



Patron: Jim Broadbent
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The Salesman (Cert 12a)

Dir: Asghar Farhadi

Starring: Shahab Hosseini, Taraneh Alidoosti

Sponsor: Sue Firth & Tony Butcher

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Synopsis. Tehran, the present day. Literature teacher Emad and his wife Rana are forced to leave their apartment when the building nears collapse. Babak, a fellow cast member in an amateur production of Arthur Miller's 'Death of a Salesman', fixes them up in a top-floor flat in a building he manages. One day Rana buzzes in an intruder, assuming it's her husband, and is badly beaten in a possibly sexual attack. She becomes withdrawn in the aftermath. Emad becomes increasingly aggravated by his inability to soothe her and resolve the situation, until an abandoned pick-up truck gives a clue to the assailant. Emad identifies the attacker and stages the subject's exposure in front of his own family and the watching Rana. Rana, disgusted by her husband's behaviour, walks away.

In Asghar Farhadi's latest complex and involving domestic drama, living spaces once again set the context for personal conflict. For his Oscar-winning *A Separation* (2011), it was a smart Tehran apartment that proved a trap as much as a home for the dysfunctional central couple. For his French foray *The Past* (2013), a half-decorated suburban house spoke volumes about partners, lover, children living a half-formed life. Now, back in his native Iran, Farhadi surprises us with opening shots of a stage set being struck, before we relocate to another Tehran flat - this one scarred by cracks in the masonry - from which the story's husband and wife are soon fleeing when the entire building looks liable to collapse under their feet. A few minutes in, and the metaphorical signals are not looking good for this marriage, not just because high-school literature teacher Emad and his wife Rana (Farhadi regulars Shahab Hosseini and Taraneh Alidoosti) are about to be homeless, but also because those preceding images of a theatrical set-up alert us to the notion of a drama being played out on a stage. And in Farhadi's universe, you sense that the drama won't end comfortably.

Indeed, this initial gambit in *The Salesman* shows Farhadi now thinking beyond the apparently naturalistic approach of his recent work, motioning towards a narrative that's more upfront about its own construction. Certainly, it's apt to describe his *modus operandi* in his international breakthrough pictures as 'apparently naturalistic', because Farhadi's rare skill in showing how seemingly unremarkable household happenings (the travails of a new live-in nurse, conflict over a stain at a dry cleaners) snowball into elaborate clusters of deception and ambiguity. These are recognisable and troubling portrayals of how we're so often prepared to shave off a few moral corners on the shortcut to fulfilment. All so ordinary, yet so awful, but they flow so naturally that we tend not to notice Farhadi's guiding hand ushering us to an even fiercer pitch of emotional intensity.

In this instance, though, once we learn that the childless husband and wife, on top of their difficult living arrangements, are both performing in an am-dram production of Arthur Miller's *Death of A Salesman*, it's clear that Farhadi is prepared to sacrifice his seductively, self-effacing storytelling for a new mode of address. Highlighting links between domestic, dramatic and cinematic space opens up a diagnostic process, in which Farhadi isn't just dissecting Iranian social conflicts as they play out in the lives of this troubled couple, but is also looking inwards to explore his own artistic contribution to the attitudes shaping that social fabric.

All of which is a rather round-the-houses preparation for noting that *The Salesman* proves a somewhat ungainly undertaking in comparison with Farhadi's previous form, at least until its seemingly disparate elements lock



together in the final stages, where the film's dramatic power and expansive scope really make their presence felt. After their life is thrown into chaos, Emad and Rana set themselves up in a rather scruffier apartment perched on the top floor of a Tehran walk-up, where there's a niggling issue with the previous tenant, who hasn't just left a whole load of her stuff but, they learn, was a woman with a lot of single male visitors - a polite way of saying she's a prostitute. Meanwhile, at a certain remove from all this upheaval, rehearsals continue, the more serene coverage inside the theatre space contrasting with the restless, roving camera covering events in the flat. Emad (who does seem to like the sound of his own voice) characteristically takes centre-stage as Willy Loman, while Rana, of course, is Linda, the quietly suffering spouse.

Soon however, a more extreme drama is happening in their real lives, when Rana buzzes in her hubby - or so she thinks - only to be attacked by an intruder. She's left bloody, battered and unwilling to talk about this traumatic offscreen event, which marks a moment of total fissure in the marriage. She doesn't want the police involved, presumably because an intrusive investigation will only add to her sense of violation (though she never specifies whether or not a rape took place), leaving Emad feeling distanced and angrily moving towards taking justice into his own hands. No Hollywood-style *Death Wish* revenge fantasies here though, as Farhadi begins at last to pull the disparate strands of the narrative together.

