



*One.Two.One Stage Photo.Mani Lotfizadeh*



## MANIA AKBARI

### *THE DISTILLATION OF REALITY*

There is on occasion an opportunity for a conversation that challenges you to the core, a situation that unsettles you as much as it enlightens your imagination, and this was one such occasion. Beginning with us all sitting opposite one another, as though we were about to play a hand of poker, 'they', Akbari's young translator and Mania Akbari herself, begin talking feverishly, finally introducing me into the conversation. Having arriving without a set of questions, unplanned even, I declare a more casual uncharted approach to the interview. Whereby I introduce an idea, a notion, and she be allowed to take the lead; to speak unfettered, to deliver something of herself. Akbari digested the idea of leading the interview, and without fear or fancy, talked of her youth and her children in Tehran. Her childhood she declared, 'was determined by politics, death and academia'.



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Taking us from the living room in London to her home in Tehran in the early 1970's, she is quite beguiling, poetic even. As there appears to be a wonderful spirit about her, that leads us from her suppressed childhood, to the fundamental events that would alter her life; in order, as a child, she consciously 'walked the line', choosing creative pursuits, when her father declares she should become as much of an academic as he and her mother had done. Her father a PhD physics student, her mother a chemistry graduate. In her home books were described as her only friend; and academic literature was the central axis by which all of their lives should turn. For Akbari, the foundations by which she was introduced to reality, were too restrictive. Her life was being determined by her father, even before she had had an opportunity to consider her options, and she describes it as an impossible situation. A young women in Tehran in the 1970's, Akbari was acting up against a backdrop of political upheaval, with the end of the Shah in 1979, and the re-introduction of Ayatollah Khomeini. Substituting what had become an 'autocratic' regime under the royal family, for a 'theocratic' constitution under the Ayatollah, and for the young Akbari, Iran felt like it was under house arrest. Nothing was allowed, as reality was dogged by Islamic laws, as innumerable rules and regulations hemmed Akbari and her childhood friends

in. Academia appeared to be the only refuge in a country closed off from the rest of the world as religion was, under such circumstances, paralysing to say the least.

In spite of such extreme social and cultural ills, Akbari managed to find solace in traditional Iranian poetry, because, as she emphasised, with a turn of her waist, Iran was originally the centre of literature and thinking in the Middle Ages. (Historically Persian literature, philosophy, medicine, and art were the significant elements of the Islamic Golden Age that reached its peak during the 10th and 11th century). As she pours over the heritage that has pre-dated us all, Akbari accredits her literal appreciation to figures such as 'Ferdowsi, Hefez, Unsuri and Rudaki', and in particular it was a small book of Hefez's poetry that was to ignite her imagination.

When given to listening to Mania Akbari, there are these defining moments that puncture her life; that seamlessly shift the access of her entire life. Taking us from her repressive youth, to where we are now, her career as a leading light in Iranian film; and those critical turning points, the stuff that makes our meeting under these circumstances so critically engaging, is the alchemy that appears to have shaped her life. An unqualified magic that has constantly rewarding her with shades of light in darkness; hope, 'optimism', and opportunity, where otherwise there was only totalitarianism.

What was it that first lit the imagination, that turned her attention from her academic interests, I ask rather tentatively, and it is as if a flag has been dropped to the floor that allows her to 'go', she beginning and almost never ends, in her purposeful descriptions of her relatively young life; as it has become something almost impossible to comprehend.

Married four times, diagnosed with cancer, leaving her son behind, and without her family; Mania Akbari has since resettled in London, where she reads and writes new scripts and looks to new influences for her films. Here, she is free of the original autocratic rights that limited her movements and restricted her imagination. But her freedom now has left her without her country, her family, and her son. She has paid the ultimate prize in her pursuit for films. Unassuming and deliberately unapologetic, Akbari sees the greatest reality, the strongest stories, in the grit and glitter of Iranian life; the highs and lows; the cleaner and the judge, are the protagonists, as they come together, cheek-by-jowl, in her contemporary fables.

Wrestling with the glass teapot, pouring more tea, Akbari describes her childhood, and the 'puppet show' that would arrive at school, when she was thirteen years of age, that influenced and altered her young life. During those malevolent days in Iran when politics and academia were occupying her attention, Akbari found something entirely magical in the 'tall tales' that were being performed on occasion in the classroom. Invited to perform, Akbari, was by then already drawn to traditional poetry, and described her interest in so many of the cultural icons that were housed at the national museum. Carpets, lamp lights and tiles, were the motifs that enveloped her imagination for everything creative. Such glimpses of early decoration were to have such a profound effect on Akbari that standing up in class with a handful of puppets pressed to her figures, was nothing more than her divine right. Describing how in the beginning she retold the original tales, of the 'wolf and the little pigs', she remembered, on another occasion, altering the fable slightly by introducing political circumstance to her plot. 'The wolf' she says, was 'Saddam Hussain!' and 'the pigs the Iranians'. It proved to be a winner among her



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classmates, as her choosing to damn the dictator of Iraq, during a time of the Iran-Iraq war, inspired her. It was her inventiveness, these early signs of her imagination that allowed Akbari to continue to pursue puppetry at school, popular among her friends and teachers; she developed a confidence for performing, for devising short, that would possibly be performed in class. As for her father and the authorities, her interest in theatre and art, proved harmless and was only qualified by Akbari's diligence to her studies.

