



The Main Feature

Season 44 – Issue 3 – Screening 10 October 2024

Winners (Barandeha)

Iran, 2022, 85mins, Cert PG

Director	Hassan Nazer
Written by	Hamed Emami, Hassan Nazer
Cinematography	Arash Seifi, Arash Seyfijama
Production Design	Mohammad Mohammadi
Music	Mohsen Amini, Mohammad Saeed Shayan

Cast

Parsa Maghami	Yahya
Martine Malalai Zikria	Yahya's mother
Helia Mohammadkhani	Leila (Yahya's friend)
Mahmoud Jafari	Karam (Post Office employee)
Reza Naji	Nasser Khan (Recycling business owner)
Hossein Abedini	Saber (co-owner of recycling business, DVD librarian)
Jafar Panahi	Taxi driver (at end of film)



Woking Film Club aims to offer members and guests a variety of films. Our last presentation (*Barbie*) was a pastel-pink, big budget, US-financed studio film, widely publicised and featuring familiar acting talent. It grossed \$122m at the UK box office. By contrast, tonight's film *Winners* is a Persian language, independently-financed production with a tiny budget, a cast that includes several non-professionals and which toured several film festivals before securing a very limited UK release in March last year. Its British box office was a grand total of \$3,147. So, *Winners* promises us a rather different cinematic experience.

The film is inspired by a true story. The Iranian film-maker Asghar Farhadi won the Best Foreign Language Oscar for *A Separation* in 2011 (it was shown by the Club the following year). He was nominated again in 2017 for *The Salesman*, but declined to travel to the ceremony in protest at then President Trump's ban on travel from several Muslim countries. Farhadi won the Oscar, and it was brought back to Iran. There was (some sources suggest...) an incident when the statuette was nearly mislaid in a taxi in Tehran (...but it was delivered safely).



Winners opens with an Oscar in transit in a taxi. It is indeed then lost, but handed in to a post office in the dusty rural village of Garmsar (about 60 miles from its intended destination of Tehran). It's packed for collection the next morning but long-serving employee Karam decides to borrow it overnight to show his family. On his moped ride home, it falls to the ground. It's found by 9-year-old Yahya. He is a boisterous but thoughtful boy, who lives with his long-suffering, widowed Afghani mother and is besotted with watching films even when he should be sleeping (and by the way - all his viewing is on DVD as streaming services are barred in Iran). He (rather surprisingly) doesn't recognise

the statuette. He shows it to his friend Leila, who for the sake of modesty dresses it in an outfit from her dolly (I'm no expert but it was not a Barbie!). It's a very poor area. The local children (including Yahya and Leila) regularly scavenge for waste plastics and metals from a nearby dump to sell to a recycler. As the post office and police search the village for the Oscar, Yahya takes fright - but is helped by the recycling unit's owner (an ex-movie star who has fallen on harder times) to return it himself to Tehran.

The film was financed by Creative Scotland, a lottery/government-funded body with a remit to "support the arts, screen and creative industries across all parts of Scotland on behalf of everyone who lives, works or visits here."

It would take more than eagle eyes to spot any tartan in the film, but the director/co-writer (Hassan Nazer) came to Scotland as a 21-year-old refugee in 2000. He had grown up near Garmsar. He first settled in Glasgow, working in a kebab house, then



took a language course and finally a film and media degree. His previous films were self-financed (from his own restaurant business in Aberdeen) but Creative Scotland stepped in to support him this time.

The film weaves in several references to Iranian cinema, notably in casting Reza Naji and Jafar Panahi - well-known locally for their respective successes at the Berlin Film Festival. *Winners* opened the Edinburgh International Film Festival in 2022 (where it won the Audience Award) and likewise won best feature at the BAFTA Scotland Awards and at the Raindance Film Festival (in London).

The Guardian's Peter Bradshaw described it as 'a likeable, gentle comedy...a rather cinephile film which ponders the enormous prestige of Iranian cinema abroad. I liked the free-spirited innocence here, and the film has something of British classics such as *Local Hero* or *Whisky Galore*.' The Sunday Times commended its 'quiet humour and restrained pathos.'

It is a slight story with too many co-incidences but it is genially charming, beautifully photographed, and believably acted by the children. The verdict of trade paper *Screendaily* that it's a 'curio for cineastes and festivalgoers' is a little harsh. But it's still important that films like *Winners* are supported by film clubs. That's not to denigrate the likes of *Barbie*, *Top Gun* or *Elvis* - but a varied diet is the best diet!

Eugene Smith



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Independent Films

Eugene Smith spotted this interesting perspective from Tim Robey (Daily Telegraph Film Critic). Films or directors named below that have been exhibited at WFC are shown **in bold**.

What do *Before Sunrise*, *Grosse Pointe Blank*, ***Four Weddings and a Funeral***, ***Little Miss Sunshine*** and *Napoleon Dynamite* have in common? All Independent ("indie") films. All big hits in the 1990s and 2000s. These days, none would be likely to score a theatrical release, or even get made. They'd certainly have an uphill struggle turning a profit.

Independent films are not just out of fashion, but tragically endangered right now. This is why this January's Sundance film festival – the event where so many films of that ilk have been hatched, nurtured and premiered over the years – held crisis talks about how to resurrect the entire indie business model. Hit by the double strikes of 2023, the festival only accepted 83 films this year, down from over 100 the year before.

