

Interview: Director Richard Raymond on the Passion of ‘Desert Dancer’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on April 9, 2015 - 2:04pm

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CHICAGO – What does anyone understand about regimes outside their political or moral universe? The setting is Iran, the time is during their controversial 2009 elections and the medium is dance as expression. Combining those elements was the challenge for director Richard Raymond, in his debut film “Desert Dancer.”

The film creates an allegory, using dance as a symbol for breaking free of government oppression, and is based on the true story of Afshin Ghaffarian, portrayed by Reece Ritchie. Like the 2014 film “Rosewater,” it uses the 2009 elections in Iran as a backdrop, and the constant vigilance of the “morality police” as an arbiter. Director Richard Raymond and screenwriter Jon Croker tell a simple story, but punctuate that story with two vital dance numbers, that say more about the events than the events themselves.



Director Richard Raymond on Location for ‘Desert Dancer’

Photo credit: Relativity Media

The British born Richard Raymond has an superhero-like movie origin story. Like a young Steven Spielberg did at Universal Studios, a 15-year old Raymond walked onto the Pinewood Studios in England as if he belonged, and started working there in a variety of film jobs (story below). From there he became a producer, and worked on a couple of short films in 1998 and 2005, before scoring his debut with “Desert Dancer.” HollywoodChicago.com talked to director Raymond via phone in anticipation of the film’s release on Friday, April 10th.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did this film become your debut feature? Did you develop it with Jon Croker or was it a screenplay you came upon?

Richard Raymond: In January of 2010, I read an article in the Sunday London Times about a young man named Afshin who had a dream of becoming a dancer, in Iran, where that activity was restricted. I was really struck by his story, and I connected to it because I was really amazed that something as simple as dance would be repressed in Iran.

I spoke to him in Paris, where he had sought political asylum, and had dragged [screenwriter] Jon along to meet him. We spent six months getting to know him and his life story, and gaining his trust. We recorded over eight hours of interviews with him, and that's how Jon and I approached the screenplay.

HollywoodChicago.com: Obviously you had to make the decision to have the entire film in English. In the interaction with the Iranians involved in the project, would there be a different tone or emotion in the native language?

Raymond: That question fairly should be answered by an Iranian, but of course it absolutely would have been different. I'm from London, and the artistic sensibilities I would bring to this film would be wrapped up in a 'Western mentality,' no matter how much research into the culture or Iranian films I may have watched. I had to embrace who I was, and my voice, to tackle the subject instinctively. I wanted to tell the story in a universal and accessible manner, because I believe that freedom of expression is a universal theme. Repression is just not tied to the Iranian regime, it can live in any country, family or state of mind.

The film was an opportunity to tell a universal story, with actors from all over the world, and through a bedrock of the Iranian setting and cast. We have over 50% of the cast from Iran, and the rest all from all over the world. Freida Pinto is from India and Reece Ritchie is from the U.K., for example, and I thought it was a great way to bring a positive awareness to the story on an international scale. It's not a political film, it's the story of the Iranian people.

HollywoodChicago.com: What specifically did the young actors who weren't Iranian need to know about being in an oppressive society that they were representing?

Raymond: They all did their own research, and it opened all their eyes to how lucky we are to have the freedoms we enjoy. It also opened their eyes to some very interesting facts...we all thought the dance performance in the desert was a huge deal and statement, but the Iranians who actually went through it just tossed it off as another day. They didn't think anything depicted in the film – the dancing, underground clubs, drinking, secret relationships – was a big deal. It's their way of life, between the world outside and the world outdoors. The non-Iranian actors became fascinated with that, and connected to it.

We also included Iranian cooking lessons, which became important, plus Iranian music, films and cultural consultants. They taught us as much as they could before shooting, and continued to consult during the filming process.



Freida Pinto and Reece Ritchie Portray Young Iranian Artists in 'Desert Dancer'

Photo credit: Relativity Media

HollywoodChicago.com: The dance scenes were monumentally choreographed, both with the dancers and the dance of your shooting style. How much of the choreography was true to Afshin's real story, and how much was stylized to fit the screenplay?

Raymond: All of the dance in the film are based on the what Afshin told us his dances were all about. For example, in the desert sequence, it

was about two people who were born of the earth, into a world where their love cannot be realized. Once they did come together, the regime split them apart and killed her. The point was they were born in Iran, and they would die in Iran.

The choreographer who worked on the film, Akram Khan – who also choreographed the opening ceremony of the London Olympics – enabled us to take actions in the context of those dances and take it further. I needed it to be immersive cinematically and with a certain vision – it’s silent storytelling, and I wanted it to work out that way. I wanted an intimate feel, a close-up on the small details of the movement, enhancing the feeling as you’re watching it unfold. It was very important to the emotion of the overall dance.

