



52nd San Francisco International Film Festival

By: Jamileh Davoudi

The San Francisco International Film Festival opened its 52nd year on April 23 and will run through May 7, with 150 films from 55 countries. Following the tradition, the opening night was at the historic Castro Theater with 'La Mission' (USA). Peter Bratt, the director who was moved by the affection of the exuberant crowd, at



La Mission

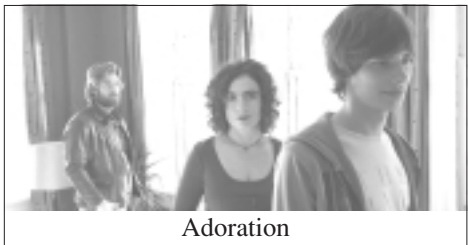
the Q&A session said, "La Mission" is the story of a man struggling with homophobia who negotiates life through violence and intimidation. As the writer, the most interesting challenge to me was to create a character that was a representation of the larger culture. We live in a patriarchal society that has used violence as a weapon since its inception. Now we are on the threshold of great change in relation to what we're doing to the earth and to each other. I wanted to take that big picture and put it into an individual who is also on the threshold of change. The drama of the film comes from watching him deal with a conflict that ultimately will act as a catalyst for his own transformation." There is only one short Iranian film, 'Angels die in the soil', in this year's festival. Directed by



Angels die in the soil

Babak Amini, it is part of the program of narrative and documentary shorts called 'Foreign Territories'. The story is set in Iraq about an Iraqi-Kurdish girl who earns a living for her ill father by digging up the remains of dead soldiers from the Iran-Iraq war and selling their bones!

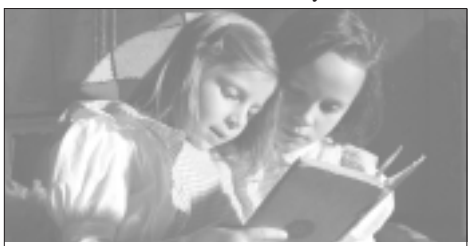
'Adoration' (Canada), written, produced and directed by Atom Egoyan whose three of his films 'Exotica', 'The Sweet Hereafter' and 'Ararat'



Adoration

won the best picture for Genie Awards, Canada's equivalent of the Oscars. One of the original inspirations for the film came from a 1986 news story that Egoyan read about a Jordanian man who sent his pregnant Irish girlfriend on a flight with a bomb in her handbag, of which she had no knowledge until security found it. Egoyan says: "This actual event of the terrorist plot began to mesh with the story of a young man maturing in an age of invented screen names and the creation of alternate identities through gaming avatars." Adoration is a multi-layered film about the role of technology in our lives, our relationships and our self identities. A very complex and engaging movie! (This film is due to be released in May.)

'Bluebeard' (France), inspired by the three pages of an old fairy tale, Catherine Breillat, the director and screen writer interweaves two parallel stories; one the story of Bluebeard, and the other, the story of her own childhood. Breillat says: "When I was



Bluebeard

little, I loved Bluebeard: however many times I read it, I was terrified each time.. The fact that I knew the story perfectly didn't change anything.. It even increased the excitement through the pleasure of fear by anticipation." Bluebeard is the kind of movie that leaves you emotionally undecided! 'Delta' (Hungary), this beautiful film from Kornel Mundruczo, set in Romania's Danube delta, depicts a brother and sister trying to build a new life. While trying to separate themselves from the mundane and monotonous life in the village, this act of

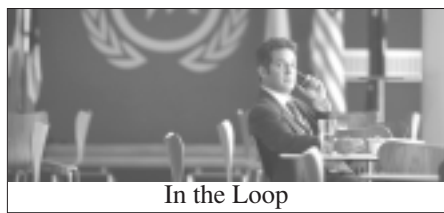
independence only serves to antagonize the



Delta

townspeople leading to a tragic and violent outcome. The cinematography is exquisite and serves to show the juxtaposition of the vibrancy and freedom of nature versus the cramped, static life in the village.

