

## Sam Adams, "Persepolis," *Film Comment*, November-December 2007

Mixing memoir, history, and childhood fantasy, Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud's *Persepolis* glides effortlessly from one realm to another. Adapted from, and in some ways bettering, Satrapi's lauded graphic novels, the movie retains the comics' 2-D monochrome, barring a few splashes of color in its framing present day sections.

But though *Persepolis*'s iterations share a common look, Satrapi and Paronnaud have rethought their material in cinematic terms, wisely avoiding the juvenile transliteration of *Sin City*. To the comics' sparse black and white, the film adds textured backgrounds and a shifting panoply of styles, from chiaroscuro silhouettes to an account of British influence in which the Shah's limbs swing like a paper puppet's.

As a child, Marjane (voiced in the French-language version by Gabrielle Lopes) grasps little of the turmoil going on around her. Only eight when the Islamic revolution replaces the Shah with a theocracy, her bemused reaction to the rapid transformation of Iranian society mirrors that of her politically minded parents, whose dreams of the Shah's ouster crumble before the repressive regime that replaces him.

Like her mother (Catherine Deneuve) and, especially, her imperious, foulmouthed grandmother (voiced with gravelly gumption by Danielle Darrieux), Marjane is a headstrong girl., not given to complying with the dictates of Islamic law, or at least not without a fight. As a teenager {voiced by Chiara Mastroianni), she sports a leather jacket with "Punk Is Not Dead" scrawled on the back, and proudly flaunts her contraband ABBA records at school.

*Persepolis* owes much of its appeal to its protagonist's giddy rebelliousness. Haunting images of neighbors tortured by the secret police arc offset by the sight of young Marjane playing tennis-racket guitar to an Iron Maiden cassette.

As the situation in Iran worsens, and as Marjane's temper grows shorter, her parents send her to Vienna, where she falls in with a group of self-styled bohemians. Although they lack the historical import of the scenes set in Iran, the movie's Viennese sequences are in some ways its sharpest, perhaps because Satrapi's adult perspective intrudes most fully. Satrapi slyly skewers her new friends' "nonchalance and forced nihilism," a privileged vice that is hard to swallow when she has seen relatives be executed for speaking their minds.

Despite her harsh childhood, Marjane still has illusions to lose. In the blush of her first romance, with a Viennese boy named Markus, his VW Bug flies high above the city, borne aloft by their deathless ardor. But when she catches him in bed with another woman, she replays the sequence with Markus transformed from a beaming Adonis to a drooling, gapped-toothed cretin.

The transitions to such flights of fancy are more seamless than they would be in a live-action film, and Satrapi and Paronnaud employ them sparingly, hewing to a restrained minimalism that is the graphic equivalent of dry wit. But they're not above simply going for a laugh, as when a resurgent Marjane bursts into an off-key, pidgin English version of "Eye of the Tiger," stalking toward the camera and swinging her fists at the lens.

However many hands were involved in the movie's creation, it still feels like the product of a single sensibility'. With its cast of grandes dames, not to mention its selection as France's Oscar candidate (beating out Edith Piaf, no less), *Persepolis* also certifies the place of diasporic narratives at the heart of French culture. That it does so without laying claim to such portentous stature is part of its strength.