



Below is Kino Ken's review of the Iranian docudrama *Sib (The Apple)*, which is a December, 2024 dvd entry into the Hugh Stoupe Library of the Heritage Methodist Church in Ligonier, Pennsylvania.

12 of a possible 20 points      \*\*\*1/2 of a possible \*\*\*\*\* = above-average film

Daon Media dvd Iran 1998 color 84 minutes in Arabic with Korean and English subtitles live action feature docudrama Producer: Iraj Sarbaz  
Hubert Bals Fund / MK2 Productions / Makhmalbaf Productions /  
Rotterdam Film Festival

Points	Category
1	Direction: Samira Makhmalbaf
1	Editing: Mohsen Makhmalbaf
1	Cinematography: Mohamad Ahmadi, Ebrahim Ghafari
1	Lighting:
1	Written by: Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Samira Makhmalbaf
2	Locations
2	Sound: Behrooz Shahamat
2	Ambience
1	Creativity

## **0 Dramatic Tension**

**Cast: Twins Massoumeh and Zahra Naderi (Massoumeh and Zahra Naderi), Ghorban Ali Naderi (father of Massoumeh and Zahra), Azizeh Mohamadi (Azizeh), Zahra Saghrisaz**

**After watching a television report, director Samira Makhmalbaf made in reaction a docudrama centered on rescue of twin girls in Tehran from a condition of virtual house arrest. Her resultant film was comprised of events subsequent to social services intervention triggered by neighborhood complaints. Lead performers were identical to parties involved. Locations used matched the slum area where events depicted had originally happened.**

**Appalling malnourishment, deficient sanitation, and illiteracy reduced disfavored siblings at the center of massive public controversy to almost a feral state. Unable to walk in a normal fashion, they instead scuffled along like insecure toddlers even though they had reached the age of eleven or twelve by the time filming occurred. When they ate, it was in a manner resembling greedy sloppiness of infants. The girls tore at food like wolves, then stuffed fragments into mouths with no trace whatsoever of etiquette.**

**Never having been exposed to monetary transactions, when allowed outside for the first time by a liberating female social worker, the pair couldn't fathom how to complete a sales transaction with a child vendor for ice cream. The boy wanted cash for a tantalizing treat so obviously desired. Since he wouldn't give it to customers freely, by golly it had to be obtained through outright grabbing.**

**Stealing was a concept outside their experience and understanding.**

**Nor were the two explorers any better equipped to deal with peer playmates. Instead of taking turns and sharing with girls from the vicinity, they attempted to monopolize equipment, bullying whoever dared resort to customary procedure and understandable recovery of their group's playthings.**

**In fact, even the operative principle of a key turning a lock mystified the uneducated youngsters.**

**Apparently their father, steeped in fundamentalist Islamic dogma, believed females must be not only sheltered and protected, but imprisoned as well. In one scene he quoted an Islamic author to buttress his argument the girls would be harassed and ravished if allowed outside their home to play.**

Nor does their mother offer any support, encouragement, or instruction. Blind, an Arabic-speaking outsider in unfamiliar Tehran, she had withdrawn into her husband's house, accepting life behind a locked gate as destiny and imposing the same straitjacket on her children.

A social services woman who tried to overcome such obstinate resistance made no headway with that inordinately cruel, self-serving mother. Not so much subservient and docile as arrogantly aloof and a latter-day Xanthippe, Mrs. Naderi seemed resolved Massoumeh and Zahra would not obtain any material, social, or educational privileges she herself lacked.

Mr. Naderi, though somewhat less hostile and self-centered than his spouse, obviously felt their actions, or rather inactions, socially justified. What a dreary commentary on life in post-Revolution Iran.

While the film's director sympathized with the girl's plight, that sentiment put her squarely in an adversarial role relative to their parents.

Very much evident in the film is a progressive viewpoint espousing educational opportunity and greater social freedom for Iranian girls. When that failed to occur, what was seen onscreen transpired, to the detriment of not just child victims but also their city itself. Such near-zombies as Massoumeh and Zahra would never, left to themselves, be capable of contributing significantly to either nurturing motherhood or responsible employment.

Direction was minimal for this production, with players either recreating past experiences or responding extemporaneously to open-ended questions and manipulative directions determined by Samira and her scripting dad, Mohsen. Any unduly meandering footage probably was trimmed away by Mohsen Makhmalbaf himself at the editing stage.

An assertion made by at least one reviewer that causing key participants to replay episodes from their life was unduly cruel seems unfounded. It might have helped them understand better the long-term consequences of their bans. Furthermore, the filming was approved voluntarily by Ghorban.

Mr. Naderi probably didn't intend to deprive his daughters of their humanity and reduce them to a nearly bestial level. Yet that was the ultimate result of his protective guardianship, one which had a contemporary parallel in the treatment of citizens by Iran's Council of Guardians.

Mrs. Naderi, throughout more of a maledicting veiled enigma, certainly didn't seem to value personalities and potentials of offspring. Indeed, she barely qualified as a mother figure beyond the circumstance of pregnancy.

The girls themselves, confused by unforeseen liberty to interact with the world outside their gate, proved as tentative and uncooperative with people encountered as would be expected. Not having been tutored in any kind of morality, they were unable to express themselves in coherent speech, instead relying on impulsive shoving and snatching. Civilization had not previously impinged on their miniscule environment with rules, concessions, compromises, and negotiating. They must unlearn a full eleven years of isolation as quickly as possible. What filmmakers captured was merely the beginning of a breakthrough process requiring years to complete. If it ever succeeded at all.

Sound recording of dialogue and diegetic noises was optimal.

Indifferent video-quality lighting neither enhanced nor marred viewing.

Due to characters playing themselves, it was impossible to evaluate "acting" here. Their behaviors, however, generated and sustained a high level of viewer fascination. That is always a film asset.

Editing felt somewhat sluggish due to Mohsen Makhmalbaf's adoption of Kiarostami's patented dialogue repetitions. Those added little or nothing of new information and slowed down further an already crawling film pacing.

More functionally adequate than poetic or inspired, cinematography made minimal use of tracking shots. Arresting camera angles were avoided altogether. Close-ups of a camera-shy mother and posing preadolescents striving for cuteness hardly benefitted the production.

Documentary realism didn't materialize. Nor was it sought. But lack of novelty, surprise, and suspense caused the film to stop short of realizing its full potential.

Relying heavily on primary colors, *Sib* succeeded admirably in recreating the world of damaged childhood. It left unclear how much of that ruin was due to mistaken social conventions that hampered rather than enhanced young lives, denying access to outlets for curiosity, imagination, and talent.

Little change in Iranian society has transpired since *Sib* was made. On the contrary, freedom for civilians has further diminished. It's very doubtful a follow-up film featuring Massoumeh and Zahra would be even as guardedly optimistic in tone as the original.

**This motion picture makes for appropriate viewing by teens and adults. It should be seen by anyone trying to understand modern Iran's repressive culture, where the apple of freedom still dangles beyond the reach of Iran's restive population. Whether its people can manage to take a bite out of that tempting fruit in future remains an open question.**