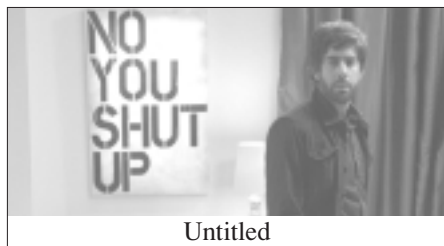
'In the Loop' (England), Director and co-writer Armando Iannucci delivers a madcap, hilarious film about the unseen goings on within the American and British governments as preparations for military action in the Middle East are being finalized. If the interdepartmental infighting, secret war committees, press leaks, and last minute editing of assessment reports seems remi-



In the Loop

niscent of the Bush and Blair administrations during the buildup to the war in Iraq, it is because Iannucci means just that. This blistering satire exposes the bungling and pettiness of government officials who are more concerned with their own career advancement than in the worldwide ramifications of the actions. (This film is due to be released July by IFC Films.)

'Untitled' (USA), Jonathan Parker's witty satire of the New York art scene follows two broth-



Untitled

ers. Adrian is an avant-garde but unpopular composer while his brother is a mediocre but commercially successful painter. Both of them become involved with Madeleine, an ambitious art gallery dealer. Through her, we are exposed to the world of contemporary art. While Parker brutally exposes the hypocrisies and pretensions of artists, dealers, and those investors who know little about the art they are buying, he also tenderly depicts the creative process of an artist trying to discover his 'inner voice'.

'Wild Field' (Russia), this gorgeous film by



Wild Field

Mikhail Kalatozishvili is aptly titled since it takes place in the remote regions of the Kazakh steppe. The focus is on a medical outpost manned by the young doctor, Mitya, who administers to the various illnesses and mishaps of the local herders. Mitya, fully committed to his duties, equipped only with the most primitive of resources, is forced to confront his own loneliness and fears living completely outside of society. At the same time he is mystically drawn, as we are, to a place that is both harsh and magical.

'Zift' (Bulgaria). It's not every day you get to see a Bulgarian film. This debut feature from Javor Gardev is based on the novel of the same name by Vladislav Todorov, who also wrote the screenplay. The film takes place within 24 hours following an ex-convict, nicknamed Moth, as he is paroled from prison and is immediately plunged into several breathtaking escapades involving his old partner in crime, Slug, and his former girlfriend, Praying Mantis. The film is dark, appropriately shot in black and white, and the symbolism is even darker. Yet, within all the decay of the decrepit, demoralized communist landscape there lies a hope that a jewel is hidden somewhere deep beneath the despair. The second week of the festival will be covered in the June issue. For film listing and tickets, please visit the festival web site: <http://fest09.sffs.org/>

Singing Scot challenged by singing Iranian 12-year-old



by Grace Nasri

IranTimes: A 12-year-old Iranian- Welsh boy wowed judges on the television show "Britain's Got Talent" last month and is now an amazing challenger to Susan Boyle, who arose the previous week from Scottish obscurity to astound the English-speaking world. Boyle brought the audience of the British talent show to its feet April 11 when she sang, "I Dreamed a Dream." One week later, Shaheen Jafargholi brought the crowd to its feet again when he sang Smokey Robinson's "Who's Loving You." Jafargholi turned 12 a week before his April 18 performance in front of judges Simon Cowell, Amanda Holden and Piers Morgan of "Britain's Got Talent." That show is almost identical to "American Idol." Jafargholi has an Iranian father and a Welsh mother who split a few years ago. The dimple-cheeked preteen overcame a brief hiccup when Cowell, known for his blunt style, stopped Jafargholi just 15 seconds into his planned performance of "Valerie." "You've got this really wrong," Cowell said. "At that moment, I thought I'd blown my only chance," Jafargholi said later. "I had this huge 'uh-oh' moment and expected to be walking straight off the stage," he told the Daily Star. Cowell, however, gave Jafargholi a second chance, asking him if he wanted to try another song. "What do you sing apart from that," Cowell asked? Jafargholi named "Who's Loving You," a song made famous by a young Michael Jackson when he sang as part of the Jackson Five. This time, the moment Jafargholi opened his mouth and belted out the first few words, the audience went wild, just as it did a week earlier for Boyle. Cowell was seen smiling and nodding his head and Holden's mouth dropped—just as happened a week earlier with Boyle. When the song was over, Jafargholi received a standing ovation from all three judges and the entire audience—just as happened a week

