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My Favourite Cake (12a)

Dirs: Maryam Moghadam, Behtash Sanaeaha

With: Lili Farhadpour, Esmaeel Mehrabi,

Mohammad Heidari

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Synopsis: Lonely Mahin is 70 and struggling. Her husband passed away some years earlier and her daughter lives far away in Europe. She eases the loneliness of her retirement through gossip sessions with her girlfriends, but yearns for intimacy. One night, she meets taxi driver Faramarz who is destined to change her life. Throwing caution to the wind, she challenges accepted social practices despite the risk of unwelcome neighbourly interest and the morality police (always on the prowl), embarking on a whirlwind romance which culminates in a night of drinking, dancing and declarations of love.

After a long day, 70-year-old Mahin (Lily Farhadpour) is getting ready for bed. Preparing to brush her teeth, she appraises herself in the mirror. Squinting, she smudges turquoise eyeshadow over her eyelids. Better? Not quite. Sighing, she dots lipstick on to her cheekbones, rubbing it in with the back of her hands, and applying the coral to her lips. Her expression is sceptical, and then defeated. She retreats to the sofa, passing out in front of the TV.

A middle-class widow in Tehran who has spent the last 30 years single, Mahin's day-to-day involves waking up at noon, watering her plants and throwing dinner parties for her girlfriends ("the old gals"). In the evenings, she watches romantic dramas and knits. As her friends tell her, over platters of watermelon, no man means no man to look after: it's not a bad life. But it's not an exciting one either, as Mahin flies under the radar, avoiding the watchful gaze of both the morality police and her neighbours.

Maryam Moghaddam and Behtash Sanaeaha's gentle romantic comedy dares to ask if Mahin actually wants to move through life unnoticed. Frustration flashes across Farhadpour's expressive face as her grown-up daughter tells her to wear her nice clothes "at home". It's a far cry from the plunging necklines and sky-high heels of her youth, which she describes nostalgically to a local cab driver. Mahin is wistful for an out-of-reach sexuality, knowing that it is also out of bounds. At the local bakery, she attempts to flirt with a stranger, moving in just that little bit too close.

She's dismissed as a cuddly grandma, even as she muscles in to protect two young women in hijabs from a police officer. "You'd kill them over a few strands of hair?" she growls, as the young women cower, heavy fringe and pink hair peeking out from underneath their headscarves. Afterwards, one of the girls remarks that at Mahin's age, that kind of sexism "doesn't really affect you".

Keenly aware of her dwindling sexual capital, and no longer accepting of it, Mahin takes herself to a pensioners' cafe for lunch. It's there she encounters taxi driver Faramarz (Esmaeel Mehrabi). When she overhears that he's single and lives alone, she books a cab ride home with him, and strikes up a conversation. Emboldened by the pathetic fallacy (outside, summer rain pours) and Faramarz's open, affable demeanour, Mahin invites him back to her place, where a romantic evening unfolds.

The film keeps pace with their date, *Before Sunrise* style, camera tightening as the conversation becomes more intimate. It's only at this point – halfway through the film – that the couple reveal their ages. Possibly, Moghaddam and Sanaeaha withhold this fact in order to encourage audiences to work out how old they think these characters are. The divorced, twinkly-eyed Faramarz praises Mahin's gumption, telling he knows that "women can propose too". Over booze and peaches, Mahin begins to glow. They vow to make wine together, "like lovers do," take selfies and dance, as the camera rotates around them. There is the sense that there is no more time to waste.

The film's downbeat final stretch feels especially harsh, then, as Moghaddam and Sanaeaha burst their protagonist's bubble.

The Iranian government has not supported the film, banning Moghaddam and Sanaeaha from travelling to Berlin for its premiere in February, and accusing the filmmakers of "crossing several red lines", as Sanaeaha put it to the *Hollywood Reporter*, by depicting Mahin drinking alcohol and without her hijab.

What's even more subversive, however, is Mahin's sense of agency. Moghaddam and Sanaeaha frequently depict her alone at the centre of the frame, whether enjoying an affogato in a posh hotel lobby, waiting for a cab outside the market, or sitting at a park bench overlooking the city. In each setting, Mahin's independence is presented as a fact rather than pitted.

Too often, later-in-life romances are presented as 'cute', neutered, shorn of sexual desire; here that desire is suggested, rather than shown. A scene in which the couple take a shower fully clothed risks reading as twee but in the event is simply tender, as they vulnerably acknowledge their long bouts of celibacy. There's

sensuality to be found elsewhere anyway, in Mahin's night-blooming jasmine, and the promise of an orange blossom cake.

