

## DVD Review: 'The Stoning of Soraya M.' Has Undeniable Power, Zero Subtlety

Submitted by [mattmovieman](#) [1] on March 16, 2010 - 2:53pm

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CHICAGO – Who in the world would want to see this film? It's as excruciating and appalling as the title promises, complete with simplistic depictions of good and evil. Like the bestselling novel from which it's based, the film aims to raise global awareness about the Islamic practice of stoning women to death, a fundamentalist tradition that still occurs today. Yet are the filmmakers harboring deeper intentions?

It's impossible to see "The Stoning of Soraya M." without thinking of the film that it resembles down to its very title: "The Passion of the Christ." Both films were produced by Steve McEveety, whose company Mpower Pictures markets films to a decidedly right-wing Christian audience. His rollicking patriotic comedy "An American Carol" reduced suicide bombers to sight gags, while "Stoning" reduces the vast majority of its Islamic characters to a bloodthirsty mob indiscernible from the Jews in "Passion." Does McEveety see this picture as little more than a horror film for the religious right, confirming fears of Islamic fundamentalists?



DVD Rating: **2.5/5.0**

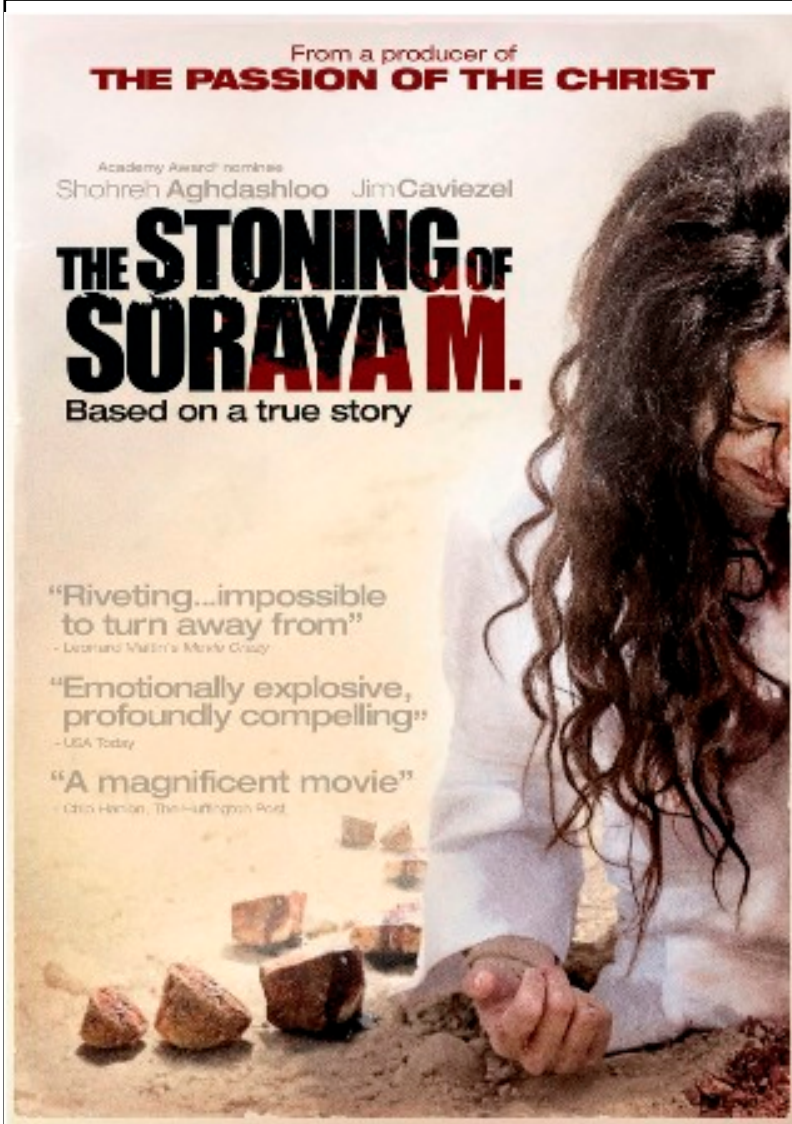
Regardless of the filmmakers' objectives, there's no denying the film's primal, visceral power. Director Cyrus Nowrasteh ("The Path to 9/11," "The Day That Reagan Was Shot") adapted the book with his wife Betsy Giffen, using the story of French author/journalist Freidoune Sahebjam as a framing device for the central drama. The setting is Iran, circa 1986. An abusive man (Navid Negahban, sneering behind a villainous black beard) wants to get rid of his pure-hearted wife, Soraya (Mozhan Marnò), so he won't have to pay her support when he marries his mistress. Thus, he concocts a bogus adultery charge that the gullible townsfolk instantly buy, with the exception of Soraya's widowed aunt Zahra (the beguiling Shohreh Aghdashloo, whose bottomless eyes never looked more righteous). This all leads to an inevitable stoning sequence that lasts about the same length as the scourging scene in "Passion," yet is even more painful considering Soraya's death is at the hands of her immediate family.



