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## Milk of Human Kindness

by **J. Hoberman**  
September 4th, 2001 12:00 AM

Balanced on a knife-edge between the exotic and the familiar, *Djomeh* is among the most formally accomplished of new Iranian films. Hassan Yektapanah's dryly comic first feature—which shared the Camera d'Or with *A Time for Drunken Horses* at the 2000 Cannes Film Festival—enriches a deceptively anecdotal plot with a combination of observational camerawork, strong narrative rhythms, and deft characterization.

*Djomeh's* eponymous protagonist is a 20-year-old Afghani exile working on a dairy farm in the mountains of northern Iran and known to the locals mainly as the "milk boy." His middle-aged Iranian boss, Mahmoud, assumes that Djomeh left Afghanistan for economic reasons or perhaps to escape civil war, but the milk boy's motivations turn out to be personal—he departed his homeland as a result of an unhappy, or at least inappropriate, romantic involvement, having fallen in love with a widow 12 years his senior.

This revelation emerges during the course of the four lengthy discussions that Djomeh has with Mahmoud, riding beside him in a battered pickup truck as they drive the dusty road, village to village, collecting milk from the townspeople's goats and cows. Djomeh professes his surprise that Mahmoud, who appears to be in his early forties, is still single. In Afghanistan, he explains, the boss would already be a grandfather; why, Djomeh asks, do Iranians postpone their marriages? We might also wonder—one of the movie's recurring motifs has Djomeh and Mahmoud coming across a wedding procession in nearly every trip to town.

Djomeh's curiosity about Iranian marriage customs is not theoretical. It's soon revealed that he has his eye on the demure young girl who, forever adjusting her chador, works behind the counter in a village grocery store. Djomeh's travels with Mahmoud are counterpointed by the boy's carefully orchestrated solo visits to this store. Eager to extend his permitted time with the largely silent girl, he routinely overpurchases canned goods. (This, in turn, contributes to Djomeh's ongoing conflict with his irascible older kinsman, an economic refugee who also works for Mahmoud and sends money home to his family.)

As the naive Djomeh, Jalil Nazari scarcely seems to be acting. His ardent attack on the dialogue in every scene underscores his role as a foreign yokel in more sophisticated Iran. Nazari's broad, open face could have been made to express persistence. Despite the regular taunts of the village kids, Djomeh seems oblivious to the local prejudices against foreigners. (There's an effortlessly metaphoric bit of business which has one mischievous urchin using a piece of mirrored glass to reflect the sun into a blind man's unseeing eye.)

Djomeh is earnest, a bit clumsy, and utterly single-minded. In another age, this story would have been titled *The Passionate Milk Boy*. By contrast, Mahmoud Behraznia—who plays the grizzled, homely boss—comes across as the film's only professional actor, his experience belied by the affable quips and significant silences that largely go over his young employee's head. When, in their third drive-time discourse, Djomeh presumes to give his boss some personal advice, the truck abruptly dies mid-conversation. By the fourth conversation, the boss has gotten an idea of his own.

The 38-year-old Yektapanah served as an assistant director for both Abbas Kiarostami on *Taste of Cherry* and Jafar Panahi on *The Mirror*; *Djomeh* isn't overtly



Heart like a wheel: Jalil Nazari in *Djomeh*  
photo: New Yorker

**Djomeh**  
Written and directed by Hassan Yektapanah  
New Yorker  
Film Forum  
Through September 18

**Vengo**  
Written and directed by Tony Gatilif  
Cowboy  
Screening Room  
September 7 through 13

**Edgy Movies: Roots and Branches**  
Whitney Museum  
September 7

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self-reflexive but feels strongly reminiscent of Kiarostami in its compositions and pacing. Yektapanah's camera is largely static, and he makes evocative use of offscreen sound. (There's a constant, reproachful moo throughout most of the action.) Extremely process-oriented, the film has been designed as a rondo of mundane tasks (weighing milk, caring for cows) and routine interactions; the drama of this rueful not-quite-romance is skillfully grounded in a series of graceful repetitions.

Ultimately *Djomeh* is a movie about the yearning for what one cannot have. It's a universal theme, but where, outside of Iran, do we see this unforced economy of expression? At the close of the movie, a sadder (but not necessarily wiser) Djomeh simply exits the film. He vanishes through the door in a whitewashed barn wall and, closing it behind him, effectively closes the fiction of the film.

