

The White Balloon (1995)

FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW: Of a Girl and Her Goldfish

By JANET MASLIN

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Director: Jafar Panahi

Writers: Jafar Panahi (original idea), Abbas Kiarostami, and 1 more credit

Stars: Aida Mohammadkhani, Mohsen Kafili and Fereshteh Sadre Orafaiy

It is an hour and a half before a new year begins in Teheran (on March 21), And the city is poised for celebration. A stern and adorable 7-year-old girl named Razieh (Aida Mohammadkhani) is pouting about not having the right goldfish for this occasion. The fish at home are skinny. She wants a fat one with better fins. So she wheedles her mother into giving her money for this purchase, but then the money is accidentally lost. Razieh enlists the help of several strangers to try retrieving it from beneath an iron grate.

And that's really all there is to "The White Balloon," a tiny, improbably charming Iranian film directed with lovely precision by Jafar Panahi. Mr. Panahi's methods are so effective, in fact, that there's reason to wish his film had more of a destination. Appearing to escalate as Razieh follows her winding path to that goldfish, and as the story unfolds in real time until the dawn of the new year, the film finally loses momentum and falls back upon the open-ended, anecdotal manner of a short story. Still, it's a short story that can be enjoyed intently all the way through.

"The White Balloon" combines a French film's solemn respect for childhood with the African idea of using the simplest of transactions -- the choice of a burial plot, the transfer of livestock -- to reflect and explore an entire community. In fact, although this film has an urban setting, its look and tempo are very much those of a small town, one in which banter and negotiation are the central part of everyone's day.

Without overburdening his slender story (the film's screenplay comes from the eminent Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami, for whom Mr. Panahi worked as an assistant on "Through the Olive Trees"), Mr. Panahi strings together a set of brief encounters that are revealing and intense. The little girl's showdown with some snake charmers who try to take her money, to the great interest of a group of bystanders, is typical. Without straining, it illustrates the girl's great stubbornness and independence, along with the snake charmers' sly calculations about whether to cheat her or bow to her will. The film maker has no trouble sustaining the tension of that exchange.

"The White Balloon" has an unadorned look, but its minor events are so carefully orchestrated that it has the feel of a child's pop-up book, with interesting bits of business in every window or door frame or alley. In addition to strong visual command of this material, Mr. Panahi has enough insight into human nature to create dramatic interest, too. The way a tailor fights with his assistant or a kindly, grandmotherly woman helps Razieh can expose a lot, especially to the sharp eyes of this determined little girl.

"I'll tell your mother it wasn't your fault," says the older woman reassuringly, about the lost money. Nothing doing, says Razieh. She knows very well whose fault it was. And even at 7, she shares this film maker's frankness and his gift for telling the truth.

