

There Is No Evil [15]

2020, Iran/Ger/Czech Rep., 150 mins

UK release date **3 December 2022**

Director **Mohammad Rasoulof**

Screenplay **Mohammad Rasoulof**

Cinematography **Ashkan Ashkani**

Cast **Ehsan Mirhosseini (Heshmat); Shaghayegh Shourian (Razieh); Kaveh Ahangar (Pouya); Mohammad Valizadegan (Javad); Mohammad Seddighimehr (Bahram); Jilla Shahi (Zaman); Baran Rasoulof (Darya)**

In Iran, executions are often carried out by conscripted soldiers, which puts an enormous burden on the shoulders of ordinary citizens. And what are we to make of the condemned, for whom guilt can sometimes be a capricious thing, dictated by a severe and oppressive Islamic regime — the same one that accused Iranian director Mohammad Rasoulof of “endangering national security” and “spreading propaganda” against the government?

When Rasoulof returned from Cannes in 2017, following the premiere of his film “A Man of Integrity,” he was banned from filmmaking for life and sentenced to a year in prison. But as a man of integrity himself, the director could not stop. His latest film, “There Is No Evil,” premiered in competition at the Berlin Film Festival, where instead of being silenced, Rasoulof launches his most openly critical statement yet, a series of Kafkaesque moral parables about Iran’s death penalty and its perpetrators, made in open defiance of the restrictions the government put on him.

The resulting feat of artistic dissidence runs two and a half hours, comprising four discrete chapters, each one designed as a standalone short film exploring a different facet of the subject. By subdividing the project like this, Rasoulof was able to direct the segments without being shut down by authorities — who are more carefully focused on features — and, in the process, he also builds a stronger argument.

Rasoulof refuses to let the sentence compromise his cinematic standards. “There Is No Evil” looks gorgeous, shot in widescreen with compelling actors (some subtle, others over-demonstrative, but all of professional caliber) in real-world

locations. For certain sequences that occur in public, he delegated duties to assistant directors while handling interiors and less conspicuous scenes himself.

Presented in rigid, locked-down frames, the eponymous opening chapter, “There Is No Evil,” delivers something of a shock, following middle-aged family man Heshmat (Ehsan Mirhosseini) around Tehran as he deals with everyday headaches. Heshmat is a voluntary functionary in a morally corrupt system, whose choice of career affords his family a comfortable (though hardly extravagant) life. But what of those who are obliged to kill — namely soldiers, enlisted not to protect the country in war but to pull the stool out from under their fellow citizens? The three remaining chapters concern such characters.

Trying to rationalize what’s demanded of them, soldiers insist, “They don’t hang people without a reason here.” But, of course, no legal system is infallible, and as a victim of a corrupt autocratic regime, Rasoulof knows firsthand how designations of “guilt” can serve as a tool for suppression. According to Amnesty Int’l statistics, Iran was responsible for more than half the world’s recorded executions in 2017. The number has since dropped, but the country continues to kill its citizens at alarming rates.

There is evil in the world, and it corrupts us when we don’t take a stand. What would you do in the characters’ shoes? What will you do in your own?

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