A Cinema Guild Release

STARLESS DREAMS

A film by Mehrdad Oskouei

76 minutes / DCP / 16:9 / Dolby 5.1 / Iran / Not Rated
In Persian with English Subtitles

Stills available at: www.cinemaguild.com/downloads

Publicity contact:
Alex Panagakis
(310) 717-1470
alex@alexpanagakispr.com

Booking contact:
Tom Sveen
tom@cinemaguild.com

The Cinema Guild, Inc.
115 West 30th Street, Suite 800
New York, NY 10001-4061
Tel: (212) 685-6242, Fax: (212) 685-4717
www.cinemaguild.com
SHORT SYNOPSIS

*Starless Dreams* plunges us into the lives of young teenage girls sharing temporary quarters at a juvenile detention center on the outskirts of Tehran. Director Mehrdad Oskouei, one of Iran’s most prominent filmmakers, spent seven years securing access to this all-female facility. As the New Year approaches, the girls bond, and reveal—with playfully disarming honesty—the circumstances and acts that resulted in their incarceration. They have killed their father, robbed a bank, or were arrested for carrying 651 grams of cocaine. Outside the prison walls, danger is everywhere, even within their own families.

With startling frankness and “the conceptual rigor and emotional directness associated with the best of Iranian cinema” (*Variety*), *Starless Dreams* delivers an unforgettable portrayal of innocence lost and found.

LONG SYNOPSIS

Mehrdad Oskouei, one of Iran’s most prominent filmmakers, spent seven years securing access to a female juvenile rehabilitation and correctional facility on the outskirts of Tehran. The result is *Starless Dreams*, a haunting portrait of stolen childhood, and the stark testimonial of those previously ignored and invisible.

*Starless Dreams* plunges us into the lives of seven young teenage girls (Khatereh, Masoumeh, Ghazal, Somayeh, Nobody, Hasrat, and 651) sharing temporary quarters at the rehabilitation center. As the New Year approaches, the girls bond, and reveal—with playfully disarming honesty—the circumstances and acts that resulted in their incarceration. Masoumeh, along with her sister and mother, killed her abusive father. Nobody explains that she was arrested for “adultery, armed robbery, the brothel.” 651 takes her name from the amount (measured in grams) of cocaine she was caught carrying. Outside the prison walls, danger is everywhere, even within their own families—virtually all of the girls have been “bothered” by male relatives.

Inside, the girls seek solace and comfort with each other and ponder the coming year. It is the sisterly bond that brings the girls to sing and dance with hope. It is also one that allows them to share tears.

*Starless Dreams* follows *It’s Always Late for Freedom* (2008) and *The Last Days of Winter* (2011) in Oskouei’s award-winning documentary trilogy which explores questions of crime and delinquency among Iranian youth. While *Starless Dreams* portrays the female experience in Iran’s juvenile justice system, the first two installments focus on boys behind bars.
"[A] heartbreaking work."

[5 stars] “Brilliant.”
– The Guardian

"Roger Ebert once called the movies 'a machine that generates empathy,' and Starless Dreams ... is just such a machine. With the conceptual rigor and emotional directness associated with the best of Iranian cinema, Oskouei simply listens to the stories of those who have never been listened to before."
– Scott Tobias, Variety

"An extraordinary film. Starless Dreams captures a rare, sorrowful, infinitely complex milieu."
– Michelle Orange, Village Voice

"Poignant and authentic."
– Vox Magazine

"Mehrdad Oskouei's reputation as one of Iran’s finest documentary filmmakers grows film by film. Starless Dreams is the perfect example of how powerful simplicity can be when it's underpinned by compassion for its subject."
– Deborah Young, The Hollywood Reporter

"One of the best Iranian social documentaries of the past years."
– Keyframe

"Brilliant. The girls in Starless Dreams make clear their experiences of systemic oppression."
– Cynthia Fuchs, PopMatters

"Provides a rich entry point into some very complex questions about the state of human rights in Iran and the state of correctional systems internationally."
– Bitch Flicks

“A fascinating and humane view of the marginalized and forgotten. The girls' voices rise as a startlingly powerful chorus, questioning, challenging and demanding we listen.”
– CineVue
SELECT FESTIVALS & AWARDS

Berlin International Film Festival, Amnesty International Film Prize

International Documentary Association Awards, Pare Lorentz Award

BFI London Film Festival, Grierson Prize for Best Documentary Feature

True/False Film Festival, True Vision Award for Mehrdad Oskouei

Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival, Best International Documentary

Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, Reva and David Logan Grand Jury Award & Inspiration Award

