousavi who took to the streets of Iran in June to protest against the contested re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, viewed by many as fraudulent. Some of the more cynical critics have rushed to accuse Neshat of piggybacking the news coverage the country has received. This is something she strongly denies. Often truly great films appear at a time when they effortlessly seem to strike a chord. And often a good chunk of luck is involved. *Women Without Men*, six years in the making, is one such film, finished just as the situation in Iran was coming to a head.

"We were really shocked by the parallel of how our story that takes place in 1953, and the shots of people protesting in the streets, resembled Iran [in 2009]," the director explains. "Not just the images, but what they were looking for, aiming for and demanding."

The film is part of Neshat's wider philosophy of promoting Iranian culture and history to the world, and showing that, despite often dark and desperate periods in the country's history, the people have never stopped fighting for what they believe in. It appears that in showing her films to the world, she seeks to redress the misguided opinions about Iranians found in many corners of the globe, where it is assumed that a people and a government are one and the same.

The screenings of *Women Without Men* have been strongly attended by the overseas Iranian community – and Neshat admits that reactions have been mixed – although many within Iran are not able to see the film because it is simply not avail-

able. Neshat is quick to mention the many connections she has made with Iranians over the internet – all important for voicing dissent and getting the truth out to the world following the June elections – and believes that somehow, some way Iranians are getting to see her work through an underground movement where banned films and music abound.

However, she remains unable to film in Iran and has to seek funding from European backers. To recreate the feel of 1950s Iran for *Women Without Men*, she and her crew were forced to relocate to Morocco. The casting process was also hugely lengthy because it was "too dangerous" to bring people over from Iran, so Farsi-speaking actors based in Europe were used. The problem was that many of the younger generation were no longer completely fluent, or spoke Farsi with a slight accent, while the older generation had long-abandoned their acting careers. After years scanning Europe for talent, thanks to the tireless work of one Austrian casting agency, the female leads were found. Neshat, ever pioneering, decided to cast the Hungarian actress Orsi Tóth – best known for her lead role in *Delta* – in as the disturbed former prostitute Zarin – a character who remains mute throughout the film.

Neshat is clearly saddened that her work is not more widely available within the Middle East and she sees attending this year's Dubai International Film Festival as an opportunity to reach out to the region. "I feel like I want to share my film with the people of Iran," she says. "There is a large population of Iranians

and other Middle Easterners living in Dubai. I've been in discussion with my producers: they must understand that I'm a Muslim woman and, even though I realise the film won't be welcome in a lot of non-secular countries [in the region], they should be encouraged to distribute it or at least screen it in that part of the world."

Although there are clearly issues within the film that some viewers may find offensive, the director is keen to stimulate the cultural, political and artistic discussions that would come from showing the film. For now, Dubai and Abu Dhabi are leading the way with annual film festivals that give Middle Eastern directors the only viable platforms to promote their work in the region.

Far from being discouraged by the challenges she encountered when filming, Neshat seems galvanised by her experience. Like many directors, she admits that she will never be completely happy with the final project, but acknowledges that it is always hard to let go of something to which there is so much obvious emotional attachment. She has no plans to stop at one film, nor will she rule out making more commercial films in the future. Neshat is already scouring books and manuscripts in search of the next film project.

In fact, it seems that the business of movie making has her well and truly hooked. "I've come to the conclusion that I love it," she laughs. "I'm absolutely convinced that we don't need to separate art from cinema. I want to make films that are seen in theatres and understood, but are profound and aesthetically beautiful, too."

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