

## Sepideh Farsis about THE SIREN

### “This film took us longer than the first Gulf War”

Sepideh Farsis's first animated film, in which 15 year old Omid rescues a group of Iranian civilians from the Iraqi attacks on the Abadan oil metropolis in 1980 during the 1st Gulf War, opened this year's Panorama Section at the Berlinale and has been collecting awards and nominations ever since. The director, born in Tehran in 1965, left the country for Paris in 1984. Having been the same age as Omid during the first Gulf War, she must have stitched many personal memories to the war in her story.

Sepideh Farsis: Of course! I wanted to show the absurdity of war from a teenager's point of view. At this age when you are no longer a child, but not yet an adult, you are fresh and fragile, but on the other hand so many possibilities are awaiting you and you have the chance to make crucial choices. My scriptwriter Javad Djavahery and I chose a boy as protagonist because boys are more subject to the pressure of taking up arms and going to the war front, but we gave him the almost same-aged Pari as alter ego.

After all, both are affected by the war. Meanwhile, a duo also opens possibilities for romance.

**What about screening this film to young audiences? Some critics said no, because it doesn't shy away from the atrocities of war.**

Farsis: After all, 12 year olds are confronted with violence, they see the news on TV, experience violence on social media channels or in video games, and they are not oblivious to the fact. Obviously, it would be good to prepare them for the film beforehand through an introduction or short text.

**A coming-of-age story and anti-war drama in an animated film. Why didn't you tell your story in a feature length fiction or documentary, as you did before?**

Farsis: War is a tough subject - and perhaps more bearable as an animated film, especially for young people. THE SIREN conveys a dream of a united humanity, a utopian journey - so I needed a form that would allow me to keep



some distance to the war through the use of a magical language: Animation! Moreover, reconstituting the 80s is much easier resorting to animation, because most of the buildings were destroyed during the war and everything that reminded us of the Shah's era already disappeared with the revolution of 1979. Showing the Iranian society of that era would have been quite complicated. Whereas here, you can revive the atmosphere, the local colour of that time in a far more organic and detailed way.

**You show Abadan as a lively and open cosmopolitan community.**

Farsis: That was also the case in Tehran. For example, I went to a school with Iranian Armenians, Jews and Zoroastrians - and in Abadan the mix was even more diverse because of the oil industry and all the non-Iranian employees of the Oil Company, at least until the war began. I wanted to show the complexity of the Iranian society at that time, all the strata, with different ethnic and social groups. Iran was not just made up of pro-regime religious fanatics, not then and even less now. This is a cliché, promoted by the Iranian regime and magnified by the media abroad. Of course, many people have emigrated in the meantime,



but religious minority communities such as Armenians or Jewish people, though smaller, are still there.

### How much did you want to make us part of your childhood in wartime?

Farsi: I felt the need to talk about this war because it is such an important chapter in the history of our country, a conflict that drastically changed the Near and Middle East. The first Gulf War began as a sort of fratricidal war, because the Iraqis and the Khouzestanis (the population of Southern Iran) were culturally very close. Separated only by a river, they maintained close bonds. At the beginning of the war, people fought to defend their country but from mid-1982 the decision to continue the battles was more in order to export the revolution, lock up all dissidents or crush them down. This war is a taboo subject in Iran that has almost never been dealt with, except in propaganda films. Besides, this terrible conflict is the first chapter of a series of wars in the region that are still ongoing.

### This project must have required a lot of research?

Farsi: You could say that! I did a lot of research for photos, reports and archive material. I worked with more than 100 people in a total of 10 studi-

os in Belgium, Germany, France, Luxembourg and Slovakia, which was not easy. Some of our collaborators I never met in person because of the COVID pandemic, but Javad Djavahery, designer Zaven Najjar and composer



Erik Truffaz were with me in Paris. We worked together very closely.

### What can you tell about the animation by Zaven Najjar and the music by Erik Truffaz?

Farsi: Zaven is a talented young graphic artist who had until now only made a short film about the civil war in Lebanon. Though born and raised in

Paris, he has a deep understanding of the region, even though he had never been in Iran. His father was an Armenian from Aleppo and he has inherited many cultural elements through his family story. He knows the history of

talism. As for Erik Truffaz: it's the second time we've worked together. He is very open as an artist and accepted to use some Persian instruments in his composition, on my demand. But the soundtrack also contains quite a few pre-existing tracks by Saeid Shanbehzaden, another musician from South-Iran, exiled in France, and we used some well-known songs from the 70s.

### Truffaz won a prize for his music at the Int'l Animated Film Festival in Annecy.

Farsi: Prizes warm your heart, give you energy and encourage you to continue, and when the audience goes along with you and thanks you at the end, that means a tremendous amount. I mean, you don't make a film in search of an award? I am always obsessed with the work and the creative process itself and I don't think about the aftermath, but it feels good to have your work recognised. THE SIREN took us more than eight years to make, longer than the first Gulf War!

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Uta Beth