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Friday April 21st 2017

Under the Shadow (Cert 15)

dir: **Babak Anvari**

Starring: **Narges Rashidi, Avin Manshadi**

Sponsors: **Robert and Sue Parker**

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Synopsis: Tehran, 1988, during the Iran/Iraq war. Shideh makes a last determined effort to enrol in medical school, but is refused because of her earlier political activism. She is upset and, returning home to Iraj her husband and daughter Dorsa, picks a fight with him. He reveals he is being drafted to the front and begs her to leave the city for safety. She refuses. Her daughter starts having nightmares after being scared by another child's ghost stories. An Iraqi missile hits the building, forcing everyone to evacuate except Shideh and Dorsa. Spirit-like djinn figures begin to appear, intent on taking Dorsa. Shideh and Dorsa finally escape in a car, leaving some personal belongings in possession of the djinns.

There's nothing new about a ghost story in which a lone mother must protect her child from supernatural forces, but there is something new about its context in this film. *Under the Shadow* is ostensibly set in Tehran in 1988 (though filmed by UK-based Iranian director Babak Anvari in Jordan), and its newness lies in a fresh and informed twist on Islamic and pre-Islamic belief systems, since it is the story about the djinn, supernatural creatures mentioned in *The 1001 Nights*, the Hadith and the Koran. Since ghost belief is very much influenced by era and culture, djinns are variously described by the scholarly as downgraded pagan gods (there were originally 360 worshipped in pre-Islamic Mecca), generic unclean spirits given to possessing humans, or simply a divinely ordained society of unusual spiritual beings set between mankind and the angels. Increasingly, though, they're perceived as something nearer to the 'poltergeist' of Hollywood cinema, almost entirely malignant, non-corporal creatures that like to meddle with domestic situations, cause fright and create divisions between parent and child. They mess with the heads of people in stress situations, a cognitive drama that serves very well in film.

We begin with a young woman, Shideh, pleading with a stony-faced university bureaucrat to be allowed back on a medical course: she yearns to be a doctor. But she will never be admitted back to medical school, he tells her, after her radical left-wing politics were noted during the Iranian Revolution in 1979. She claims it was the folly of youth, but they both know this isn't true. She is indeed thoroughly westernised, throwing off her scarf as soon as she's home and, whenever she can, dancing to a Jane Fonda exercise tape in her VCR. As soon as she steps outside the flat, however, both the war and the increasingly religious, paternalistic environment hit her hard. It doesn't help that her rather sweet-natured and understanding husband Iraj, whose medical career she now resents, is drafted by the army for his annual one-month attendance at the front.

He begs his angry wife to take their daughter Dorsa to the safety of his parents. But she won't budge. She throws out all her medical books except one, inscribed by her late mother, who always wanted



her to be a doctor. Her husband leaves. Occasionally he rings up. The line is bad; you keep expecting something nasty to emerge from the crackle, but it's always him. Even when he's still at the flat, spooky things are beginning to happen - the daughter has nightmares, she's scared of the bathroom - but when Iraj leaves, the ante is upped. Shideh is disturbed by a boy in a neighbouring flat, who seems to be spooking Dorsa with tales of evil ghosts in the house. Then, as if to confirm it, a large Iraqi missile hits the roof but doesn't explode. Soon everyone is leaving the building. Dorsa is frantic with worry about her abducted doll. Shideh begins to have those waking-up-in-your-dreams nightmares. Knocks on the door draw her out into a stairwell, only for a ghostly hijab, like a kind of skeletal flag, to swoosh into the apartment. Worse, Dorsa appears to prefer this ghost-mother to her real one.

Yes, there's a bit of *The Devil's Backbone* (2001) in the ticking bomb, a bit of *The Babadook* (2014) in the single-mother vulnerabilities and the trashcan infelicities (did the ghost throw it out/did the child?), a bit of *Mama* (2013) in the mothering issues, and a touch of Japanese horror in the vision of the daughter's face reduced to little but an enormous mouth (the folkloric Obaguro-bettari yokai).

This is more conventional and less stylised than that other para-Iranian horror *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014). Its ancestor is certainly Nakata Hideo's *Dark Water* (2002), though it suffers in comparison with that masterpiece of the genre. Childhood possessions come and go on the whim of the elemental entity - a red bag to Nakata, a doll here. A crack on the ceiling (a water stain in *Dark Water*) speaks of a leaking/splintering of sanity on the mother. For the djinn, it is a portal, which Shideh tries to tape up. How-mad-is-the-mother questions lurk, as they always do in such movies.

The ensemble acting is solid rather than exceptional, but the two female leads are excellent. The filming style and palette are usually restrained and muted, with some hand-held close ups, the odd prowling camera move to suggest a presence and some straight-up and unapologetic trick shots in the dream sequences. The soundtrack plays effectively with the idea that these unclean spirits, made out of smokeless fire, travel restlessly on the air, and so the mournful wail of wind, the air-raid klaxon and sometimes a call to prayer, murmur restlessly in the background and are all equally a threat.