*Vengo*, French director Tony Gatlif's latest celebration of gypsy soul, sets a modest sliver of narrative in a fabulous widescreen landscape and surrounds it with a permanent party. Gatlif, whose strongest film remains the rhapsodic travelogue *Latcho Drom*, is basically a maker of musicals; here too, the abundant fiery performances seem to span time and space. Although *Vengo* is set in Andalusia, one band of Rom musicians seems to have just arrived from India and another features an Egyptian Sufi singer. An instance of mad flamenco under the stars segues into an episode of spontaneous belly dancing. In the most unusual celebration, the brooding, charismatic hero, Caco (dancer Antonio Canales, perversely cast in a nondancing role) takes his palsied nephew out on the town in Seville.

*Vengo's* perfunctory story line, mainly a bridge from one musical interlude to the next, has something to do with a blood feud between Caco's family and the rival Caravaca clan, operators of the local casino. Caco's doom is presaged by his frequent visits to his daughter's grave, but his fatalism carries very little weight. *Vengo's* vistas are so sumptuously empty and the male cast has such a surplus of scruffy elegance that the movie might be a multipage fashion spread in *Vanity Fair*. This sense of moody posturing has its own leisure-class quality, but it unavoidably mitigates *Vengo's* tragic finale—if not the power of the closing lament, which, like most of the numbers in the film, should inspire infectiously banged fists, smashed glasses, and overturned tables.

For major-league posing, there are few movies to top *Salomé*, the 1922 feature produced and financed by silent-movie diva Alla Nazimova as a vehicle for herself. Inspired by Oscar Wilde's scandalous play and Aubrey Beardsley's decadent illustrations, this intimation of an alternative Hollywood fits into American film history somewhere between the "Fall of Babylon" episode from D.W. Griffith's 1916 *Intolerance* and the lysergic Sunset Boulevard dress-up Kenneth Anger concocted some four decades later in *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*.

More than a relic, *Salomé* is showing—in a beautifully tinted 35mm print—on a bill with Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy's 1924 *Ballet Mécanique* as part of "Unseen Cinema," the ambitious series devoted to pre-World War II American avant-garde cinema that, having been featured at the Whitney Museum all summer, will be reprised this fall at Anthology Film Archives. In a general sense, *Salomé* is a manifestation of the pop orientalism that set itself against more puritanical mores in the decades before and after World War I. The wanton teenager who danced for the head of St. John the Baptist had recently been painted as a modern woman by Robert Henri, played in the movies by Theda Bara, parodied as a Lower East Side Jewish girl in a song by Irving Berlin, and memorialized as a cigarette brand name before Nazimova took on the material.

A lithe 40-plus, Nazimova plays the 14-year-old Princess of Judea as a saucy flapper. Men kill themselves for her, and she barely notices, having become fixated on a desert prophet in a fur loincloth. "The mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death," the opening title explains. Most of the movie is a big buildup to Salomé's dance, basically an absurd little gavotte despite the presence of a clownishly excited Herod and a squad of capering dwarfs. What's remarkable about the movie is its brazenly languid pacing—the combination of single-shot scenes and rapturous close-ups. In its own day, this 68-minute feature would have seemed avant-garde in the spirit of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*—it's set in a world of total artifice.

Outrageous would not be too strong a word: The bare-chested boys, blond Nubian slaves, metallic potted palms, art nouveau floral patterns, and birdcage dungeons of Natacha Rambova's design anticipate everything from Jean Cocteau and Josef von Sternberg to *Flash Gordon*, although Nazimova's hairdo is unique. (As Kenneth Anger explains in the "Unseen Cinema" catalog, Rambova used "masses of giant pearls—each about the size of moth balls—each individually wired on black tightly-wound springs that quiver tremulously with each petulant gesture of the Spoiled Princess. It is by far the *objet* in the picture.")

*Salomé* is brilliantly counterpointed, under the rubric "Edgy Movies: Roots and Branches," by *Ballet Mécanique*, which is having its world premiere as accompanied by the original George Antheil music. According to Antheil, the movie was created to accompany the music. Be that as it may, the percussive jangling of Antheil's pounding piano and occasional siren blast accentuate the movie's piston-gear motion and make this venerable avant-garde piece seem nearly new.

More by J. Hoberman

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