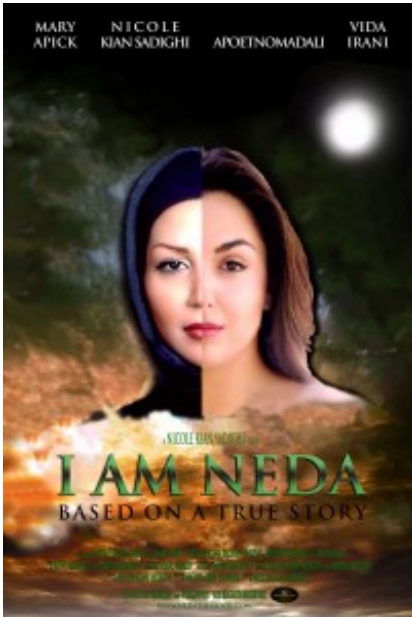


TAEM Interview with Director Nicole Kian Sadighi « The Eerie Digest

<http://www.eeriedigest.com/wordpress/2011/12/taem-interview-with-director-nicole-kian-sadighi/>

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TAEM- The Arts and Entertainment Magazine is honored to present Director Nicole Kian Sadighi to all of our readership. Nicole has written and directed the politically explosive film 'I AM NEDA'. This film is on the fast track to the Oscars, and it is one that has not only caught our attention, but our full support as well.

You can follow the film's successes by watching for updates here and take action by sharing with friends:

IMDB: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2011052/>

Official Website: <http://www.IAmNeda.com>

'I Am Neda' News: <http://www.nedathemovie.com/contact.html>

Official Twitter: [@IAmNedaTheMovie](https://twitter.com/IAmNedaTheMovie)

Email: info@nedathemovie.com

Nicole, you not only worked on this film behind the camera, but you play the lead role as well. Tell us about your early days in acting, and what was your inspiration in taking up this career?

NKS- Since I can remember I have known that this is what I wanted to do. Like all kids, I suppose, I was always playing in the land of make believe and wandering off into different faraway worlds of witches, princesses, ghouls and goblins. But I liked to take it one step further, setting up little theatrical plays in the garage, my dolls and teddy bears being the other characters of course, and would ask my parents to be my audience, particularly when we had guests over for dinner. Many times when I was supposed to be asleep at bedtime I would be imaging that my bed was a magnificent spaceship or somehow magical and I'd venture into different universes for great adventures. I had a very vivid imagination. My mother especially, is a big lover of movies and she knew of all the Hollywood stars and starlets so I grew up watching those all the time and then mimicking them afterward. Not a lot's changed since then J



TAEM- What was the formal training that you underwent to achieve your dreams in this career?

NKS- The love of performance and the Entertainment world continued as I grew up. I would audition for school plays and joined local theatre groups. We had a great one that my local church organized. And, as soon as I came of age, I went to a performing arts school. I couldn't afford the big ones like RADA or Italia Conti. So I enrolled in Brooklands College of Performing Arts, this great school in Weybridge, Surrey, where I was able to get a grant and I graduated after 3 years. It was a "Fame" style academy. I trained in everything from acting, singing, music dancing, Alexander Technique, Stanislavski, Chekov. Wonderful dedicated faculty. It did the trick because I graduated with Distinctions and



Merits.

TAEM- What was your inspiration behind this film, and tell us about the political setting that was its background?

