



***Davandeh (The Runner)* is a forthcoming LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library in Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Below is Kino Ken's review of that masterful visual poem.**

17 of a possible 20 points = a minor classic

Key: *= outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates a juvenile performer

Iran 1984 color 94 minutes subtitled live action feature visual poem

Kanun parvaresh fekri (Kanoon) / Studio of the Voice and Portrait of the Islamic Revolution of Iran Producers: Ali Reza Zarrin and Reza Ramezani

Points:

2 Direction: Amir Naderi*

2 Editing: Bahram Beyzaie (also spelled Beizai)

2 Cinematography: Firouz Malekzadeh*

Still Photography: Maani Petgar*

2 Lighting

0 Screenplay: Amir Naderi and Behrouz Gharibpour

**1 Music (Non-original): Bob Thiele and George David Weiss; Burt Bacharach;
Victor Young**

- 2 Production Design: Mohammad Hassanzadeh* and Amir Naderi***
Art Direction: Mohammad Hassanzadeh*
- 2 Sound Design: Amir Naderi***
Sound Recording: Nezamoddin Kiaie*
Sound Mixing: Mohammad Haghighi*
- 2 Acting**
- 2 Creativity**
- 17 total points**

Cast: Madjid Niroumand (j)* (Amiro, age 9), Abbas Nazeri (junk shop merchant), Musa (also spelled Moussa) Torkizadeh (j) (Amiro's best friend), many others

In a pre-revolutionary Iranian seaport city of the late 1960s, nine-year-old orphan Amiro leads a threadbare existence. He dreams of escape from poverty and illiteracy. His hunger for education and exotic locales is fed by foreign magazines, occasional visits to a cinema and the array of nearby cargo ships. These come from places Amiro can only dream about, since he has no family, mentor, or benefactor to provide finances and an itinerary for world travel.

The waif must content himself with life centered along a colorful, if depressingly familiar, shoreline. He's created a haven for himself in a rusting, beached oil tanker. In order to eat, Amiro collects deposit bottles, shines shoes, sells ice water. All occupations risky for a child alone. Some adults attempt to cheat, bully, or banish the lad, who has no guardian.

A local boys' gang serves as a brotherhood whose elder members feel free to extort or outright grab any potentially profitable findings, regardless of who first possessed them. The stronger prey upon the weaker, demonstrated by a complete disregard for rules, etiquette, or personal property. No one says "please" or "thank you" in this competitive shark tank of a society, despite the Koranic injunction to show charity toward orphans.

Amiro's best friend is Musa, who appears to be only at most a year or so older. They have common interests, acquiring money through collecting discarded bottles floating in the sea and playing imaginary pilots aboard Amiro's landlocked ship. Both use movies as windows into a larger world of adventure and beauty. Neither plans to stay treading water indefinitely at Abadan.

Unlike most youths in the gang of runners to which he intermittently belongs, Amiro has acquired an aesthetic sense. That propels him to create collages of photographs and string up a personalized variant on patio decorations in lieu of fairy lights or Japanese lanterns. He's even willing to shell out a couple rials to purchase a non-functional oversized light bulb, simply because its size, color and shape are appealing.

Two great barriers constantly frustrate the urchin. One is imprisonment in illiteracy. Without some sponsor to register him for schooling, Amiro can only admire picture content in aviation magazines he relishes. Observation will not by itself clarify how planes fly. Eventually, in sheer frustration, Amiro tears up the pages of a magazine, littering the coastline with them. There is no alternative open apparently but to attempt self-registration in whatever school might accept him. Night classes outdoors, which stretch credulity, offer a solution eagerly accepted. Through sheer repetition and memory, the late-starting scholar masters all thirty-two letters of the Farsi alphabet, an achievement still mere preliminary to actual reading.

Meanwhile, there are shoes which must be shined, ice that melts all too quickly under a broiling desert sun, footraces demanding concentration and endurance to win. Participation by itself is not adequate to fulfill ambition. Amiro must either run faster or further than competitors.

There's a stubbornness evident too in the youngster, demonstrated by an exhausting, yet ultimately triumphant chase after a cyclist customer who drank a glass of precious ice water, then wheeled off without bothering to pay for it. The junior vendor shows no qualms about pursuing that cheat to the extent of shepherding him into the path of an oncoming vehicle. Whatever means it takes to get what's due is morally acceptable. Hmmm. In this regard, the film's hero is no different from companions. For all of them, kicking, shoving, tripping, even manhandling rivals to obtain or maintain a lead is normal. It's even expected. There's no sense of fair play or justice in such a society.

Amiro's attempts to communicate with representatives of the more mobile adult world are generally limited to shouts, frantic arm waves and leaps into the air. Most of these elicit no responses. That doesn't faze an eternal optimist. But watching a tottery, hacking old woman try to cross a highway does, providing a glimpse into what might happen to his own mobility as he ages. That dampens temporarily enthusiasm about life. So does watching a peg-legged young man

walk with the aid of a crutch. And a reported shark sighting in water where he had been swimming for castoff return deposit bottles makes him far less ardent in acquiring them. Anything damaging to legs is an evil to be avoided. Better and safer sticking to land operations.

