

To Iran, to see how the folks are making out

Through her family's eyes, a Canadian of Iranian descent takes a close look at the land she never knew



JOHN GRIFFIN

Iran is a hot-button topic these days. With her first feature documentary *Khaneh Ma: These Places We Call Home*, Anna Fahr has put her finger on it.

It is not the button we might expect. This is not a picture about uranium enrichment, radical Islamic fundamentalism, mad-hatter political leaders or manipulative mullahs. It is a story about family, about the power of blood ties, and the pain that separation brings to all concerned. It is a story about Anna Fahr's own kin, in Iran and abroad.

Specifically, it is a story about a trip the Ottawa-born Fahr, her first-generation Iranian-Canadian parents, and sister made to Iran in 2004 for a gathering of the clan. Fahr brought along a camera for a reason. She wanted to get to the heart of a culture she knew only second-hand. She wanted to feel the ties of extended family in a country where family is everything. She wanted to understand the hardship of saying goodbye.

Khaneh Ma begins with preparations for travel, the packing of overstuffed suitcases, and the tying on of head scarves that are part of life for women in Iran. There is the flight, the joyous reunion in the city of Bojnard with

relatives she hasn't seen for over a decade, and a re-acquaintance with the domestic culture that has hovered over her life in Canada like a ghost.

There are no major revelations here. This isn't high drama or soap opera. Instead, the wonder of the film is in the daily routines, the food, the dancing and laughter, the poring over old photographs. It is in the gradual realization that her family members – like others who experienced the revolution that ousted the Shah and installed Ayatollah Khomeini as the religious ruler of an Islamist republic – have remarkable stories to tell.

"Some have liked the fact the film is so intimate," says the Montreal-based Fahr, whose 26th birthday is today and whose film screens at the NFB Cinema Tuesday through next Sunday. "Others thought we should have contextualized it more.

"But this is a personal documentary. It's about the issues of the immigrant experience, seen through the eyes of a journey to my homeland and the gathering of a family I had not seen for so long. Any religious content" – there is footage shot through a window of a parade, and another from a car of people milling around outside a mosque – "just happened."

Fahr and her cameraman, Alexis Landriault, shot 80 hours of film over five weeks. She deliberately avoided a single point of view, preferring that the characters in the film determine the direction it might take.

She learned of her grandmother's strength in raising six kids,

and having the courage to send them overseas to study during the last years of the Shah's reign, over the objections of her religiously observant husband. While they were hitting the books in Europe and North America, the Shah fell. With the new regime, they and many others like them, were considered tainted by Western culture, and were no longer welcome in the country of their birth.

"The old and the uneducated stayed," says one family member in *Khaneh Ma*. Everyone else got out.

But leaving is a relative thing. "When you leave Iran, you take your black eyes and your black hair with you," says another in this passionate, articulate and inclusive group. "It can't be separated."

Fahr interviews an aunt who is living in Germany because contemporary Iran will not allow her to live as she would live – as a liberated female. It is a painful interview. She interviews a cousin who is in the process of moving to Canada with her husband and beautiful child.

For them, Canada is the dream, the place where "people with different good ideals can live together in harmony." It is the dream of the multicultural state, and it is currently under fire from some people in some quarters here. For them, *Khaneh Ma* should be required viewing.

Khaneh Ma: These Places We Call Home screens Tuesday through next Sunday in Farsi and English, with English subtitles at the NFB Cinema, 1564 St. Denis, beginning at 7 p.m. For details, log on to www.khanehmamovie.com.

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PHIL CARPENTER THE GAZETTE

"This is a personal documentary," Ottawa-born Montrealer Anna Fahr says of her film, *Khaneh Ma: These Places We Call Home*.