

THE SALESMAN

IRAN

ASGHAR FARHADI

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It's a surprise to find a classic post-war play by a Jewish-American playwright at the centre of a new Iranian film. Asghar Farhadi's *The Salesman*, which recently won the Oscar for Best Foreign Language feature, is about a school teacher and actor, Emad Etesami (Shahab Hosseini) directing and starring in a production of Miller's *Death Of A Salesman* at a time of unexpected upheaval in his domestic life.

Farhadi is far too sly and subtle a filmmaker to draw the parallels between Emad and Willy Loman in too obvious a fashion. Nonetheless, what gives the film a searing emotional impact is the way it exposes the hidden flaws in its main character.

Emad seems reliable and likeable. In the classroom with his literature students, he has a natural authority. He doesn't patronise them. They respect him and hold him in affection. At rehearsals, there is the same mood of calm. Even when he and his wife Rana (Taraneh Alidoosti) have to flee their damaged apartment after what appears to be an earthquake, he doesn't panic. He is the first to help others. Thanks to a stage colleague, they quickly find a new apartment and life appears to carry on as normal.

One of the points about *The Salesman* is that what starts as a little crack can bring a whole building down. Something about their new apartment bothers Emad and Rana. The previous tenant's possessions are all still there, her shoes and clothes. What they learn about her unsettles them. She had a lot of "visitors", which is a polite way of saying she may have been a prostitute.

In bizarre circumstances, when Emad is briefly out of the apartment and Rana is having a shower, an intruder

gets in and assaults her. Emad is full of righteous indignation and determined to track down the aggressor.

The Salesman is structured like a thriller, albeit a low key and downbeat one. Emad is the self-appointed detective, looking for clues about his wife's attacker. He finds car keys, a phone, a truck. The irony is that in the course of his investigations, it's his own character flaws which emerge. He is relentless and vindictive. His manner changes.

Whether at home or in the classroom or at the theatre, he now always seems to be on edge, his brow furrowed. He won't go to the police. He is not sure whether the neighbours are allies or antagonists. He doesn't know whether he is taking the assault too seriously or not seriously enough. He is trying to help his wife but his actions risk alienating her.

Shahab Hosseini is superb here as the tormented husband who feels the same powerlessness and sense of frustration as Willy Loman in Miller's play. He seems sympathetic one moment and wantonly cruel the next. Taraneh Alidoosti is also very affecting as the traumatised wife, trying to make sense of an act of what appears to be random brutality.

In Farhadi's universe, ambiguity reigns. The villains turn out to be vulnerable and strangely sympathetic while the heroes are capable of extraordinary viciousness. What is also apparent is how little they understand one another. Everyone is capable of duplicity. Husbands and wives who lived together for years are baffled by one another's behaviour as they discover that, in extreme circumstances, they're simply no longer able to communicate with one another.

Geoffrey Macnab, The Independent

WRITER: Asghar Farhadi **CINEMATOGRAPHY:** Hossein Jafarian **Music:** Sattar Oraki

CAST: Rana Etesami Taraneh Alidoosti | Emad Etesami Shahab Hosseini | Babak Babak Karimi | Sanam Mina Sadat

VOTING FOR *I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO* A69 | B34 | C7 | D1 | E0 | Rating 88.5% | Attendance 112

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