Hot Docs International Documentary Film Festival, Official Selection,

Chicago International Film Festival, Official Selection

Camden International Film Festival, Official Selection

Human Rights Watch Festival, New York, Official Selection
INTERVIEW

Can you speak about where you started your career and your journey to this film?
Mehrdad Oskouei: When I was fifteen, I decided to commit suicide. My father went bankrupt so the family’s finances were taking a big toll. I took ropes and weights to the seaside and decided to drown myself so my siblings could have better opportunities. While at the shore, something surreal happened. A car arrived out of nowhere late at night and more people than it could conceivably fit started coming out of it, playing loud music on their sound system and began dancing and swimming in the water. That moment felt like a catharsis, like a reminder that the world would go around and life would continue whether I was gone or alive. I changed my mind. After that, I started acting in theatre, but there was a sense of injustice in my dad’s situation, which made me feel uneasy about frivolous art. I wondered why no one heard our voice, our pain. I decided then that if I had the opportunity, I would become the voice for the voiceless. I made my first film at 17. I sold everything I had, down to my textbooks and put together enough money for an 8mm film. I wrote my second film when I was serving in the military. When they found out I was sneaking time to work on it, they punished me. But by the time they banished me to the south of Iran to work in the fields, I’d already finished filming. Eventually, I applied to university and studied cinema, all the while making films and working as a professional photographer. I’ve made 25 films, short and long, which I finance myself in whatever way I can.

How did your relationship with the Centre for Correction and Rehabilitation of Young Adults start?
I wanted to make a film about the kids at these centres for years, but it was really impossible to enter the system. I first attempted to film there in 2006. I tried for six months to get the permissions but was unsuccessful. Eventually, I took my two-page original concept to the federal judiciary for one final plea. I presented all the research I had done and asked for a really short filming period. They took it from me and sent me home. I was in the car talking to my assistant about how the project was bust after all these months and just then my cell phone rang. That sounds very typical of Iranian bureaucracy. Just when you think there’s no way forward…

Exactly! They gave me permission to film in the Centre for ten days under the judiciary’s supervision. They wanted the rushes sent to them every night. We shot almost everything I wanted in that short window. When I presented my final cut (It’s Always Late for Freedom, 2008) to the authorities later, it really had an emotional impact on them. Later, I decided to make a film (The Last Days of Winter, 2011) about the occasional field trips that the Centre would take the kids to. It would always be either the seaside or a religious site on pilgrimage. The whole months-long process of obtaining permission for the second film began with that idea. The censors joked that I was getting too cocky and I should be thankful for the one film they allowed me to make. This went on for another four years, but I eventually got it made in 2010. Before filming the second chapter, I learned the Centre also had a girls-only division. The security and secrecy around this division was airtight so I got the ball rolling early. The research for Starless Dreams had been in progress for seven years when permission to film was finally granted. We were allowed three months of access but shooting only took place over 20 days in that period.
Tell me about your relationship with the kids. They are mostly teenage girls who have had trouble with men in their past. They’ve had traumatic sexual experiences and have been harmed by men. To try to create some sense of trust and intimacy, I introduced myself to them as Amoo (paternal uncle) and that didn’t work so well. It turns out the uncles were in most cases the ones doing all the harm, so I became Daei Mehrdad instead. Daei (maternal uncle) was fine. We developed a friendly, familial environment. They learned about me, my family, my daughter. They watched my two previous films. They sensed that I was being open and honest within the first few days. They really welcomed me into their world.

This sense of trust really comes through in the film. The audience immediately feels that there’s no emotional distance between the camera and the subject and the girls are really frank with you. In all honesty, if I felt that the subjects were uncomfortable with the camera, I would have stopped the shoot. I use my films as a method of psychoanalysis. In my interviews, if I can’t challenge the subjects psychologically, and consequently, challenge the sociological expectations of the audience, then there’s no point in filmmaking.

Was there a working script you started with, of ideas you wanted to get from the girls? I shape the screenplay in the editing room. I borrow the structures of narrative storytelling from fiction cinema but with an overarching idea, not a script. For this film, the idea was a question that needed to be answered for myself: why should these kids, at this age, be in this place, and what leads them to be here? Once I entered the Centre, I needed to find characters for my story. I find the characters through extensive conversations, to find the right focus for the film. The Centre’s staff members were incredibly helpful too. Some personalities fell out of the story, either because they didn’t want to share their stories with the camera, or for other reasons. I didn’t know what to expect when we began and--especially with this film--there were curveballs along the way. For example, if one of the girls was going to be released, we wouldn’t find out until at most 24 hours before, which meant a really crunched shooting period to get everything we wanted from her to close her arc.

Does making a film like this take an emotional toll on you? Of course! The film doesn’t include everything we shot, and there were really disturbing storylines that totally shook me. I’m a very emotional person and the mental pressure physically affects me as well. I woke up very early every morning and by seven, we had started filming. The whole day I would try to conceal my emotions from the girls. At night when we wrapped, the production assistant would get me a cab and ask the driver to not talk or play music. I’d just throw myself in the corner of the back seat. When I got home, every night, I’d just take a shower, do my crying in there, and my wife and daughter would understand. I’d just leave the shower and jump straight under my blanket.