Credits

Mahin	Lili Farhadpour
Faramaz	Esmael Fehrabi
Puran	Manoori Ilkhani
Mahin's friends	Soraya Horang, Homa Mottahedin, Sima Esmaeili
Old men in the restaurant	Aman Rahimi, Azim Mashhadi, Saeed Payamipoor, Ali Asghar Nejat
Morality police	Mehdi Pilevari
Young taxi driver	Mohammad Heidari
Park janitor	Khosro Abbasi
Gardener	Mozaffar Ismaeili
Girl in the park	Melika Pazouki
Woman neighbour	Efad Rasolinezhad
Hotel waiter	Amir Hossein Esfandiari
Taxi agency manager	Shahin Harimi
Restaurant cashier	Saeed Lashgarou
Driver	Mohammad Ali Babajani
Man in bakery	Amir Azarmian
Taxi passenger	Batool Moazzezi
Boy in the park	Meraj Abtahi

Directors Maryam Moghadam, Behtash Sanaeaha

Screenplay Maryam Moghadam, Behtash Sanaeaha

Cinematography Mohamad Hadadi

Editing Ata Mehrad, Behtash Sanaeaha

Sound Hossein Goorchian, Reza Heidari

Costume Maryam Moghadam

Iran, France, Sweden, Germany 2023. 97m

Another view

Seizing the day and small rebellions are championed by Iranian directors Maryam Moghadam and Behtash Sanaeaha in their latest collaboration.

Their gentle drama is built around a delightful performance from Lili Farhadpour as 70-year-old widow Mahin, who decides to shake her life up a bit. Living in a comfortable home, Moghadam and Sanaeaha take time to establish her friends and family. She might not see them as often as she'd like but her female mates are a hoot of a crowd, sharing jokes over dinner when they do get together.

Mahin's daughter is part of the far-flung diaspora these days, connected mostly by interrupted video calls. She's not a sad case but the older woman is lonely, something which leads her to try to forge new connections. Although this is an Iran-specific film - and partially revolves around the breaking of many of the country's oppressive rules - Moghadam and Sanaeaha also touch on the universal issue of becoming 'invisible' as we age.

That's why perhaps even 70-year-old cabbie Faramarz (Esmael Mehrabi) doesn't spot her when she sits near him at a restaurant frequented by pensioners with state vouchers to spend. She sees him, however, and soon sets in motion a meeting that will prove to be full of welcome surprises for both of them.

While many other films feel as though they are really staking out a deliberate political stance against the Iranian regime or coming at it

from deep within metaphor, *My Favourite Cake* is casually, but almost constantly, rebellious in small ways. Through the course of an evening, Mahin will face down the morality police, invite a man she barely knows to her home, drink an impressive quantity of fortified wine and dance like nobody's watching, among other things. "The more submissive you are, the more they push you down," she tells a younger woman, in what could easily be a rallying call for women in plenty of other countries as well as Iran. That said, the authorities took exception to the film, unsuccessfully raiding the directors' offices and banning them from attending the Berlin Film Festival for its premiere.

These sorts of bullyboy tactics seem particularly heavy handed for such a sweet-natured work. As Faramarz repairs the lights in Mahin's garden, Farhadpour and Mahin's growing relationship takes on a gentle glow as well, although there's always a sense of the fragility of the moment. Mahin's nosy neighbour is married to someone who could cause trouble. It's a sense of threat that the filmmakers don't labour but which feels invasive, after all this is a country where, Faramarz notes, he once got carted off to jail for a month simply for playing an instrument at a wedding. Graceful camerawork from Mohamad Hadadi ensures there is movement even in Mahin's house, often almost imperceptibly drawing closer to what's happening. Later, the camera joins in the mood of the dance.

Moments of sweetness may be fleeting, like the taste of your favourite cake but perhaps that's what makes them so irresistible - plus, if you never try to take a bite, how would you know?

Amber Wilkinson: Eye for Film

Audience note: "In December 2024 the directors, forbidden from making movies, working, and travelling, were on trial in Iran, held in Evin prison, for propaganda against the regime, breaking Islamic rules by making a vulgar movie, and spreading prostitution and libertinism." (Wikipedia)

Our next screening: Friday February 21st 2025. 7.30pm Black Box Diaries (Japan/UK/USA 2023. 15)

We like to include at least one documentary each season and this year, we have picked an exceptional story.

In 2015, journalist Shiori Ito was sexually assaulted by a prominent TV journalist. She reported it to the police, who deemed it a "black box" case - not worth prosecuting because it took place behind closed doors. Undeterred, she began her own investigation. Documenting everything on film, her story unfolds like a thriller with secret investigative recordings, vérité shooting and emotional first-person video as she pieces together the crime she experienced, fighting on her own behalf in the face of the authorities' refusal to do so in any meaningful way.

Black Box Diaries is an riveting film that will keep you glued to your seat. It fully deserves its shortlisting for this year's Oscars.