

Kate Stables, "Persepolis," *Sight & Sound*, Vol. 18, Issue 5, May 2008, pp. 75-6

Nestled in the Academy Award nominations for best animated feature this year, in between Pixar's sheeny crowd-pleaser *Ratatouille* and amiable sports-spoof *Surf's Up*, cartoonist Marjane Satrapi's marvellous, bittersweet, monochrome memoir about growing up Iranian seemed an exotic oddity. For this intensely enjoyable and utterly original movie doesn't fit neatly into any box -- adapted from Satrapi's highly successful series of French graphic novels, it's a frequently hilarious autobiography-as-Bildungsroman, a lesson in recent Iranian history and a feisty feminist fable, all in one package.

1. Working with cult French illustrator Vincent Paronnaud as her co-writer and co-director, Satrapi wanted to adapt her memoirs with her trademark 'stylised realism' intact, feeling that the black-and-white abstraction gave her work a useful universality. It's true that the spare yet fluid quality of Satrapi's woodcut aesthetic allows the viewer to slip easily into the world of seven-year-old Marjane ('Marji'), whose interests range from Bruce Lee to fervent communism ("Down with the Shah!") when not conversing with God about her future as a prophet. But it also provides a strong authorial signature which ties together the film's different visual and emotional moods (from stark expressionist horror as Tehran is bombed by Iraqi missiles to playful lovestruck teenage transformations) into a distinctive whole. Watching *Persepolis*' pen-and-paper images, produced via traditional cel animation, one is struck by how mobile and engaging they look when set against the cookie-cutter CGI naturalism omnipresent in today's animated features, giving an appropriately personalised look to this highly individual story.

Satrapi's no slouch as a storyteller either, deftly channelling the terrifying upheavals of the Iranian revolution and the Iran-Iraq war through her own experiences. She and Paronnaud mix the micro and macro strands of Marjane's life confidently for light and shade, weaving together the sad Sufi-curlieued story of radical Uncle Anouche, whose high hopes for the Iranian revolution end in his execution for treason, alongside her own comical acquisition of illicit western music tapes. Plaited together, these varied strands make *Persepolis* a whistlestop primer in Iranian post-war politics, gaily summarising the 1953 imperial installation of the Pahlavi dynasty as a jaunty Persian puppet show, and painting Marjane and her family dancing for joy above the giant, swirling street demonstrations that oust the Shah.

None of this would have half the impact, however, without the powerful figure of Marjane pulling it along. A square female peg in an increasingly tiny round hole as defined by the religious regime, Marjane's intellectual curiosity and restlessness leap out of every frame. Her constantly mobile face is in seamless harmony with her racing, irreverent narration (voiced by Gabrielle Lopes as young Marji, and with marvellous swooping range by Chiara Mastroianni as the teenage and adult Marjane). By wearing her 'Punk Is Ded' jacket in the streets and ceaselessly questioning the political zealotry of her teachers, Marjane finds herself being schooled in Vienna at 14, for her own safety. Here the film narrows, in interest rather than pace, as Marjane is cast as a fundamentalist exotic by her school friends, while the narrative shuttles swiftly through the usual teenage stations: unsuitable friends, first loves, a grotesque growth spurt. Still, it winds itself up smartly enough into a wrenching portrait of guilty exile and miserable homecoming when Marjane finds that "I was a stranger in Austria and in my own country too," only to start the inevitable energetic cycle of rebellion against the patriarchal excesses of the Iranian regime. Here Satrapi's satire on the strictures of the morality police provides sly feminist laughs (a kind of mullah lite) by parodying her university art classes -- drawing a burqa-swathed model, or studying a prudishly blacked-out Botticelli Birth of Venus. The film's darker moments range wider, though, showing how men rather than women can be sideswiped by events as commonplace as pavement lechery or attending an illegal party (one of these ends in imprisonment in the film, the other in the death that prompts Marjane to exile herself for good, this time to France).

Memoirs are by their very nature solipsistic -- but Marjane looms so appealingly large in *Persepolis* that with the exception of her feisty Granny ("You're so tall now, you'll grab God's balls") we get little more than

fleeting portraits of her friends and relatives, her immature husband Reza, and even her mother, voiced with husky, weary resignation by Catherine Deneuve. Perhaps this is inevitable in a movie that succeeds in cramming nearly 20 years of tumultuous growing-up, a revolution and a war into 96 minutes. It's probably more seemly to compliment Satrapi on the feat of creating a movie made up of small, telling moments that gifts us with much larger truths.