NKS - Cameron Crowe once said “In the future, everybody is going to be a director. Somebody’s got to live a real life so we have something to make a movie about.” This movie is about a real life event that is still happening today. I think some of the best films have been inspired by real life. I am Persian by birth. Both my parents being journalists kind of influenced my already curious nature for how everything and everyone fits into the world. For over 3 decades the people in Iran, 70% of whom are under the age of 35, have been disenfranchised but its rarely been reported in the mainstream media, despite the efforts of the Iranian people living inside the country and the Diaspora whom many have left family behind in their homeland. There were the famous 1999 student protests that made world headlines. It was one of the largest civil disobedience protests in Iran and many innocent people were arrested or killed. Throughout the last 3 decades no other people of any other country in the Middle East has been hitting the streets to demonstrate and protest for their basic human rights as much as the Iranians. Increasingly every year there have been demonstrations and marches like labor protests, student protests, women’s group protests, teacher groups, religious minority protests, you name it. It’s been erupting and yet you would think in such a volatile and central part of the Middle East, a subcontinent that is always the talk of foreign policy, this would be news of the highest agenda. But sadly it hasn’t been. Until of course in 2009, the year for presidential elections in Iran. Silent demonstrations of non-violent marches by the civilians soon began because the people disputed the presidential election results that Ahmadinejad had been officially declared the winner before some of the polling stations had even been closed. This didn’t make sense. Unless by magic how could you declare the winner when the voting hadn’t finished? So the people went into the streets and marched in silent protests, even though the government and authorities sent their armed forces to try and control it from growing larger, they couldn’t stop it. Within a matter of days millions of people were out onto the streets; young, old, women, men, grandmothers, grandfathers, everyone. There was an energy in the air and an excitement that they couldn’t contain. The people were feeling like, this time; maybe this time; under the guise of elections, they could steer something; just this one thing, their way, into the direction of freedom. However, the tide turned for the worst, and within one week, foreign journalists were ordered to leave the country and the authorities escalated their force and started intimidating, beating and arresting them. It’s notable to add that women are really at the forefront of this movement. When the authorities saw that this still wasn’t deterring the people, the government gave orders to shoot to kill. These acts of civil disobedience turned bloody and horrific in a very short amount of time. There were snipers on rooftops, uniformed thugs on motorcycles, helicopters overhead spilling acid onto the people, police trucks ramming and running over people in the streets. You can see this horrific documented footage on YouTube. There are no words to describe the savagery. This became what some might call Iran’s ‘Twitter’ or ‘Social Media Freedom Movement’. The kids on the streets all have camera phones. They wanted the world to know and see what they have had to endure all these years. They would film everything with their phones and go home and upload it on to Twitter, Facebook, YouTube etc. For the first time in history the world media couldn’t ignore their plight any longer. This time CNN and FOX news had no choice but to follow what was going on. What we saw in 2009 – the Persian Spring – has sprung the Arab spring that we see throughout the Middle East today.

TAEM- Please tell us the story behind ‘I AM NEDA’ and how you became involved with its writing.



NKS - When I saw the footage of what was happening to the people of Iran during these non-violent protests, I felt extremely frustrated and powerless and wanted to do something to help them in some way, to shine a light on it. We all know of the American Civil Rights movement, Gandhi’s Salt March in India, Apartheid in Africa and we were witnessing the Iranian people’s civil rights movement



and they needed our attention. They were literally being massacred in the streets while we were all glued to our televisions and computer screens, helpless. Then one day the headlines read “Who is the girl called Neda?” and that was it. I knew. I knew I had to make a movie about this girl called Neda.

Stephen Spielberg once said that he likes to make movies about ordinary people caught up in extraordinary circumstances. That’s exactly how I would describe ‘I AM NEDA’. One ordinary Iranian woman, Neda Agha Soltan, got caught up in extraordinary circumstances.

When I learned of her story, I knew it was something that should never be forgotten. So, I soon spent the best part of a year researching her life, her family, the circumstances and put pen to paper to write a script for film. By the time I was through with this journey, I had learned so much about her. At this time, I also I didn’t have the resources to make a full length feature, but realizing that time was of the essence, I wanted to get Neda’s message out sooner rather than later. I knew a lot of time could be lost pitching the script to procure investors, etc. So with what I had, I chose to turn it into a short featurette. ‘I AM NEDA’s’ TRT is 21 minutes. At the same time I wanted the story to be compelling enough where there was enough material to give the audience a sense of who Neda was. Sometimes a tall deed, particularly when you are essentially creating a biopic to fit into a short movie. I’m an old school kind of girl, and I am a lover of the classic cinematic look and I wanted this to have those same elements, feel and story structure. This story is really centered around her life on the backdrop of a defining chapter of the history. I soon came to realize that I was not only retelling history but also documenting it. I became so steeped in her story that I felt, in my own small way, I was becoming part of it myself. That’s why I decided to play her in the movie. To this day, Neda is such an inspiration to me and I hope now, to so many others.

TAEM – Describe Neda and her life for us.



NKS – *She was living under one of the most brutal regimes of our time.* Neda, although just an ordinary young woman like any other around the world, also had some very endearing and unique qualities. For someone who lived in such a formidable country, with deep social problems and challenges, particularly for women, she really had a unique lust for living. She sought answers in the splendor of the world and was extremely ambitious of her future. I’d say to sum her up, she was a lover of life, loved all things beautiful that she was hugely passionate about the world and all the possibilities it holds. For sure, Neda was a true optimist. She had a deep desire to leave the country and live abroad where she could be free from the shackles of Iran and pursue her dream of singing. She had joined a small group who would go “underground” in order to have jam sessions. In Iran there is a corporate ban on self-expression in public. There is no singing or playing of instruments, no public displays of happiness or affection otherwise there is a chance that you will be targeted by the authorities.

