

Late-Blooming Iranian Actor Comes to "The Kite Runner," via a Traffic Light in Tehran

Sixty year-old Iranian actor, Homayoun Ershadi, is slight of build and stands only about 5'7" tall. He was almost surprised when award-winning director, Marc Forster, cast him as commanding patriarch, Baba, in "The Kite Runner," which opens later this month in Twin Cities theaters. The much-awaited film examines the deleterious effects of war with the Soviets and subsequent rise of the Taliban on Afghan civil life during the course of over twenty years.

But the film is adapted from the best-selling first novel of the same name by Afghan-born writer, Khaled Hosseini, and it depicted Baba as an imposing giant.

I knew the book very well. I loved the book. When I went to Kabul I told Marc Forester, 'Why did you choose me, because the book says Baba is 6'8", big hands, wrestling with the bears?' You know? I'm not that kind of a person. He said, 'Don't worry. Start reading your lines.' So, I did. And after that I realized he found 6'8", big hands, those things, in my heart.

It was easy to understand Forster's reasoning last month when I caught up with Ershadi at the Chambers Hotel in downtown Minneapolis. Ershadi's aquiline nose and mane of mostly-salt-and-some-pepper hair suggested a powerful and erudite intelligence, which is exactly how he appears in the film. His fit for the role was so natural the audition process was quick, even underwhelming.

Casting agent, Kate Dell, based in London, she called me and said, 'Marc Forester saw your film and he likes your performance and he'd like to meet you.' So, I went to Kabul and had an audition with Marc Forester, and that's it.

Ershadi's presence provides an aggressive edge that helps hold the film together in its early stages. Although Baba's son, Amir, is the film's protagonist, he spends much of the film as a passive observer of life, a future writer, and not the ambitious, tough son Baba wants. This passivity causes Amir to watch in helpless horror as his childhood best friend, Hassan, is raped in a Kabul back alley. Amir's shame surrounding the rape haunts him as he and Baba flee to America after the Soviets invade in 1979 and Hassan is left behind. Twenty-one years pass before Amir grows strong enough to confront the incident after he has become a successful novelist living in San Francisco and a mysterious phone call summons him to the rescue of Hassan's son.

The film relies on Ershadi for continuity. He's onscreen with both the adult Amir (Egyptian-born Khalid Abdalla) and the younger Amir (Zekeria Ebrahimi) and his

friend Hosein (Ahmad Khan Mahmidzada). Ershadi balances the demands by drawing from his own experience as a father.

The way I've felt ready to be Baba, because I'm the father of two kids. And those small kids [the actors playing younger Amir and Hosein], as soon as I met those kids, I knew there was a chemistry between me and those kids, especially with older Amir because I have one son and one daughter. Now I have two sons and one daughter because that relationship [with the actor playing older Amir] goes all the way up until now.

Ershadi is remarkably believable as a more youthful Baba not only by dyeing his hair darker but also through a sensitive ear for the role, which he believes cannot be developed through mere preparation.

I didn't prepare myself to act because it comes from inside. So when you feel it, you don't have to act. It comes. Naturally it comes out, everything.

If you're thinking Ershadi's approach seems unplanned, you're absolutely right. He never planned to be an actor. Until 11 years ago, he'd been working as an architect in Iran.

Okay, I graduated in architecture from a university of architecture of Venice, Italy. Since then, I worked as an architect in Iran, then in Canada, then again in Iran until almost 11 years ago. And by accident, I became an actor.

The accident that caused Ershadi to become an actor occurred in traffic, but it didn't involve a car wreck. He was driving through the streets of Tehran when legendary Iranian director, Abbas Kiarostami, spotted him at a traffic light and asked him to star in his next film, "Taste of Cherry."

I stopped at the traffic lights with my car, with my Range Rover, which you see in "Taste of Cherry," that's my car. And I was thinking. And then Abbas Kiarostami knocked [on] my windows [of my] car and said, 'Do you want to be in my film?'

Ershadi's performance in "Taste of Cherry" led Kiarostami to cast him for his next film, "The Pear Tree." Ershadi enjoyed the process so much, he quit architecture to pursue acting full time. And he's been well employed ever since.

Because, as you know, we don't have any agents or managers in Iran. If they want you—or a director or his assistant—they call you directly. And when they call you, that means they chose you. You don't have to market yourself. Those

actors not famous. There is no audition. They know what they want. So, they'll call you directly without having an agent or manager.

Although Ershadi's story has a Hollywood "a star is born" quality, he has no current plans to follow up "The Kite Runner" with another Western film. In fact, he's perfectly content to return to Iran.

I'm proud to be Iranian. I live there. I have my family there. I'm going to stay in Iran for the future? I don't know.

Maybe Ershadi will even return to building skyscrapers. He's certainly not the type who's worried about having a plan. And it shows.

For Movie Talk, I'm Paul Bachleitner.