

It's All Farsi To Me

By Joe Knowles

Secret *Ballot*, a new comedy now playing in better multiplexes, is a breezily entertaining road movie about the most abused word in the dictionary. The term in question is "democracy." Or, in Farsi, حکومت قاطبه مردم .

Secret Ballot

Written and directed by Babak Payami

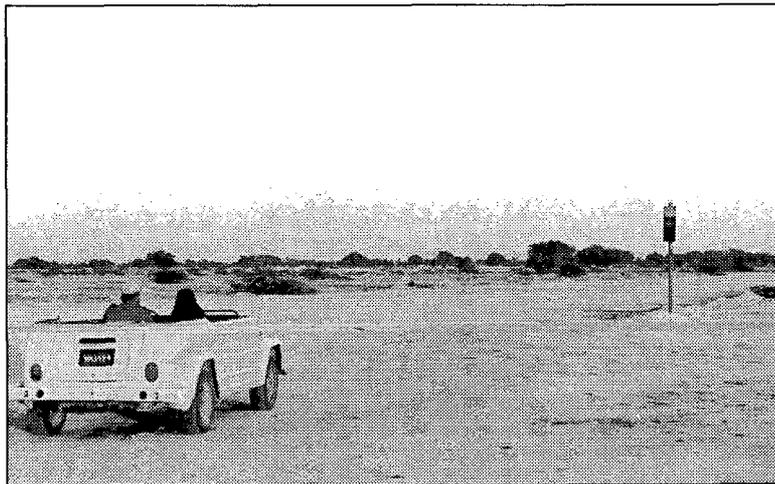
Wait, you don't read Farsi? Those characters might as well be from the console of some alien spaceship? Or a Florida ballot line? If you are like most Americans, you are as uncomprehending as I am of those little black markings, the preferred written medium of some 50 million literate Iranians. Perhaps more linguistically versatile readers can assure me that the above translation, provided by "the first online Farsi dictionary," www.farsidic.com, doesn't actually mean "I am a jelly donut."

But if it does, it would only serve to underscore my point, which is that America fundamentally does not get Iran. It may surprise the average moviegoer that one third of the Axis of Evil is also a limited democracy, with a popular reformist president and legislature bravely determined to peacefully sideline the clique of mullahs who still hold the real power. (This pseudo-democratic arrangement, incidentally, is rather like any number of U.S. allies in the "developing world," such as Turkey, which has generals behind the scenes instead of religious leaders. Except that Turkey has been much nastier to its Kurdish minority.) Iran's 2000 election—and, without a doubt, Florida's—is the context for *Secret Ballot*, which unfolds on a remote island in the Persian Gulf far removed from the drama of mainland politics.

In the opening shot—the first of many surreal touches—a large wooden box parachutes from a military plane. We later

learn that it's Election Day in Iran, and the box contains another box, this one for holding ballots. A female polling agent, a wide-eyed idealist sent to collect the locals' votes, washes up on shore next to the military barracks—not much more than a bunk bed on the beach—and announces to the soldier on duty that he has orders to escort her around the island. Areas as rural as this have no polling places, the chador-clad agent explains, so here the government must send election officials door-to-door.

And so begins the journey of a truly strange cinematic odd couple, tooling around in an open jeep trying to cajole the natives to exercise their rights. The skepti-



The law of the land.

cal soldier, rifle at the ready, chafes at the assignment and unthinkingly scares people away—"I want to vote, but not at gunpoint," says one frightened citizen—but the earnest woman, vainly trying to explain the virtues of democracy to fishermen, herders and their standoffish wives, can't seem to get anyone's attention without him. It's tempting to call both of these characters personifications of the divided Iranian government—he of the grim old guard, she of the younger, modernizing reformers.

