

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

By Paul Bachleitner

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 in mid-December 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. The film is based on the best-selling first novel of the same name by Afghan-born writer, Khaled Hosseini. But it depicted Baba as an imposing giant.

Ershadi recalls asking Forster about it. ““Why did you choose me, because the book says Baba is 6’8”, big hands, wrestling with the bears?” 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 in November 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.

Ershadi laughed when he talked about it. “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 adds 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.

Ershadi also provides 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 Mahmidezada](#)). Ershadi balances the demands by drawing from his own experience as a father. He has two grown children.

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,” he said. “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.

"I graduated in architecture from a university of architecture of Venice, Italy," he said. "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 occurred in traffic, but it didn't involve a car wreck. Ershadi was driving through the streets of Tehran when legendary Iranian director, Abbas Kiarostami, spotted him 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," Ershadi said. "That's my car. 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.

"You don't have to market yourself," he said. "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.