

Shirin Neshat:
Women without Men (2009)

Wed 6 March

Director: Shirin Neshat
Country: Iran
Date: 2009
Duration: 1 hr 36 min
Language: Persian with English Subtitles

(From www.surrealmoviez.info)

This was a highly ambitious Iranian film following the lives of several women in 1950s Iran. It may be of interest to American viewers in that the backdrop to the movie is the 1953 coup, where the CIA, in support of an absolute monarch (the Shah), helped overthrow a democratically elected government. That assumes that anyone is still interested in finding out "why the world hates America", I think it's become passé to ruminate on that now. But if you flick CNN on and see the latest wranglings with Iran, well here is where the story started, it's a good idea not to start reading at chapter 56.

The main focus of the film though is the treatment of several Iranian women by the society in which they live, and their retreat to a magical garden without men. It's an awesomely ambitious adaptation of a famous novel of the same name by Shahrnush Parsipur (who has a cameo appearance as the brothel madam). It's not particularly successful, I don't like saying that, but I think even Shirin Neshat, who was present for the screening was not happy with the finished article, which took a very long time to film. She has simply tried to weave too many strands. The most successful story perhaps is of the young prostitute Zarin, who is anorexic and actually played very well by a Hungarian actress, Orsolya Tóth. It's no surprise to me that Neshat actually made a 20 minute short starring the same actress in 2005 called Zarin, which was very well received.

In the Women Without Men, Zarin, who runs away from a brothel is seen furiously rubbing her body raw in some public baths. She speaks not a single word in the whole movie, and that is the most effective condemnation of the society she lives in.

We can see some of the terrible attitudes prevailing then and perhaps now as well about women. Amir Khan (played very ably by Essa Zahir) at one point approaches one of the women (Faezeh played by Pegah Ferydoni) and gives her this line about how women are flowers who blossom and then wither. He then asks her to become his second wife; his first wife, who has withered, will "of course" become her servant. Khan has absolutely no idea of the level of misogyny he's communicating. One of the women is a general's wife, her husband ends an incredibly oafish rant with an order for her to come and eat some melon because he wants her to. In the movie we see a distillation of the unfortunate insensitivities to which a group of Iranian women have been subjected. It's important to note that it would be an overreaction to condemn Iranian male society en masse.

It's a very beautiful movie, the garden of the villa that the general's wife sets herself up in after a very scandalous separation, is really very magical and shot wondrously. I was worried that the movie was getting a bit lost in it's quest for aesthetic perfection, and thusly becomes almost soporific. The stories of the different women became a bit cacophonous, there was no unison message. It's got to be pretty unbalanced as well, men are almost uniformly comedy sketch buffoons, the women martyrs.

(au bonheur des dames, IMDb)

About the director

Shirin Neshat is an Iranian born artist/filmmaker whose work addresses the complex social and religious forces shaping the identity of Muslim women. Neshat was recognized for her portraits of women overlaid with calligraphy in the Women of Allah series. She also directed several video installations, among them are: Rapture (1999,) and Turbulent (1998,) which won her the International Award at the 48th Venice Biennial. Her solo museum exhibitions include shows at the Whitney Museum, New York; The Museum of Contemporary Arts, Athens; The Serpentine Gallery, London; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin and Musee d'Art Contemporain de Montreal. Women Without Men is her feature directorial debut.

Rodrigo Garcia:

Wed 13 March

Things You Can Tell Just by Looking at Her (1999)

Director: Rodrigo Garcia

Country: USA

Date: 1999

Duration: 1 hr 46 min

Language: English

(From Wikipedia)

Things You Can Tell Just by Looking at Her consists of five stories or vignettes, tied together loosely to envision the complexity of incomplete communications about life, family, and love. We glimpse the lives of five women, each facing problems such as loneliness, dissatisfaction, longing, and or desire. Rodrigo Garcia, in his first-time directing, assembled this film with a loaded cast of actresses who can tell you everything you need to know just by their body language and facial expressions. Their individual stories show us what “things you can tell just by looking at her”.

In the film's prologue, Kathy (Amy Brenneman) --a police detective--and her partner are investigating the apparent suicide of an unknown woman. Dr. Keener (Glenn Close), a middle-aged doctor, attempts to care for her aging mother while coping with her own loneliness. She avoids intimacy, but also longs for it; we see both frustration and anticipation as she waits for phone calls from male colleagues. Dr. Keener decides to seek comfort or escape in Christine (Calista Flockhart) who reads tarot cards. Christine's partner Lilly (Valeria Golino) is critically ill with an unnamed disease, possibly cancer.