Apparently Neda had a wonderful voice. In fact her name in Persian means “Voice” or “Calling”. She was a lover of literature, art, music, fashion, history and books. In my research I discovered some of her favorites were *Wuthering Heights*, *Freedom and Death*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *Siddhartha*. In fact, when I found this out, I decided I had to have one of those books in the movie. So I sought out a Persian cover version, just like the one she would have had and was able to acquire, *Wuthering Heights*. She loved lots of bright colors and fashionable clothing like miniskirts and gorgeous little dresses, so I was very calculating in my decision to incorporate some of these details into the film. This is about her essence and what she stood for. So really she was no different from any other young woman in any part of the world with the same dreams and aspirations as any

other girl anywhere. That's why I called the film 'I AM NEDA'.

TAEM- More importantly, tell us about her early life and what led up to her stand for basic human freedoms.

NKS- When she had been a very small child, she was the first and only person at her school to campaign against having to cover herself with a scarf or "chador" which it's called in Iran and eventually she won. This is amazing and unheard of in Iran. This gives us an idea of her tenacious personality that even from such a young age she was so persistent. Throughout her life she hated how shackled women's lives were, a frustrating reflection of her own life. Neda was extremely fearless in her pursuit to stand up to injustice and always defended what she believed in. Women are not treated as human beings in Iran and Neda would often voice her frustrations about it. She never held back her opinions and feelings, and from what I understand was brutally honest with people. Her sister once said in an interview that Neda never felt the need to lie. I'm sure I'm not speaking just for myself when I say that she had the heart and strength of a lioness and yet encompassed all the gentleness of the beauty in life. There was a pureness about her. She was passionately in love with the idea of being in love thus highlighting this by having Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* on set as it is all about love and passion, everything that is very dangerous to express in Iran. She wanted to see the world and have new experiences. Everything she had a passion for was inherently rebellious and destructive in the eyes of the regime and what it preaches. Neda felt it important to stay true to herself and always followed her heart. Although she was extremely interested in Religion, she dropped out of studying Islamic Philosophy at Tehran's Azadi University after just two semesters. She had said that the God they are teaching at the universities is different from the God she worshiped and that they were being taught that God is vengeful. This was fundamentally against everything she believed in. Her God was compassionate and loving.

During the elections, more and more people started complaining that opposition candidates were being sabotaged from receiving votes; in fact, people were being obstructed from entering polling stations. Neda and her brother Mohammad had apparently gone to 3 different voting stations where they couldn't find any representatives for the opposition candidates, only for Ahmadinejad and well, Neda being Neda, argued with them but ultimately deciding to boycott the elections. So when the final results were officially announced that Ahmadinejad had won even before the polling stations had closed, you can imagine the absolute frustration of the people. The elections had been fake. Which has been the governments MO since the inception of this regime. This time however, the people had reached a tipping point and as the days followed there were mass protests in the street. In the city of Tehran alone millions of people were in the streets, as these were some of the largest gatherings in the history of Iran. Women and men of all ages, backgrounds and religions joined in. Neda was one of them. Despite the savage backlash of the authorities and her mother begging her to stay at home, Neda couldn't help herself; she had to be there alongside everyone. She felt it her duty and I think that was driven by a sense that she could be part of an extraordinary change. She just wanted to be able to exercise her basic individual freedoms, such as freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, basic Human Rights that many of us think everyone has, but they really do not.

TAEM- How did Neda's life tragically end?



NKS – On June 20, 2009, during the post-election protests Neda became another tragic casualty of Iran's violent crackdown as she was shot down by a sniper during a non-violent protest. She died in the streets amongst friend and strangers who were fearlessly standing up to injustice and defending what they believed in.

Sadly, there have been hundreds of thousands of Neda's in Iran, who have tragically lost their lives for standing up for their rights even to this day. The one



difference in Neda's story is that we witnessed the murder being captured with the protesters' camera phones. These people were standing side-by-side and managed to upload this violent footage online for the world to really see. In fact, it went viral within minutes. Soon it was replayed over and over again on social media and leading news channels such as CNN and FOX. An extremely graphic image of a

young girl innocently standing at the back of protesters one minute, then in the blink of an eye, she is shot in the heart by a sniper, falls back and takes her last breathe while people try to save her. Every time I recount this story I can't help but get emotional. It's unbelievable, it's tragic.

