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Marzieh Vafamehr: In Sentencing Actor to Flogging and Jail, Repression Takes World Stage

Charity Hume · Thursday, October 13th, 2011

Update October 28, 2011: Marzieh Vafamehr's sentence has been lifted!

Marzieh Vafamehr, an Iranian actress who appeared in Granaz Moussavi's 2009 film, *My Tehran for Sale*, has been sentenced to 90 lashes and a year in jail. The film has been banned in Iran, and charges against Vafamehr include "participation in production of a vulgar film," and "anti-Sharia conduct." In the film, Vafamehr portrays an actress who is forced to consider a life of exile from Iran, her native country, by the harsh fundamentalist laws that criminalize her natural appearance and restrict her artistic expression. Her character drinks alcohol and appears without a hijab in scenes where her head has been shaved. Commenting on Vafamehr's sentence, Saeed Kamali Dehghan of *The Guardian*, remarked that "life is mirroring art, in the most gruesome of ways."

The Guardian article led me to take a step many of us have learned to avoid when confronted by the daily horrors enacted on the world stage. I did not tune out. I did not "turn the page." Overcoming my aversion to violence, to torture, I typed the following words into a search engine: "flogging in Iran." Then I clicked on "Images." In to order to grasp the nature of the punishment currently sanctioned by Iran's government, I advise readers to do this for themselves.

Dozens of photographs came up. The pictures show flayed flesh, raw skin, and the mutilated backs and legs of human beings. Because the sentence is frequently carried out in public, many of the pictures depict a ring of spectators. Here is a crowd who gathered to watch a woman buried to her neck in preparation for a stoning, here are the tribesmen who hold down the woman as she is flayed, here are the priests and imams who have ordered the scourging. This ring of spectators who silently witness and therefore sanction the punishment have both civil and religious authority to enact this sentence with the full blessing of their religion and their legal code.

Alfred Hitchcock had it right when he explained that true horror comes when the murderer sounds rational, when the language of the killer uses the mask of civilization. He considered one of his most chilling portraits of evil to be a serial rapist who is a natty dresser, a person who goes from victim to victim with the education and finesse of a professor. When he kills his victims, by strangling them with neckties, he uses the words of the priest, the schoolteacher, the authoritarian. He says, "This is for your own good."

The brutality the regime enacts against artists who dare to draw attention to the repressive

conditions for women, make Marizieh Vafamehr's decision to undertake this role heroic. In the act of making this film, Vafamehr is a symbol of independence of thought, of artistic freedom, and of the courage to speak out. The atrocity Vafamehr faces is one meant to frighten and intimidate thousands of Iranian women into silence and submission. Beyond the circle of tormenters, a world-wide audience is watching these events unfold. As spectators who witness the crime Iran to plans to carry out on the world stage, we are not watching an actress on a screen. The mutilation, the blood, the screams, the scars will be real. Vafamehr is a heroine who deserves to be rescued before she runs out of time.

Here are links to suggested action and an online petition.

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