When the one person who understands and sticks up for Amiro is invited to join an older seafaring brother, change comes obtrusively into the orphan's world. There will be no replacement figure. Merely a tradeoff as friendship's end trails into school's beginning. Musa and his pal take a final ride together on a rented bike, one of the few affordable pleasures available. Later the same day, an imminent voyager brings Amiro his shirt, one he's possibly outgrown, as a farewell gift of friendship. Its recipient doesn't return the favor. Alone on a rocky beach that night, he mourns the loss of his only loyal and protective playmate, gazing tearfully into a relentlessly assertive sea.

Obsession with racing fills otherwise empty leisure time. Pitting his own legs against those of older kids or the wheels of a freight train moving at reduced speed across a dusty, dry wasteland provide a constructive outlet for restless energy.

In a nightmarish climax, Amiro and fellow scroungers battle heat, thirst and each other in a dash backgrounded against scorching flames. Their goal: reaching as quickly as possible a block of ice perched atop an oil barrel.

Can the youngest and scrawniest somehow emerge as first to lay hands on the prize? Why not borrow the dvd yourself from the library and find out?

Madjid Niroumand's performance in the lead has been lauded by critics and cinephiles around the world. Deservedly so. With a face as actively expressive as his legs are kinetic, Niroumand is a sympathetic and transparent protagonist. Making extensive use of close-ups and tracking shots, the film enmeshes screeners in his seemingly unending struggles. His refusal to retreat and passionate disavowal of a charge of thievery flung at him by a toadying outdoor headwaiter make him an admirable juvenile entrepreneur. This despite contrary traits of selfishness and assertive rudeness directed against people who loot his treasured, though lean, stock of goods.

Watch for Musa Torkizadeh's Chaplin imitation, a comic interlude of universal appeal.

Bahram Beyzaie's editing of chase sequences, seemingly influenced by such masters as Buster Keaton and Akira Kurosawa, is compellingly polished and thoroughly involving.

Lighting is impeccable throughout, which seems customary in a Naderi film. Whites in particular are highlighted through a succession of naval uniforms.

Listen carefully to the masterfully recorded and calibrated soundtrack for strains of Burt Bacharach's 1965 hit song "What the World Needs Now Is Love" and Louis Armstrong's 1967 rendition of "What a Wonderful World," a song written by the team of Bob Thiele and George David Weiss which was stiffed by listeners when it first appeared only to become an accepted evergreen standard. Victor Young's "Around the World" melody certainly underlines Amiro's desire for travel anywhere, any time. Mixer Mohammad Haghghi, recording engineer Nezamoddin Kiaie and sound designer Amir Naderi are to be commended for creation of a supremely memorable soundscape.

Cinematographer Firouz Malekzadeh and still photographer Maani Petgar supply stunning visual compositions that alternately delight and terrify audiences. The flickering flames of *Davandeh's* blazing, superheated scramble to possess the ice block paint a hellish series of scenes which will not soon be forgotten. Just as fascinating are Petgar's shots of Niroumand's sweating face as he battles his way towards tempting coolness.

Mohammad Hassanzadeh and the director team to optimal effectiveness in generating a brilliantly luminous coastal city in what appears to be an ever-present rainless summer. One where nothing but infrequent dust storms ever interrupt a parade of searing sunny days.

On the minus side, the screenplay by Amir Naderi and Behrouz Gharibpour unfolds a series of episodes loosely connected to a central figure and location. There's no true surprise present and the ending, while upbeat and affirmative, seems an unnecessary anticlimax after the prolonged rapture scene at the oil barrel.

Bonus features of this Criterion Collection release include an insightful essay by author Ehsan Khosbakht giving readers significant supplemental material relating this film to others in the Naderi output and to events in the director's own life that found their way into his autobiographical visual poem. Khosbakht's point about Amiro's battle to remove himself from various forms of waste is quite well taken. Amiro wants a purpose for his life and is unable to

find it in Abadan. He must get outside that community to someplace where he can expend abundant vitality in a more meaningful, constructive kind of busyness.

There's also a relaxed, intimate conversation between Naderi and director Ramin Bahrani, an admiring acolyte, that lasts a little over twenty-one minutes. A 2022 audio interview conducted haplessly at Film Forum with Naderi and actor Madjid Niroumand is moderated by Rialto Pictures founder Bruce Goldstein. It's marred by confused microphone and chair placements. Naderi's thick accent and rapid speech don't make for clarity, either.

Another supplement is the short live action experimental film *Waiting*, a 1974 production shot in Iran intended to represent some kind of personal dream Naderi wishes not to elucidate for cinema fans. It runs about forty-eight minutes. *Waiting* is quite repetitive and nearly wordless. Be warned. To call it enigmatic is a severe understatement. Like *Davandeh*, it offers richly luminous lighting, a boy protagonist and a fixation on ice. Unlike the former picture, there are at least ten significant female characters observable. *Waiting*, a fragmented visual poem lacking any obvious narrative line, will probably not prove a rewarding experience for adventurous seekers. Action epic it's not.

Where do you stand today, Amir Naderi? is a supplementary photo essay from 2018 shot in New York City. It highlights Naderi's proclivity for manufacturing photographic collages. These are strong indicators of the director's major and minor influences, revealing inspirations from Tarkovsky and impressionism to Welles and Godard. It has a runtime of twenty minutes.

A theatrical trailer for *Davandeh* of about one and one-half minutes duration is an enticing extra.

With one profanity in the subtitled main feature and a repeated obscene phrase in an interview, this dvd release is best geared to teen and adult audiences. For them, *Davandeh* will be a potent, gorgeously lensed treat.