Neda's death is a defining moment in history and a defining image that as a filmmaker I don't want people to forget. I think of other tragedies that we've seen around the world like the young man standing in front of the tank in Tienanmen Square or the young Vietnamese girl running away from the napalms and Neda is right there.

A number of media and institutions have also acknowledged this such as *Time* magazine named her one of their 'Persons of the Year', *London Times* named her 'Person of the Year', Oxford University named a scholarship after her, U2 and President Obama paid homage to her and commented on the tragedy.

TAEM- We understand that the film has been seen in many film festivals, and has received many awards. Tell us about the process that the film is undertaking and the awards it has thus rightly received.

NKS – We completed post production this fall and have begun our targeted festival submissions. So now we are waiting for acceptance letters and emails to follow.

Enthusiastically, in the past two months we have screened 'I AM NEDA' to audiences with fantastic support at the ARPA International Film Festival and the Santa Rosa International Film Festival "Cinema of Conscience" category. I was also asked to be a panelist for their "Emerging Talent and Filmmakers to Watch" panel as well as their "Making Movies That Matter" panel. I spoke alongside some wonderful filmmakers, such as Michael Wilson and Steven Collins.

At every Q&A, once people have seen the movie, their reactions have been extremely touching and encouraging which I believe illustrates the future success of this film. I think those who see it will tell others, show their support of the film and help spread-the-word about Neda's message as well as what one person such as myself, with limited resources and time, can accomplish if they too embrace the challenge with tenacity.

People are fascinated by her story, the movie and they always want to know more, more about her, more about the process of making the film and I really appreciate that. I'm happy to say that the audiences have shared with me that they have walked away feeling like they have gotten to know Neda on a more personal level, more than just a victim in a video that went viral on YouTube. It encourages me and helps affirm that I've accomplished something big.

TAEM- Tell us about the cast.

NKS –Including myself, it's a 4 member cast. All of us are born in Iran and have subsequently had to leave the country at one point or another. Everyone but me, (my nationality is British) have been living in the United States. Award winning Mary Apick, (*Checkpoint, Beneath the Veil*), plays Hajar Rostami Neda's Mother, Vida Irani (*The Bilderberg Club, The Mind of Mencia*) plays Hoda, Neda's sister. APoetNomadAli (hip-hop musician) a stage name he prefers to go by, plays Mohammad, Neda's brother. I must say, with regards to APoetNomadAli what a pleasant surprise for me, he's got a great natural instinct and I was happy to have had such a talented singer as a part of the cast. He has had much success as a musician, sharing the stage with the likes of Christina

Milian and One Republic.

I'm completely proud of my cast, particularly because myself, Vida and APoetNomadAli had to learn the Persian script from scratch. Mary is already fluent of course. Vida, APoetNomadAli and myself are all practically at 1st grade level when it comes to Farsi language and with the help of a dialogue coach and our Persian families we truly had to learn a whole language of sophisticated dialogue by heart.

When I initially wrote the script I knew that anyone who was going to be part of the making of this movie had to realize the significance of the story and I so appreciate my cast's contributions as they approached this production with professionalism even working with a 1st time director. I had a particular vision for this film, and the cast had to share in the collective vision and they did! We wanted to be a part of this movie to make a difference in the world, and to perhaps contribute to some kind of change. It's a story that the world must know about and history should never forget. So the cast members were each ideal in their contributions and shared my passion for doing this film. They got it. They should all be very proud of themselves.

TAEM – With our magazine's publisher involved in the World Music and Independent Film Festival (WMIFF) in Washington, DC, will you plan to have your film be shown in that prestigious event and setting ?

NKS – Absolutely! I would be honored to have the movie showcased at WMIFF as it has certainly put DC on the Hollywood map, adding a little glitz to the heart of American politics. How do we make this happen?

TAEM- What is your next step for your film on the way to the Oscars?

NKS – Well the fun has only just begun! We are readying ourselves for an extremely busy and exciting year long road toward Oscars 2013 with lots of festivals and promotional events throughout. Any filmmaker will tell you that the work doesn't finish on wrap day as every day I strive for quality and excellence. I'd made a promise to myself that I would not let anything get in the way of telling the story of Neda and her legacy, but nothing would stop me from making this film the best success it could be. Now, that the film is finished, I can only hope that I have achieved what I set out to do and would not have disappointed her.

TAEM- Nicole, your film 'I AM NEDA' is sure to be a success and all of us here at The Arts and Entertainment Magazine is fully behind it and what it stands for. We wish you the best of luck and thank you for honoring us with this interview. Please keep in touch as I know that our readership will look forward to seeing it.

TAEM



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