As ever, he resists clichéd characterisations in favour of nuanced, contradictory humanity. We want to be sympathetic to Rana, but her withholding silence (in Alidoosti's reserved, vulnerable but always dignified performance) keeps emotional communion at arm's length, and we are forced instead to confront her desperate situation, where the path of legal redress is likely to lead to further humiliation. Her fears are then played out metaphorically in an onstage breakdown, where she has to abandon the play's public performance. The suggestion is clear: owning her own pain comes at a cost of isolation in a society whose uneasy attitudes to sexuality leave women like Rana with nowhere to go.

In such a situation, what is the husband's role? Again, we want to be understanding of Emad's difficult position, but as the plot switches into slightly half-hearted suspense mode, his drive is less to soothe and understand his troubled wife than to be seen to be the man who sorts everything out. Hosseini is utterly convincing here, seemingly lacking self-analytical skills because he's been programmed by society not just to be in control but to be seen to be in control. He's a teacher by profession, after all - though his attempt to guide young minds by showing them Dariush Mehrjui's 1969 Iranian cinema classic *The Cow* proves fruitless - and the latest in a line of Farhadi male characters who always know better and simply have to have the final word, even if the end product is more pain and division, with the women bearing the brunt of it.

It's only at this stage in the proceedings that the connections between the

Miller play and the central couple's domestic travails come into focus. Farhadi, perhaps wary of distracting us from the rising intensity of Emad's search for the attacker, doesn't give us that much of the play itself, but those who know *Death of a Salesman* well will recognise that Emad's plight echoes Willy's in how the values with which he lives his life are breaking it apart. Farhadi's bravura finale adds yet another layer, however, as Emad turns the cracked shell of their old apartment into a virtual stage set in which to play out his dramatic resolution of the crime that's shaken his marriage to its foundation, complete with invited audience for his moment of triumph. This being a Farhadi film, it doesn't quite work out as expected, but drawing attention at this key climactic moment to the self-aware theatricality of what we're seeing, Farhadi is perhaps suggesting that his role as director is just as problematic as Emad's ego-driven desire to be seen to be the controlling hand. Is the filmmaker suggesting that he's just another pompous Iranian man who thinks he knows better?

Finally, at the close of this self-reflexive, somewhat awkward yet daring and ambitious film, comes its key image - the wife walking away from the apartment, just as she'd earlier walked off stage. Left to heal on her own, we see her not so much putting distance between herself and the male gaze, but exiting the masculine *mise-en-scène* defining her marriage, perhaps even her entire society. For Farhadi too, it might even be a recognition that even his own cinematic mastery has its limits, while paradoxically leaving us with one of the most despairing, powerful and courageous moments in his increasingly storied filmography.

Credits

Emad	Shahab Hosseini
Rana	Taraneh Alidoosti
Babak	Babak Karimi
Customer	Farid Sajjadi Hosseini
Sanam	Mina Sadati
Siavash	Mehdi Koushki
Kati	Maral Bani Adam
Director	Asghar Farhadi
Screenplay	Asghar Farhadi
Director of Photography	Hossein Jafarian
Editor	Hayedeh Safiyari
Art Direction	Keyvan Moghadam
Music	Satar Oraki
Sound	Yadollah Najafi, Hossein Bashash Sara Samiee
Costume	France, Iran, Qatar 2016 123 mins

Another view

The opening moments of Asghar Farhadi's *The Salesman* are a salvo against film critics who accuse the director of cleaving too closely to conventional dramatic composition. Still shots of props, lighting, and multi-level stage arrangement of an in-film production of 'Death of a Salesman' is suddenly disrupted by a two-minute tracking shot, breathlessly following middle-class couple Emad and Rana Etesami (Shahab Hosseini and Taraneh Alidoosti, both riveting) as they and their neighbours are forced to evacuate their crumbling apartment complex.

This juxtaposition of visual cinematic language stacked against the more static scenes from the Arthur Miller play turns out to be a running thread throughout the film.