HollywoodChicago.com: Interestingly, your film is set in the same era as the other 2014 film set in Iran, the Jon Stewart directed ‘Rosewater.’ How do you think your portrayal of that 2009 election differed in tone with the interpretation in ‘Rosewater’?

Raymond: We actually shot ours a year before ‘Rosewater,’ but that film came out before ours did. [laughs] I thought ‘Rosewater’ was excellent, and it did include a dancing sequence with the prisoner in the story, which I truly loved. The main difference in that film is that it’s told through the prism of a camera lens, because their story is told through the eye of a journalist, and they didn’t have to re-create much. We had to re-create more on the streets, and I actually envied that they didn’t have to do as much of that.

But for our story, it was important to put the audience into the middle of the protests, to be attacked by motorbikes through the perspective of our characters. We needed to be in the middle of it, to take the audience through a different journey.

HollywoodChicago.com: What will Westerners never understand about the type of totalitarianism practiced by the Iranian government? Or do we just have different interpretations of what freedom means in our own political structures?

Raymond: That second question is key. Think about so many people in the U.S.– where I’m speaking from – who are not free in their own minds, for whatever reason that might be. What is freedom anyway? Is it having a 9-5 job to pay the mortgage mean being free? What does freeing your mind mean?

All that I know we have to stop demonizing other cultures without knowledge. An Iranian dance video, uploaded on YouTube, got the creators punishment by the lash and a year in jail. And here we say in big letters that proves there is no happiness in Iran. That generic demonization of an entire country is wrong, there is happiness everywhere. I hope that ‘Desert Dancer’ does shine a light on the positivity that exists in Iran and in their youth, and how we are all the same in our hopes and dreams, and the ability to realize our potential artistic goals. It’s about giving voice to the voiceless, and that’s always a good ambition to have in the arts.

HollywoodChicago.com: The young people depicted in the film had a natural inclination to rebel. Since you’re closer to that age that I am, what function of intellect or emotion does youth express when rebelling against a regime or a way of life?

Raymond: It’s all about one word...passion. Passion goes hand-in-hand with youth, even though it can be expressed throughout a life. But in youth, the passion to rebel, express yourself, become artistic and exist – it’s right on the surface. This was a passion project, at all levels of production.

HollywoodChicago.com: What struck me about the screenplay that is was very simple and straightforward, with the dance creating the main form of what the story is communicating. What is it about the power of the art form of dance that creates this powerful communication, without words or even structure?

Raymond: I think you answered the question within the question. [laughs] Dance is art without words or structure, and is an interesting storytelling device if you’re not doing something one dimensional with it, like in a music video. To take it further and deeper, to infiltrate dance as part of the narrative structure, pushes the boundary of what people have seen before.



Richard Raymond Directs a Scene in 'Desert Dancer'

Photo credit: Relativity Media

HollywoodChicago.com: Your IMDB bio states you 'snuck into' Pinewood Studios at age 15, and established yourself in the business that way. What motivated you at this very young age to gravitate towards a filmmaking career, and what gave you the guts to follow through as you did?

Raymond: Well, to start the story I went to school in North London, and when you're 15 years old, the headmaster at the school signs you up for work experience. My assignment was two weeks at British Gas. There was no way I was going to do it. I was interested in movies, and read that Pinewood Studios – which turned out to be close enough to where I lived – had done so many of them, including the Richard Donner-directed 'Superman.' Hollywood wasn't so out of reach, after all.

I wrote a number of letters to the studio, but they never replied. So I thought, the hell with it, I had read a story about Steven Spielberg and how he snuck into Universal Studios, and I thought I'd do the same at Pinewood. So my headmaster signed me off for my two weeks, and my Dad drove me to the gate.

HollywoodChicago.com: There must have been different security standards than today.

Raymond: Exactly. It's totally different today, and you wouldn't be able to do right now what I did then. I walked up to the guard, with an elaborate story, but he just opened it up and waved me through. I couldn't believe my luck. I walked around for weeks, and even met an American man who I found out was director Blake Edwards, when he was filming 'The Son of Pink Panther.' I went on that set, and that was it for me. After that, I was on the set of 'Shadowland,' directed by Sir Richard Attenborough, and he took me under his wing for awhile. I could never afford to go to film school, but I got into the best film school in the world at the time.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is the most important message in this film to one, Iranian citizens, and two, the Western countries that judge Iran from the outside?

Raymond: The first thing to the Iranian citizens, their story is being told, and that is important to me. To everybody else, you should fight for your dreams and fight for whatever else you want in your life. Be inspired to create, because if you resist against anything, you must be creative.

"Desert Dancer" will get a nationwide limited release, including Chicago, on April 10th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Reece Ritchie, Nazanin Boniadi, Freida Pinto and Makram Koury. Screenplay by Jon Croker. Directed by Richard Raymond. Rated "PG-13"



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Source URL (retrieved on *Apr 25 2024 - 12:58pm*):
<http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/25374/interview-director-richard-raymond-on-the-passion-of-desert-dancer>

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