earlier for Boyle. Cowell said, "This is now one song that can change your life. And this may be the start of something special for you, young man." Holden said Jafargholi's rendition of the song gave her "goosebumps." After the show, Morgan praised Jafargholi, saying, "Once Simon got him to sing the right kind of song for his voice, he was sensational. Like a young Stevie Wonder." Jafargholi, who lives with his mother, Karen Thomas, in Swansea, Wales, said, "I couldn't believe my luck when Simon gave me a second chance and asked for another song... Luckily, I managed to hold it together and control my nerves. I just told myself that I had to do it, that it was now or never and that there was no room for mistakes. Simon had given me a second chance but I knew there wouldn't be a third." Jafargholi is in competition with Boyle, a plump, 47-year-old Scottish woman who works as a church volunteer and says she has never been kissed. Boyle became a sensation overnight. The YouTube clip of her performance has received more than 50 million hits so far, triple the best that President Obama has scored. Thomas said her son began singing at the age of two and admitted, "There's been no stopping him. It's his passion and he doesn't stop from the moment he wakes up until the moment he goes to sleep at night. His idols are Michael Jackson, Mariah Carey, Leona Lewis and Whitney Houston—all the big ones." The young singing sensation, who has received more than 300,000 hits on YouTube, told the Daily Star, "Simon told me I was one of the best singers he'd ever heard. It was such a shock. To be honest, it felt like I was living in a dream and that it was happening to someone else rather than me." Jafargholi's performance can be viewed on YouTube at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yVU4IkzMNio>

Beggar not really so poor after all

IranTimes: After the death of an Iranian vagrant who spent a lifetime begging for change on the streets of western Iran, police discovered that Talat Habibian had actually left behind a vast fortune. Habibian's neighbors had thought of her as nothing more than a beggar while she was alive, but when police found her dead in her unkempt home, the image changed. After finding her body, officers discovered hidden valuables estimated in the millions. Judge Yousef Bagheri later confirmed Habibian's millionaire status. The precise value of the assets has yet to be established but officials say it totals several billion Iranian rials—potentially millions of dollars. Among the deceased's possessions, police found the equivalent of more than \$10,000 in cash, ownership documents to a number of lucrative properties and businesses, and title deeds to acres of farmland. They also discovered a collection of precious jewelry and ornaments, including earrings dating back to the mid-19th Century reign of the Qajar monarch, Mohammad Shah. Bagheri has been appointed to dispose of Habibian's assets after it was found that the seventy-something-year-old woman had no heirs, The Guardian of Britain reported. But similar stories have been heard before in Iran; and

Habibian is not the country's first wealthy beggar. In 2003, a 40-year-old Tehran woman filed for divorce after discovering that her wealthy carpet trader husband regularly begged in a run-



down neighborhood in the south of the city. In 2006, an Iranian beggar arrested by police in Tehran was found to have more than \$14,000 in the bank and owned a luxury apartment in the city's affluent northern suburbs. The Iranian authorities have in the past made efforts to stamp out begging. In 2006, the Tehran City Council offered inducements of \$500 monthly for adults and \$200 monthly for children to get off the streets, but the venture failed because the begging business is apparently too lucrative.

Radio host: Islam means ladies can't drive

IranTimes: A San Francisco radio station has come under criticism for spewing anti-Muslim rhetoric during a morning talk show. Radio station KSFO 560-AM host Brian Sussman and co-host "Officer Vic" said during their March 30 morning program: "Islamic finance is about living within your means and helping the needy—unless they're Jews," and, "The great honorable qualities of that good old time religion: honor killings, female circumcision, not allowing women to drive...Jews are monkeys, pigs." The Washington-based Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) on April 2 called on the station to discipline the talk show hosts for mistating Muslim beliefs and casting suspicion on



political participation by Muslim Americans. "Radio hosts are free to hold bigoted views, but listeners have no obligation to subsidize those views by purchasing the goods or services of companies that choose to advertise on hate-filled programs," said CAIR National Communications Director Ibrahim Hooper. "So-called 'honor killings,' female genital mutilation and not allowing women to drive are not part of Islam. Muslims respect Jews and Christians as 'people of the book' who received earlier revelations from God." This was not the first time the station had made racist comments about Islam and its followers. Hooper recalled that in 2005, Sussman reportedly asked one caller to prove he was not Muslim by proclaiming "Allah is a whore." In 2007, another host at the station reportedly warned "enemy" Muslim nations: "You keep screwing around with stuff like this, we're going to kill a bunch of you—millions of you."