Quizzed as to how those hand-puppets came into being, Akbari mentions her mother, 'she made them', 'sewed these little hand-puppets together for me', and tellingly she encouraged Akbari's interest in performing. Mentioning her mother and then talking more of her taking private classes in 'painting', where as a young girl she was introduced to such liberal notions as 'abstraction', and the principles of 'modernism'; in spite of my grappling with how such ideas were allowed to surface in Tehran in the 1970's, I readily revert the conversation back to her mother, their relationship, and more of who she was. As much by intuition as by the glimpses of affection Akbari atoned to her mother, I foresee her as a remarkable woman. Quickly and affectionately I imagine a young woman, (Akbari's mother), living well under the Shah, enjoying Western



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influences and making choices that were able to determine her own destiny more positively. Akbari mentions her mother, (even given to recalling her grandmother), giving her a book of poems, she had written, as a memento almost, of their shared interest for poetry. Might it have been her mother who influenced Akbari more than anyone else; possibly, but then such an accolade can only be contested by her relationship with her second husband.

A man Akbari described as her light during her maturing years in the early 1990's, when she decided to make films over everything else. Risking her life and her personal security for snap-shots scenes of Iran, that were either confiscated or would have her incarcerated; Akbari accredited all of her courage and determination, in those years as a young adult, to her husband, and his wanting her to pursue her desire for film-making. As much a social maverick as Akbari, her husband encouraged her to live for the moment, to take the necessary risks to convert her dreams into reality, in order she be allowed to achieve something substantial of her life; and Akbari never looks back. To the point where one day, one evening in fact, she described how she is invited home, to see his children by his first marriage, and her son is present, his ex-wife is also in attendance, and they are all together for the first time.

It would prove to be the end of the relationship, as he told her to leave, to ultimately pursue her dreams of film and let him bring up the children, their child included.

It proved to be a new turning point in her life, challenging her resolve for film, but cast the dye that would lead her away from the routine of everyone else's life for something else entirely; and her marriage was one of four that led her further and further away from Iran to Britain, in order she be allowed to make films. But then almost damning of her new circumstances, Akbari's steely reply to any sense of wonderment of her achievement to date, is qualified by opposing remarks; 'dreams never come true, they simply get achieved and you alter your desires', and then when discussing her prevalent 'optimism', (that quickly becomes apparent in her presence), she defines it by suggesting that 'without dreams life is meaningless'. Where I might have stopped to consider what I was giving up, 'what price such goals', Akbari explains everything without flinching away from the ultimate goal of making films, of trying to explain herself into a new reality.

I see her mother as a lynch-pin for her early years and her second husband as the gladiatorial figure who led her away from her political and social circumstances for something more liberal, acquiring of her to physically



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leave Iran in order to pursue her ambitions. Specific to her films, Akbari explains her early apprenticeships as almost impossible. Working with another leading Iranian filmmaker, (whilst with her second husband), she was reduced to filming in short spasms, arrested, her film, often confiscated and numerous cameras broken. Proving more inventive on each occasion, Akbari retells a tale of how she hid the film in her bra, in order the camera appeared empty and the police look idiotic. Then on another occasion on being arrested, she tore open her coat to reveal her breasts, or lack of them, as a consequence of her recent cancerous surgery. The female police officers were given to apologising and seeking to amend their misdemeanor by offering to donate to the charity affiliated to cancer research in Iran. Those high risk, tectonic situations, that might have the rest of us abandoning such pursuits for something safer, simpler; are the emotive moments that have shaped Akbari's life further away from any kind of normal, and turned her axis to that of one observer of others. Giving up her mild mannered life in Iran in order to critique the very reality she wrestled with whilst growing up there, and then ultimately gave up. Standing on the other side of the camera, it seems a high prize to have paid to film such anecdotal scenes of 'love', 'fear', 'oppression', 'hope'. But if we lose sight of what Akbari



is doing, (has done), then we misunderstand her archival achievement; we fail to see that this remarkable woman rejected her political and social circumstances, in order she be allowed to understand her place on earth; to abandon the temporary nourishment of academia and the grandeur of politics, for a higher pursuit of her philosophical place here.

Specifically then when given to describing her films, 20 Fingers, 6 Video Arts, 10+4, One TwoOne, Women Do Not Have Breasts, From Tehran to London, and In my Country, Men Have Breasts and 'I slept with my mother, my father, my brother and my sister in a country called Iran', Akbari talks of the majesty of the moment, when everything comes together, in pursuit of a film, and of how those loves and those lives, turn to hate. For her the beautiful act is that which comes with 'making' a film, of impressing ideas and actions into celluloid, and of taking desperate lives on a collision course, for a piece of cinematic history. In the beginning her son Amin Maher and younger sister Roya Akbari depicted Mania in front of the camera in Abbas Kiarostami's pivotal film Ten, which was entered into Cannes the same year. Interrupting her pursuit of film, with short documentaries, Akbari made Crystal in 2003, and then returned to film with 20 Fingers, (her directorial debut,

in which she devised the script, starred in and directed). Akbari tells of how an uncensored version of the film was smuggled out of Tehran in 2004, arriving at Venice, where she won a prize for best digital film. It was to be the making of her, a defining moment in her tumultuous life. A censored version was given to the Iranian authorities who approved of its childish youthfulness, and she lived another day.

The film that shattered the precarious equilibrium that held her to Iran was Women Do Not Have Breasts; that was a deliberate depiction of her own life, post diagnosed with cancer. For one heightened moment of our time together, Akbari is more enlivened, enraged even that this film as ever made. Her translator begins quizzing me for the correct term she uses to describe it as illegitimate; 'bastard' I suggest; 'yes', 'yes' he says, the film was nothing short of a calamity for Akbari, for so many reasons; not least for her exile out of Iran.

Calling time on what might be the first in a series of interviews; I am given a heavy glass of whisky and invited to dissect a miniature chocolate cake, close to my right hand at the table. I sheepishly drink from my glass and request to leave. Akbari, I recall, is as much a beholder of my attention as any of her films could be.