A Stone's Throw

Why and how we wrote *The Stoning of Soraya M.*

Nobody will ever make this."

"You never know."

"It's a long shot."

"They're all long shots."

"It's like a Greek tragedy."

"We've got the time to write it. All we need are the rights."

Oh, that's all. This conversation occurred sometime in 2005. We were talking about a book, *The Stoning of Soraya M.* by Freidoune Sahebjam, that we had read more than 10 years before. The true story of a public stoning in an Iranian village was so elemental, so powerful, and so maddening that it still stuck with us almost scene by scene.

We had been married 24 years and didn't need to explain to each other why this story needed to be adapted into a screenplay. It was a gem with all the elements of drama you could hope for: conflict, betrayal, courage, oppression, lust, brutality, injustice, and, yes, even a ticking clock. It was not unlike *The Ox-Bow Incident, An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge, The Lottery,* and *Of Mice and Men*. All simple stories with a panoply of complex human motivations, interactions, desires, and agonies. The book broke our hearts and opened our eyes. It pleaded with us to tell it again, this time on film.

Finally, the time seemed right. Would the many hurdles prove insurmountable? Immediately, there were complications involving a French publisher and English translation, as well as a vanished author.

Hurdle #1: Buy the Rights

A couple of Italian producers had previously attempted to option the book, but Sahebjam wanted someone with an Iranian background who would shoot it in Farsi. Originally, before we knew of the author's preference, we had decided to use Farsi, even though we anticipated the usual objections: subtitles are death, there aren't any American roles in it, it will be categorized as an art film—even worse, as a *foreign* art film. But from the start we were committed to staying true to the true story, making it as authentic as possible. It was the least we owed to the people who lived and died it.

Our two years chasing the rights provided plenty of time to talk, to structure, to develop the characters, to research the village customs, and to outline. Once we had assurances that the terms were agreed upon, and the author contactable, all that was left was the final paperwork (plus the check we would write for the option). Betsy began the first draft in April 2007. By then, we were two heads with a singular vision.

We followed the same collaborative pattern we had a couple years earlier on an unproduced script: First draft, Betsy. Writing and crying, crying and writing. Rewrite, Cyrus. No crying. Back and forth, talking, adjusting, and finally getting reads from a few trusted fellow writers. Tighten, add a speech, delete a few scenes, eliminate hiccups—you know, the usual revising process.

At that time Cyrus was simultaneously researching an assignment for MPower Pictures in Miami with John Shepherd, a partner with Steve McEveety at MPower. John asked Cyrus what he was working on. Shepherd revealed that MPower Pictures had investors interested in an Iranian story. Shepherd offered to read their script when it was ready. Cyrus said he hoped to direct. John didn't blink.

In September 2007, Shohreh Aghdashloo, whom we'd always envisioned in the role of Zahra, enthusiastically signed on. A self-styled activist for human rights in Iran, she knew the risks of such a role. This book's message was as important to her as it was to us.

Auditions then began in earnest for Farsi-speaking actors. We drew mainly from the large Iranian talent pool here in L.A., although a few auditioned in England and elsewhere on tape. Some were scared off, knowing that it could be dangerous. Many still have family in Iran who are vulnerable to persecution and reprisals.

We would be filming somewhere in the Middle East, and that too involved risks, exposing all to jihad.

The last to be cast was the only non-Iranian, Jim Caviezel, who demonstrated clearly in *Passion of the Christ* that he could learn to speak a foreign language and take whatever heat might come. Steve McEveety took pains to have explicit conversations with each actor before they committed so there would be no illusions about this undertaking. To a person, they were in it heart, soul, mind, and body.

JOHN VASEY

Cyrus and Betsy Giffen Nowrasteh

By December, Cyrus was scouting locations in the Middle East with the line producer. We settled on an Arabic, Sunni nation with a helpful film commission. (We can't disclose our location publicly, at the request of the host country.) While there, it became obvious that Iran makes the entire region nervous.

