

**Tom Charity, "Persepolis' Is Glorious," *CNN.com*, Jan. 11, 2008,
<http://www.cnn.com/2008/SHOWBIZ/Movies/01/11/review.persepolis/index.html>**

CNN -- Pop culture's extraordinary ability to speak across borders underpins "Persepolis," an exuberant autobiographical film and dark-horse contender for an animated feature Oscar.

It would be a worthy winner, too. Not that this hand-drawn French production's simple black-on-white graphics approach the depth of Pixar's "Ratatouille," but the quest for photorealism is not the only game in town.

Co-directed by Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud, based on Satrapi's graphic novels, "Persepolis" has some of the blithe, spindly finesse of a New Yorker cartoon, but a cartoon that at any given moment threatens to descend into inky expressionist gloom.

Satrapi has acknowledged the influence of Art Spiegelman's "Maus" on her work, and just as "Maus" marked a shift in the pedigree of the graphic novel -- "comic book" was no longer a sufficient term when the Holocaust was the topic -- "Persepolis" is an animated film aimed at a sophisticated adult audience. Unless you count Richard Linklater's Rotoscoped "A Scanner Darkly" and "Waking Life," it's hard to think of a recent American equivalent.

The narrative takes the form of Disney's old standby, the coming-of-age story, but in a context that's alien to most of us.

In 1979 Marjane is a 9-year-old Bruce Lee nut in Tehran. The fall of the shah is cause for celebration in the Satrapi household: Marjane's family of cosmopolitan Marxists has suffered imprisonment and intimidation under his rule. The revolution is a time of hope and opportunity.

But it doesn't last. Religious fundamentalists take control, Marjane and her friends are forced to wear the veil and social freedoms are curtailed. Worse is to come when Iran goes to war with Iraq.

As the 1970s feminist slogan had it, "the personal is political," and in a theocracy the political is also inescapably personal.

The film folds a pocket history of Persia into Marjane's sentimental education, but in many ways the small domestic details are the most telling. Consider that a routine police check sends the whole family into panicky emergency mode in case their illicit booze is discovered.

Outspoken and rebellious, the teenage Marjane goes through a punk phase and buys contraband Michael Jackson cassettes on the black market. She has to talk fast when she's accosted on the street by hard-liners, two women whose billowing chadors make them look like wraiths.

The gaping disconnect between life in the public and the private spheres is your basic teenage endurance course, but here the stakes are ratcheted up.

Yet the film never succumbs to the melodramatic impulse that destroys a broadly similar saga in "The Kite Runner." Satrapi keeps her story moving briskly, and even moments of extreme danger are leavened with self-mockery and satire.

When it comes to that deceptively simple but very important job of putting a familiar face on a stranger, "Persepolis" -- which refers to the ancient capital of the Persian Empire before it was destroyed by Alexander the Great -- may achieve more than any of this season's soul-searching Iraq war movies.

As it goes on, this becomes a story about conformity and individualism, and it's worth noting that Marjane is both more readily recognizable -- and more of an individualist -- than a lip-service rebel like "Juno's" Juno MacGuff.

Marjane's relationship with her wise and wicked grandmother, voiced by Danielle Darrieux, is a glowing testament to an indomitable female spirit. When Chiara Mastroianni, as the older Marjane, breaks into a croaky English karaoke rendition of Survivor's "Eye of the Tiger," it's hard to suppress a cheer.

Which is generally the way "Persepolis" makes you feel as you leave the theater.