Mozhan Marnò stars in Cyrus Nowrasteh's *The Stoning of Soraya M.*

*Photo credit: Lionsgate Home Entertainment*

The film's utter lack of subtlety and nuance is its gravest misstep. Soraya basically emerges as the Christ-like figure, with Zahra cast as the maternal Mary, conflicted mayor Ebrahim (David Diaan) as Pontius Pilate, the local mullah (Ali Pourtash) as Jewish high priest Caiaphas, and the blackmailed Hashem (Parviz Sayyad) as any of Jesus's betraying disciples. The film resembles "Passion" in nearly all departments, with John Debney's mournful score, Christien Tinsley's gory make-up effects, and a hugely distracting Jim Caviezel (as Sahebjam, decked out in another fake nose) evoking constant memories of Mel Gibson's blood-spattered blockbuster. The story concealed within Sahebjam's book deserves to be told, but these are the wrong filmmakers to tell it.



The Stoning of Soraya M. was released on Blu-Ray and DVD on March 9th, 2010.

Photo credit: Lionsgate Home Entertainment

"The Stoning of Soraya M." is presented in its 2.35:1 aspect ratio, and includes a decent amount of extras, which is quite unique for a DVD these days. The Nowrastehs share an audio commentary where they discuss some of the film's deviations from fact, such as how Sahebjam obtained the story by returning to the village, posing as Zahra's relative. There's also a commentary featuring insights from line producer Stephen A. Marinaccio II, production designer Judy Rhee, costume designer Jane Anderson and costume supervisor Sierra Robinson. They reveal that some of the stronger Farsi language was "cleaned up" in the subtitles, particularly during the stoning sequence.

Yet the most interesting material is contained in the three-part, 42-minute making-of featurette, which offers ample behind-the-scenes footage of the filmmakers in the still-undisclosed shooting location (a mountain village in Jordan). The director comes off rather badly, as onset tensions cause him to lose his temper. Of course, there's no end to the obstacles, as public prayer causes the shoot to halt five times per day, while the director has difficulty communicating with the "unprofessional" extras (Nowrasteh's father is recruited to phonetically teach them Farsi). But when the filmmakers laugh at an angry local man who wants them to leave, they come across as less than sympathetic. Producer McEveety admits that he wants the film to "embarrass the Muslim world...that would allow this to happen," while Negahban says that he doesn't want Iranians to be seen as barbaric. To that end, this film certainly won't help.

*'The Stoning of Soraya M.'* is released by Lionsgate Home Entertainment and stars Shohreh Aghdashloo, Mozhan Marnò, Navid Negahban, Ali Pourtash, David Diaan, Parviz Sayyad and Jim Caviezel. It was written by Cyrus Nowrasteh and Betsy Giffen Nowrasteh and directed by Cyrus Nowrasteh. It was released on March 9th, 2010. It is rated R.



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