As is typical of Farhadi's thematically-dense screenplays, the cracked foundation of the couple's home is a harbinger of marital tension. While waiting for their old apartment to be repaired, Emad and Rana, part-time players in the local theatre group putting on the Miller production, take up temporary residence in a flat owned by a fellow actor in the company. However, their new landlord failed to disclose the circumstances surrounding the hasty exit of the flat's prior tenant: a sex worker ousted against her will, evidenced by a locked room filled with her possessions.

Farhadi slowly builds *The Salesman* around things left unsaid and unseen. The previous tenant, never shown onscreen, goes from a mild curiosity to lingering pall. When a former client of the tenant breaks in and attacks Rana, the event is never shown or spoken of in explicit terms, other than in the aftermath – bewildering shots of a profusely bleeding cut on Rana's head coupled with the mish-mash of contradictory testimony from neighbours who heard her cry out.

Rana throws herself into the play wanting to forget about the incident. Yet the far-reaching repercussions of rape (again, never stated as

such in Farhadi's script, but alluded to in the subtext – piercing gazes and unanswered questions between the couple), are felt in the trace evidence. From Rana's bandaged head to a quiet dinner at home suddenly becoming tainted by the use of money left by the previous tenant, *The Salesman* is haunted by these structuring absences.

Like 'Death of a Salesman', Farhadi's *The Salesman* turns into a tragic examination of masculinity, as Emad is unable to let go of the incident in question, despite Rana's protestations. From this point, the film loses momentum. The complex and often contradictory behaviour that rape survivors can exhibit in the aftermath of an attack is a compelling subject, one that Farhadi only hints at. Emad's search for revenge, a reworking of an old Iranian film trope, crescendos early and then awkwardly peters out beyond that point.

The final shot, recalling the last lines of Miller's play ("We're free...") loses some emotional punch due to its poorly timed execution. Still, *The Salesman* provides further evidence of Farhadi's mastery when it comes to articulating the middle-class woes of contemporary Iranian society.

Mallory Andrews: Little White Lies

Our next film: February 23rd, 7.30pm

Elle (France 2016, dir: Paul Verhoeven. Cert 18)

Isabelle Huppert is in typically imperious form as Michèle, a successful businesswoman, who is attacked in her own home one night and raped. Everyone she knows is appalled by her ordeal; but instead of reporting it to the police, as her friends expect, she decides not to take any action. Gradually the film reveals the complexities in Michèle's character that lead to this decision and invites us to consider whether there should be a socially 'appropriate' response to violence, or whether it is up to women how they deal with trauma, regardless of whether it makes sense to other characters (and the audience).

Programme news

The following 3 films - all released since the programme went to print - have been selected to complete the season.

April 6th Land of Mine (Denmark 2015. Cert 15). This tense drama explores issues of post-war revenge, compassion and forgiveness. Sergeant Rasmussen, a Danish NCO, is in charge of a group of Nazi POWs, teenage conscripts forced into the German army and later captured, who are made to clear thousands of landmines from Danish beaches. Rasmussen is initially hostile towards his charges, but as he gets to know them, his view begins to change. Nominated for Best Film not in the English Language, 2017

April 20: Hotel Salvation (India 2016. Cert 12a). Following a prophetic dream, 77 year-old Daya demands to travel to the sacred ghats of Varanasi to achieve salvation in his final days. His overworked son Rajiv finds himself roped into accompanying him to Mukti Bhawan (Hotel Salvation) where Daya finds a new lease of life among the residents of this last stop hostel. Shubhashish Bhutiani's debut feature is a charming drama about a father and son as they try to navigate through complexities of family life.

May 4: Call Me By Your Name (Italy 2017. Cert 15). In Northern Italy in 1983, seventeen year-old Elio begins a relationship with visiting Oliver, his father's research assistant, with whom he bonds over his emerging sexuality, their Jewish heritage, and the beguiling Italian landscape. Luca Guadagnino follows *I Am Love* and *A Bigger Splash* with another finely judged study of the complexities of love. The film has been universally praised since its release and is nominated this year for 4 Oscars and 2 BAFTAs

Archive classic

As part of our 65th anniversary, the Committee plans to include an 'archive classic' in the 2018-19 season. Over the next few weeks, please take a moment to look at the montages that play before each film and let us have your suggestions, no later than March 23rd. The committee will then shortlist (subject to availability) and ask members to vote on which film to include in the new season, which will be selected on May 9th. More details will be announced soon.

Other events

This year, the Society is supporting both the RAF Centenary and the BFI Cinemathèque project with screenings in June and July. Details will be confirmed as soon as possible.