Rebecca (Holly Hunter) is a successful bank manager who's "not big on regrets". After a three-year involvement with Robert (Gregory Hines)--who keeps her secret from his wife--she becomes pregnant. Before Rebecca visits Dr. Keener to get an abortion, she has a fling with Walter, (Matt Craven), a co-worker. Rose (Kathy Baker) is a single mother who is writing children's books, and develops a sweet crush on a new dwarf neighbor (Danny Woodburn), who catches Rose spying on him. Rose later experiences the shock of learning about her son's extensive sexual activity.

Kathy's sister Carol Faber (Cameron Diaz) is a lovely blind woman who has an active social life. Kathy is attracted to the medical examiner in the suicide case, and her story ends with him taking her out on a date. In an epilogue, Dr. Keener drops in to a bar, where she meets the male character, Walter, from previous stories (possibly the younger male alluded to in Christine's tarot card reading).

Carmen has a non-speaking role, a woman who appears in four scenes in four different stories, once walking beside Rebecca (Holly Hunter), and once in the grocery store while Rose (Kathy Baker) is shopping, and once under Christine's balcony (Calista Flockhart), and the fourth a postmortem examination by detective Kathy (Amy Brenneman) alongside Kathy's BF, Dr Sam (Miguel Sandoval). Presumably, Carmen is also Robert's (Gregory Hines) wife who was visited by him in San Francisco, as understood from Carol's (Cameron Diaz) imaginative story towards the end of the film. Carol has a good detective and storytelling imagination that could qualify her to be a good writer, according to her sister, Kathy.

Another conclusion involves that Robert (Gregory Hines) has taken a detective job from Carol (Cameron Diaz), according to one of Carol's lines. This is a very loose conclusion based on the film's whole plot and hyperlink cinema.

About the Director

García was born in Bogotá, Colombia, the son of Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez and Mercedes Barcha Pardo. Because of this he knew Carlos Fuentes, Julio Cortázar, Pablo Neruda and Luis Buñuel when he was young. García has directed a variety of independent films such as the award-winning *Nine Lives* and *Albert Nobbs* and several episodes of the HBO series, *Six Feet Under*, *Carnivàle*, and *Big Love*. He created, wrote and directed the wildly popular HBO hit "*In Treatment*" As of 1987, he lives in the United States.

He has also worked as a camera operator and a cinematographer for several films such as *Gia*, *The Birdcage* and *Great Expectations*.

His film *Nine Lives* was nominated for the William Shatner Golden Groundhog Award for Best Underground Movie, the other nominated films were *Green Street Hooligans*, *MirrorMask*, *Up for Grabs* and *Opie Gets Laid*.

Chris Kraus:

Wed 20 March

Vier Minuten (Four Minutes) (2006)

Director: Chris Kraus

Country: Germany

Date: 2006

Duration: 1 hr 56 min

Language: German with English Subtitles

(From Wikipedia)

Traude Krueger (Bleibtreu) is working as a piano teacher in a women's prison. While selecting new students, she meets Jenny Von Loeben (Herzprung). When she tells her she can't follow any lessons because her hands are too rough, Jenny becomes enraged and almost beats the present prison guard, Mütze (Pippig), who is also one of Krueger's students, to death. After doing so, while the other guards are rushing in, she starts playing the piano. Krueger listens from the hallway and, impressed by her talent, later offers Jenny to give her lessons after all. She does however tell Jenny never to play 'that kind of negro-music' again.

It is revealed that Jenny's adoptive father wanted to turn her into a Mozart-like child prodigy when she was young but when she resisted to going to further contests, he started raping her. She is still incredibly talented though and Krueger plans to start playing in competitions again. While practicing, some other inmates become increasingly jealous of Jenny, who doesn't seem to get punished for beating up the guard. Some of the other prison personnel also heavily oppose giving her the freedom to play the piano. However, the prison director sees in this a perfect opportunity to get some positive media attention for his prison, which does ensue.

Against all odds, Jenny manages to reach the finals of a grand piano-concours for players of maximum 21 years of age. During events preceding the competition, she was transferred by Mütze to the cell of her rival inmates. One night, they strap her hands to the bed with some cloth and set them on fire. In a furious reaction, Jenny severely wounds one of the culprits. This leads to her being forbidden to enter the competition. Krueger however learns that Mütze

deliberately turned a blind eye so to let Jenny get burned and plays on his conscience. He finally decides to aid her in letting Jenny escape from prison to go play at the competition.