Streaming, I hear you insist, must be the natural home for indies this side of the pandemic. Well, yes and no. There was nothing like the hue and cry in Sundance that scored a bidding war over *CODA* in 2021, with Apple paying a festival-record \$25 million for the rights, and shepherding it (somehow) to the Best Picture Oscar.

All the noise coming from Sundance this year was that even the streamers were turning their backs on indies. The top prize winner, *In the Summers*, couldn't find a US distributor until June, when the niche Music Box Films bought it, with plans for a tiddly release.

It's ever harder to persuade adults off their sofas to go to the cinema, unless they've committed to a special-occasion outing to one of the year's biggest films. As a result, very few indies have made more than a tiny commercial splash lately. Kelly Reichardt's art-world dramedy *Showing Up* (2022) made \$1.2 million worldwide, bettered slightly by last year's Sundance's Grand Jury Prize winner *A Thousand and One* (2023), which took \$3.5 million.

This is not a Sundance-only (or US-only) problem. Locally, 2023 was a poor one for UK films qualifying as independent. Despite a couple of successes – ***All of Us Strangers*** and ***The Great Escaper*** – box office revenues for British and Irish independent films were down a whopping 49% over 2022. And yet total revenues were up 4 per cent.

This general trend may have been encouraging for the studios pushing ***Barbie***, ***Oppenheimer***, and this year's *Inside Out 2* and *Deadpool & Wolverine* to become juggernauts. For the smaller players, though, and independent filmmakers, not so much.

This is what's short-sighted about treating indie films like some pesky encrustation to be scraped off one's shoe and forgotten about. They're too important, not just in themselves, but as launchpads for careers that will keep the whole industry afloat.

Look at **Christopher Nolan** and **Greta Gerwig**, heroes of the film world last year, for ***Oppenheimer*** and ***Barbie*** respectively. Nolan made *Following* (1998) for \$6,000, then *Memento* (2000) for \$9 million, and without those films, he'd never have got noticed. Gerwig worked her way up through the American mumblecore¹ scene earning a pittance, before proving her mettle with *Frances Ha* (2012) and *Lady Bird* (2017). Had all of these projects been siphoned off hypothetically to streaming, would these two wildly successful filmmakers have gained the prestige they now have?

Such trajectories also give us stars, who never arrive from nowhere to headline a \$100 million picture overnight. They start small. Hugh Grant would not be Hugh Grant without ***Four Weddings and a***

¹ Mumblecore is a subgenre of independent film characterised by naturalistic acting and (sometimes improvised) dialogue, low budgets, an emphasis on dialogue over plot, and a focus on the personal relationships of young adults. Mumblecore films tend to revolve around characters in their twenties and early thirties who are usually single, white, and fairly aimless in both their professional and personal lives. Plots are often concerned with difficulties in romantic relationships, exacerbated by the characters' inability to articulate their own desires. Wikipedia

Funeral (1994), an unrepeatable sleeper hit which earned an astonishing \$246 million worldwide, from a budget of £3 million. The same year, Kate Winslet needed **Heavenly Creatures**, or she'd never have been cast in *Sense and Sensibility*, and then *Titanic*.

Indies are a proving ground and much more: the communal experience of seeing them with a packed audience can be every bit as fulfilling as *Oppenheimer* at the Imax. Anyone who rented *Reservoir Dogs* probably remembers it quite well – but if you paid to see it in the cinema, you remember it better.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/0/indie-dramas-are-vanishing-from-cinemas/>

Editor's note: The club is showing *All of Us Strangers* on 27th March 2025

Club website: www.wncc.org.uk. Prefer to leave your comments on the film and your score online rather than on paper? Email to reactions@wncc.org.uk by Wednesday 16 October 2024
Discs of previous shows are available to hire for a modest fee.

Comments and reactions to: **Barbie**

No of reaction slips received = 22 Average score = 5.59

Score	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	~	1	1	2	1	4	4	6	3	~	~

Sorry, seemed pointless to me

Surprisingly entertaining and often thought-provoking

Energetic pace; glorious colours and sets; interesting concept. Very enjoyable.

Surprisingly entertaining, humorous and even philosophical!

Some good jokes, but the film lost its way in the last 20 minutes

Quite a clever idea but not my sort of film. I don't quite understand why it was so successful

Well-acted, great sets. Interesting storyline

Not my style, but very entertaining

Just not my sort of film

Surreal! (for the girls)

Position	Film	Average score
1	The Great Escaper	8.00
2	Barbie	5.59

Forthcoming attraction: 24 October 2024 – **The Color Purple**



On this film's release, it was fashionable to castigate director Steven Spielberg for his somewhat glossy, sugar-coated version of Alice Walker's celebrated and hard-hitting Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about a young black woman's struggle for self- and racial identity. Yet this is actually an impressive, dignified attempt to turn a radical and often difficult book into mainstream entertainment with a message, which is a ticklish task at the best of times, but one to be tackled devoutly. Whoopi Goldberg is wonderful in the lead, Danny Glover and Margaret Avery are sublime, and watch out for a pre-TV-fame Oprah Winfrey playing very out of character. Radio Times

The film, however, stands instead as monument to a remarkable performance by comedienne turned actress Whoopi Goldberg, whose portrayal of the heroine of Alice Walker's novel is a personal triumph. Liverpool Echo