In the film, one of the girls asks why you don’t take the camera out and film their families. Did you consider that angle to the story? Someone once asked Frederick Wiseman what the secret to the brilliance of his filmmaking was, and he said, “I limit the geography of my stories.” The biggest concepts in the universe can be found in the smallest of spaces. One needs only to look deep enough. Actually, Wiseman’s films, and a workshop of his that I attended in Amsterdam years ago, really affected my filmmaking.
Before that, I’d go around the country and research for months on all aspects of a project. When I made my geography smaller, so to speak, I think I gave myself the chance to reach something more profound.

**In Starless Dreams, the smaller scope enhances the sense of intimacy that the audience feels with your universe and characters.**

If you feel the need to step outside the Centre, it means there’s something lacking in the girls’ stories and I just didn’t think that was the case. In the film, the only time we see the outside world is through the fences around the building, but even that doesn’t project a feeling of liberation. For the girls, the Centre is their entire universe. Most of them feel happier and safer there, and they have each other. Outside of that space, danger surrounds them, even from their own families. I tried to show their departures from the Centre as the beginning of a new form of imprisonment.

**Do you want to continue funding your films independently?**

Yes, so I can stay true to my subjects and beliefs. I have to make films and be the voice of the people who don’t have their own. It hasn’t been easy because I’m not connected to any organization. I’ve been fortunate that my films have never been censored, and I’ve been allowed to work the way I want to, but I still need the films to be seen in order to do my duty.

**Do you think we’re seeing increased interest in documentary across the globe? I feel like audiences everywhere are more interested these days.**

Yes, but I think the fact that more people are interested around the world means that documentaries from Iran, Asia, Africa and Latin America are being pursued in an unprecedented way and that brings a lot of new voices to the fray. In an increasingly globalized, multi-cultural world, we need this range of color to be present. Otherwise, the powerful global media organizations will eventually distort the images of all “smaller” cultures. You know, I still get asked questions like “Are there cars in Iran? Do people still ride camels?” [Laughs] Imagine how much room there is to educate and inform.

**In the past few years, there’s been a growing trend toward films that blur the line between fiction and documentary. This mode of storytelling has always existed to an extent in world cinema, but in Iran it has a very rich history. Ovanes Ohanian was doing it in the 1930s and then Kamran Shirdel and Parviz Kimiavi and others carried the torch in the 1960s and 1970s. Of course, the world got to discover it through Abbas Kiarostami’s Close-up. What draws Iranian filmmakers to this true/false line?**

Even Asghar Farhadi has done that to an extent. Iranian narrative filmmaking has always been more experimental than most national cinemas and is always gravitating toward the documentary mode. With new means of filmmaking, it’s only going to grow more radically. One of my students is making a fiction film at the moment with a small camera in her sunglasses just as she walks around. That’s an unprecedented level of truth in fiction cinema. I think Iranians always viewed cinema as a tool, a means of socio-political expression. That line of thinking naturally pushed them toward playing with the cinematic form to achieve a greater truth, to be able to tell stories that were authentic. Introducing elements of documentary filmmaking into fiction is just one of the ways that desire has always manifested itself.

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

MEHRDAD OSKOUEI
Director / Writer / Producer

Mehrdad Oskouei is an Iranian filmmaker, producer, photographer and researcher. He was born in Tehran in 1969 and later graduated with a degree in film direction from the University of Arts. His films have been screened at numerous festivals both at home and abroad to great critical acclaim.

Mehrdad Oskouei is a founding member of the Institute of Anthropology and Culture and has sat on several international film festival juries as well as being a cultural ambassador for the United Nation's humanitarian committee, UCHA. Oskouei also teaches at film schools around Iran and is active in the Tehran Arts and Culture Association.

His latest film, Starless Dreams, won the Amnesty International Film Prize in the Generation 14plus section of the 66th Berlinale and the Grierson Prize for Best Documentary feature at the 2016 BFI London Film Festival. Oskouei also received the True Vision Award for his outstanding body of documentary work at the 13th True/False Film Festival and the Pare Lorentz Award at the 2016 IDA Documentary Awards.

SELECT FILMOGRAPHY

STARLESS DREAMS (2016, 76 min.)
THE LAST DAYS OF WINTER (2011, 52 min.)
IT’S ALWAYS LATE FOR FREEDOM (2007, 53 min.)
NOSE, IRANIAN STYLE (2005, 53 min.)
THE OTHER SIDE OF THE BURKA (2004, 52 min.)
MY MOTHER’S HOME, LAGOON (2000, 26 min.)
CREDITS

Written and Directed by
Mehrdad Oskouei

Director of Photography
Mohammad Hadadi

Editing
Amir Adibparvar

Music
Afshin Azizi

Sound Recorder
Parsa Karimi

Sound Mixer
Hossein Mahdavi

Production Manager
Vahid Hajiloei

Producer
Mehrdad Oskouei

Production Company
Oskouei Film Production

A Cinema Guild Release