That's not exactly the case—thankfully, *Secret Ballot* avoids schematic allegory in favor of a more ambiguous humanism—but in any event, the locals have no use for either of these people. Entreaties to fill out ballots are met with perplexed stares—who ever heard of a woman

polling officer?—or polite offers of food. One busy fisherman shrugs, "Voting doesn't catch fish." A flock of veiled wives complain that they can get married at 12 but must wait until 16 to vote. After getting the brush-off at a populous and rambling estate headed by an ancient matriarch, the agent concedes that "Granny Baghoo has her own government here. She doesn't need representatives."

Indeed, the deep well of absurdity that makes *Secret Ballot* so good is the fundamental disconnect between the election and reality; it provides the engine for the laughs and the occasion for one surrealist gag after another. We reach a nearly Buñuelian climax when the jeep stops at a red light, in the middle of nowhere, that obviously has no reason for existing at all. On the darker side of the same surreal coin, the polling agent, at wits' end, tries

to crash a funeral in hopes of collecting the mourners' votes. When she's coldly ignored at the cemetery, which is off-limits to women, her heartbroken expression—the emotional nadir of the journey—practically carries the film by itself.

Moments like these reveal that *Secret Ballot* cares deeply about the human beings democracy is supposed to serve—not the other way around, the all too common pitfall of "political" movies. On this island, where the

law is pointedly irrelevant and communication next to impossible, the ballots might as well be in Greek—or English. (Even Farsi isn't good enough for some of the islanders who happen to speak Arabic.) Director Babak Payami, with his long takes, deadpan wit and knack for capturing cultural collision, finds a kindred spirit in filmmakers like Jim Jarmusch and Jacques Tati, whose deceptively low-key comedies also understand that our biggest problem is that we talk too much. *Secret Ballot* is a reminder that political debates, as surely in Iran as in America, are often much more one-sided than we think. ■

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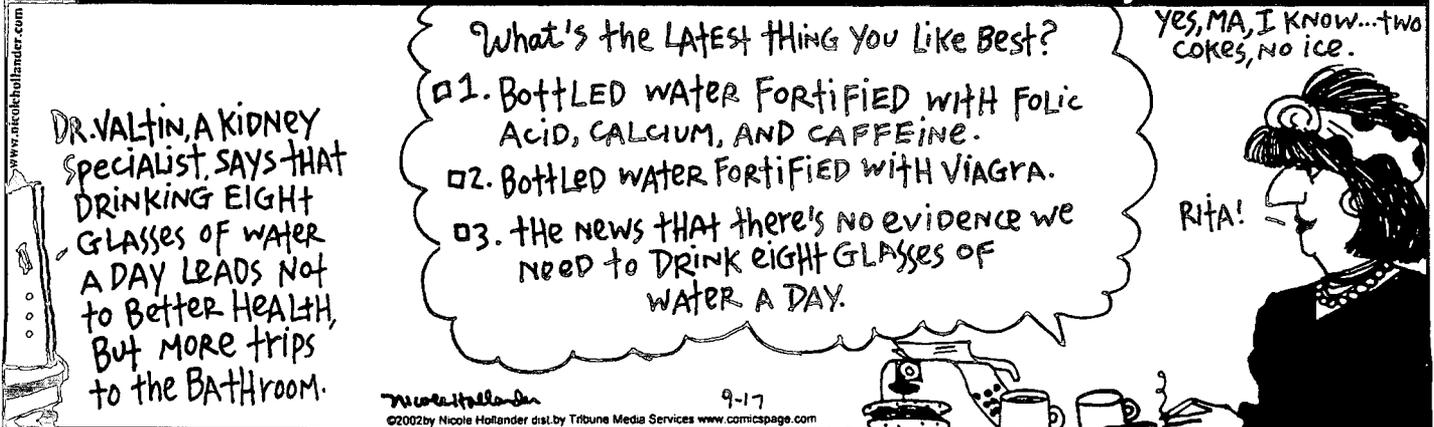
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SYLVIA

By Nicole Hollander



Heading off to Glory

By Joshua Rothkopf

Like many Americans, I wish to confront evil with my secret but stunning powers of kung fu. Since this would be far too vulgar a display of force, I've learned to make do with the cinematic offerings, picking up pointers and improving on my sound effects. *Master of the Flying Guillotine* is as deliriously satisfying as such seminars come, a notorious 1974 bloodfest currently revived from its choppily dismembered afterlife on late-night television. (Such extremities deserve their loving restorers too, maybe even more so.) Whole again at a full 93 minutes yet still delightfully cruddy to behold, it crackles with more punchy style per square inch—not to mention plain old punching—than seems strictly legal.