Credits

Shideh	Narges Rashidi
Dorsa	Avin Manshadi
Iraj	Bobby Naderi
Landlord	Ray Haratian
Dr Reza	Arash Marandi
Mrs Ebrahimi	Aram Ghasemy
Mrs Fakur	Soussan Farrokhnia
Pargol	Behi Djanati Atai
Mr Fakur	Hamidreza Djavadan
Director	Bijan Daneshmand
Director	Babak Anvari
Screenplay	Babak Anvari
Director of Photography	Kit Fraser
Editor	Chris Barwell
Production design	Nasser Zoubi
Music	Gavin Cullen
Sound design	Alex Joseph
Costume	Phaedra Dahdaleh

UK/Jordan/Qatar 2016
84 mins

Another View

The anxieties of motherhood have fueled many a great horror movie, from Rosemary's Baby to The Babadook, and in Babak Anvari's mostly terrifying Under the Shadow, maternal angst does battle not just with demons from the beyond but also social and political upheaval. The film is set in Iran in the late 1980s. Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Revolution is nearly a decade old, and Saddam Hussein's bombs have just started to fall on Tehran when we meet our protagonist, Shideh (Narges Rashidi), a once-promising medical student who had to leave school after being accused of left-wing activity. With air raid sirens going off and her husband Iraj (Bobby Naderi) called to the front, Shideh refuses to take her daughter Dorsa to her mother-in-law's, away from the big city with its big targets. To her, such advice sounds awfully like patronizing criticism of her abilities as a mother.

Shideh is a modern, well-educated woman, with little use for the country's strictly enforced dress code. She keeps an illegal VCR at home and has Jane Fonda exercise videos stashed away in a locked drawer. And, as one does, she discounts her neighbors' talk of spirits as superstitious hokey. She even dismisses the warnings of Mehdi, a mute boy who lost both parents to a bomb and has secretly begun communicating with Dorsa. Mehdi has been telling the girl about djinn — malevolent spirits from Islamic mythology that travel the winds and attach themselves to people via beloved objects. Soon enough, Dorsa is seeing things and speaking to invisible figures — figures that seem to suggest that they'd do a better job of parenting than Shideh. Oh, and the girl's favorite doll has gone missing, and she refuses to go anywhere without it. As neighbors flee the city, mother and child are stuck at home, forced to contend with bombs on one side and evil spirits on the other.

Under the Shadow starts out a bit rough: Early scenes feature the kind of clunky backstory and facile psychologizing that you might expect from a more schlocky effort. And the film doesn't entirely reimagine some of its more predictable horror conventions: the mute boy, the creepy doll, the young child speaking to her "secret friends." But once things get going, the tension builds nicely and gathers complexity. As supernatural forces tighten the screws on Shideh, so do the not-so-supernatural ones: She runs out of her building in fear and is promptly picked up by the religious police for not covering her head; spending the evening in detention, she gets off with a warning and a stern reminder that the typical punishment for her crime is a whipping.

Horror films often live under a shadow. As is frequently noted, scary movies in the U.S. become big business whenever social and

political turmoil starts to get out of hand. But that's a resonance that usually exists outside of the texts themselves. The connections between the '70s horror boom and the specter of Vietnam, or the torture-porn craze of the 2000s and the War on Terror, were rarely explicit; they were acts of collective cultural imagination. Under the Shadow, on the other hand, makes such connections overt: The shadows in question are clearly not just supernatural, but also psychological and political. And Anvari's great accomplishment with this film — especially in the second half — is allowing his story to gather moral, symbolic force without shortchanging the simple pleasures of genre. The jump scares are solid, and earned. The suspense is genuine. And Under the Shadow never loses sight of the basic human reality of mother and child, trapped at home, encircled by a variety of evils, both real and imagined.

Bilge Ebiri: Village Voice

Our next screening: Friday April 28th, 7.30pm
Victoria (Germany 2015. Cert 15)

Victoria attracted a lot of attention on release for director Sebastian Schipper's astonishing technical achievement of filming the whole drama in a single take. It deserves better than to be known for just that single detail. Victoria, a young Spanish woman newly moved to Berlin, meets a group of 4 locals in a bar; but her flirtation with one of them turns from an enjoyable night out into a terrifying experience where lives are on the line. It's dynamic, astounding, utterly compelling viewing from first frame to last.

Programme news

The films selected for our new season (subject to confirmation) are

After Love (France 2016)	A Man called Ove (Sweden 2015)
Aquarius (Brazil 2016)	Neruda (Chile/Argentina 2016)
Blue Velvet (USA 1986 - classic)	The Olive Tree (Spain 2016)
Certain Women (USA 2016)	The Other Side of Hope (Finland 2017)
Dans la Cour (France 2014)	Paterson (USA 2016)
A Date for Mad Mary (Ireland 2016)	A Quiet Passion (UK 2016)
Elle (France 2016)	The Salesman (Iran 2016)
Frantz (France 2016)	Sweet Bean (Japan 2016)
Graduation (Romania 2016)	Tharlo (China 2016)
The Handmaiden (S Korea 2016)	Toni Erdmann (Germany 2016)
The Innocents (Poland 2016)	The Unknown Girl (Belgium 2016)
Letters from Baghdad (UK 2016)	

Three further films will be added from those released over the summer and autumn.

Membership for the 2017-18 season opens on May 1. There will be a small increase in rates, as follows

Single - £36 (up £1)

Joint - £66 (up £2)

Concession (student/over 60) - £33 (up £1)

Temporary membership rates remain unchanged at £5 per film.

We expect the new programme to be available in July.