MPOWER PICTURES

Facing the Fear

But it had only been eight months from writing the first word to finding a village to shoot it in. This movie that never would get made, this politically sensitive, Farsi-speaking, sharia law-mob rule, foreign art film had come together faster than any project either of us had ever worked on in our careers. It felt like it was preordained.

Yet it would be a lie to say we felt no trepidation. It's a dangerous world, and this film risks offending some of the most dangerous people in it. One reason we waited so long to tackle it was simply that now our children are grown. But somebody has to speak for the voiceless, for Muslim women who are legally and religiously powerless. To tell one story is to tell the story of millions.

Our two sons accompanied us and were extras in the film. Our younger son also made the behind-the-scenes documentary. Cyrus' father came along as the Farsi advisor, working daily with the script supervisor as well as teaching Farsi phonetically to the local hires who spoke Arabic and some English. It was a family affair.

Shooting was a challenge. We shot for 32 days, most of it in a remote mountain village an hour's drive from the hotel, on difficult roads. One week we shot in suburbs outside a large city. Difficulties included constant police stops en route, language barriers, calls to prayer throughout the day, a local crew of mixed experience, overt anti-Semitism, destroyed sets, and crew members assaulted. A local paper reported that we had defiled a mosque and women had entered it. It was all lies, of course; in fact, the local imam was quite cooperative. However, the false accusations caused both government and religious officials to come by for an inspection. Security, both seen and unseen, became critical to our getting the film made and to our physical survival.

There it's a different world, a tribal world. Offend one person today and tomorrow a thousand know about it. Contracts don't bind, one house may be owned by 30 people who all want money from us for the location. We had to get everything we needed while there. Reshoots were never an option.

Beyond the inherent cultural and language differences, however, many of the locals were incredibly supportive and helpful to our cause. Villagers routinely came up and thanked us for making a film about this subject. We wouldn't trade that experience for anything.

If the story wasn't real before, that location made it breathe. It was beautiful, remote, primitive, and so haunting it seemed you could hear the whispers of the real characters in your ears.

Ironically, Freidoune Sahebjam, the author of the book, died at home in Paris on the last day of our shooting the stoning sequence. Of all his books, this was the dearest to him. Though none of us had met him in person, we all felt his loss, as well as a renewal of purpose.

Postproduction brought us new talent in our editor, Geoffrey Rowland, and his team, as well as a big score on a low budget by John Debney. He, like almost everybody else, worked for well below their normal fees. Why? From D.P. to A.D. to wardrobe to mixing, to sound to editing to so many of the people we needed to make this movie happen, we heard the same comment: *I'm so grateful to work on something that matters.*

Post was completed just in the nick of time for last September's Toronto Film Festival. Within minutes of the online box-office opening, we sold out all three public screenings.

Surprising us, there were walk-outs during the stoning sequence. Now we know there always are, always will be. Most walked back in. There were tears. There always are. And anger, always. Questions. Always.

We were runner-up at Toronto in the Audience Award, and finishing second was very gratifying, especially because the winner was a little foreign art film titled *Slumdog Millionaire*.

As gratifying as that honor, it's the women we remember the most from the festival. From Syria, Iran, Nigeria, Somalia, all weeping and thanking us through their tears. One after the next, each stood up in front of hundreds of people to say, "This is how it is, and no one here knows. Now they will. Now they can see. Thank you."

That's why we made this movie. It wasn't for a paycheck, for credit, for Hollywood approval. It was for them. The women. Stonings, honor killings, "legal" rape, enforced circumcisions, a lack of basic human rights. They live it. All we did was write and shoot it. WB

Betsy Giffen Nowrasteh wrote Under Pressure *for HBO and Largo Ent. (1997). Cyrus Nowrasteh has written* The Day Reagan Was Shot *(2001, which he also directed),* 10,000 Men Named George, *and* The Path to 9/11 *(2006), among others.*