But I get ahead of myself. The titular weapon, an artifact dating back to the Ching Dynasty (or at least the illustrious reign of Shaw Brothers Studios), is basically a red hat attached to a length of chain. When it drops onto your head with a little whistle, the look is really quite fetching; a mesh veil descends, and for a brief moment you resemble a beekeeper with a taste for Gaultier. But with a violent jerk of the chain, razor sharp blades emerge, sending the bonnet—with its contents—back to the wielder. Take it as a lesson: It pays to accessorize.

To watch this beauty in action, a riposte to all laws of physics and practicality, is to be awed by film's purest inventions—by King Kong or flying saucers. You tremble at the sight of its Master (Kam Kang), an ancient monk with feathery eyebrows the size of mature tarantulas. (His swastika-adorned bib may have Buddhist precedent, but its symbolism here is all too obvious.) Only blind in a technical sense, he rages forth from his mountain retreat to avenge the murder of his two disciples. The guy even has his own theme music, a churning metallic groan that swells whenever he wanders into frame. (Credit where sorely due: Neu!, Kraftwerk and other sampled krautrockers should contact their attorneys.)

His avowed prey is the One-Armed Boxer, played by the ingenious writer and director Jimmy Wang Yu. The critic pauses for reflection, knowing that auteurs must be made, not merely discovered. Candidate appears to have been discovered poolside, handsome and chiseled but

never actually inclined to learn a martial art. Shortcomings are hidden by camera trickery, as befitting the ambulatory-challenged roles that bring him idolatry in the late '60s. By the time Wang Yu commands his own productions, his grasp of compositional sleight-of-hand is total. But sadly the moment is over: Bruce Lee's bona fide athleticism is the writing on the wall. Scandals and financial mismanagement do the rest.

Master can thus be appreciated as Wang Yu's final flourish, a sorcerer's last stand. Nothing about it is subtle or honest, no flinch goes unamplified, no body blow unpunctuated. At its heart lies an epic tournament wholly unrelated to the central drama but far too weird to dismiss. One after another, gifted combatants enter the dusty, abstracted arena to ply their skills: the monkey boxer, the "braided hair" strangler whipping his deadly ponytail, the "yoga master" brandishing



extendable eight-foot arms. What little reality remains gets wafted away as two opponents duke it out while perched on wooden poles, suspended over glittering swords. Each match ends with a sickening flourish, the snap of a victory fan as the winner is declared and the "loser" swept off. Once more the drums are beaten. Another round begins. And so on.

It would be scant exaggeration to estimate the influence of this sequence in the billions of dollars; when the mortal combat finally does subside, it's tempting to dig into your pocket for another quarter. Still, the plot must go on. There are one-armed pretenders across the countryside to be beheaded, barefooted assassins to be fried on metal floors. (Words cannot begin to serve.) Along the way, the Boxer solemnly offers bits of wisdom sure to send even non-expert viewers into paroxysms of joy: "The main fundamental of kung fu is to act wise and brave." Wouldn't you know it? He's the good guy.

Eventually, it all comes down to the blind versus the handicapped. But with so much genial exuberance on display—ricocheting zooms, wall-climbing choreography (by the legendary Lui brothers), ass-kickings aplenty—it's easy not to care. *Master of the Flying Guillotine* is either the arcade classic of the season or the most notable pulp rediscovery in years. A few more movies like this, and who knows? I might just have to bust out my eagle claw, my supple snake fist. Evildoers be warned: I can feel my limbs tensing already. You can't hold me responsible. ■

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