When, after her escape, Krueger and Jenny arrive at Krueger's apartment to get themselves dressed, Jenny learns that Krueger has had contact with her adoptive father. Thinking he arranged all of it, and that Krueger was just being bribed into teaching her, she falls into a fury once more. It is now that Krueger tells her about her own past, how she lost her great love, another woman, during the second world war because she was a communist, and how she also taught her to play the piano.

Krueger is able to convince Jenny to play at the concours where, because the police have come to take her back to jail, she has only four minutes to convince the crowd. She diverts from the original plan of playing a piece of Schumann by playing a unique piece of her beloved "negro-music". When she is finished, the crowd erupts in a standing ovation.

About the Director: Chris Kraus

Chris Kraus was employed as a journalist and illustrator before attending the Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin from 1991–98, where he studied film directing. Beginning in 1994, he worked as a dramatic advisor and screenplay writer for directors Volker Schlöndorff, Rosa von Praunheim, and Detlev Buck, among others.

In 2002 his first novel was published, titled *Scherbentanz* (Shattered Glass). He then also made a film based on this book, with the help of Margit Carstensen and Jürgen Vogel. The story has to do with the relationship between a young man who suffers from Leukemia and his mother, who herself suffers with alcoholism. In 2006 Kraus made his second feature film, *Four Minutes*, starring Monica Bleibtreu, Hannah Herzprung and Nadja Uhl. Even before its official premiere in February, 2007, this film gained a great deal of attention at international film festivals. Its story centers on a musically talented young woman serving time in prison for murder.

Chris Kraus lives in Berlin and gives regular academic lectures on filmmaking.

Radu Mihaileanu:	Wed 27 March
The Source (La Source des Femmes) (2011)	

Director: Radu Mihazileanu
Country: Romania
Date: 2011
Duration: 1 hr 45 min
Language: Arabic with English Subtitles

(From Wikipedia)

In a tiny, remote village somewhere in North Africa, the men are idle and the women work. All day, it seems, the men sit in a café under a sweet sun and tell jokes. Since now there is no harvest and no work for their men, the women keep the place going; they are dutiful, loving and tough. It is a tradition in this place for the women to fetch the water from the well. This task makes for hard labor. The long daily trek, up and down steep hills, is made over rough, rocky, unforgiving ground. This work comes at a cost; many of the village women have miscarried. Not even a pregnancy is enough to get between tradition and duty.

Young, childless Leila (Leila Bekhti) has had enough. She implores the village women to go on a 'sex strike'. The women will withhold 'loving'. They demand that the men find a way to persuade the government to provide infrastructure finance so that the well can be pumped into the village centre. The women adopt Leila's tactic. Happy marriages become tortured, sometimes violent. The village men are hurt and offended. The women, some consumed with guilt and longing, begin to question their 'strike'. Meanwhile, the very social foundations of this village, governed by religion and tradition, begin to look shaky as the strike forces the men and women into a conflict over every aspect of their lives.

About the Director: Radu Mihaileanu

Radu Mihaileanu (born April 23, 1958 in Bucharest) is a Romanian-born French film director and screenwriter. He left Romania in 1980 and graduated the IDHEC cinematographic institute in Paris. In addition to his work in the cinema he published a book of poems in 1987 titled *Une vague en mal de mer*. His latest film *The Source* premiered In Competition at the 2011 Cannes Film Festival.

**François Truffaut:
Jules et Jim (1962)**

Wed 3 April

Director: François Truffaut
Country: France
Date: 1962
Duration: 1 hr 45 min
Language: French with English Subtitles

(From Wikipedia)

The film is set before, during and after the Great War in several different parts of France, Austria, and Germany. Jules (Oskar Werner) is a shy writer from Austria who forges a friendship with the more extroverted Jim (Henri Serre). They share an interest in the world of the arts and the Bohemian lifestyle. At a slide show early in the movie, they become entranced with a statue of a goddess and its serene smile.

After encounters with several women, they meet the free-spirited, capricious Catherine (Jeanne Moreau), a doppelgänger for the statue with the serene smile. Although she begins a relationship with Jules, both men are affected by her presence and her attitude toward life. A few days before the declaration of war, Jules and Catherine move to Austria to get married. Both men serve during the war; however, they serve on the opposing sides, and each fears throughout the conflict that he might have killed the other.

After the wartime separation, Jim visits, and later stays with, Jules and Catherine in their house in the Black Forest. Jules and Catherine have a little daughter, Sabine, but the marriage is not a happy one. Catherine torments and punishes Jules with numerous affairs, and she tells Jim that she once left Jules and their daughter for six months. She flirts with and attempts to seduce Jim, who has never forgotten her. Jules, desperate that Catherine might leave him forever, gives his blessing for Jim to marry Catherine so that he may continue to visit them and see her. For a while, the four of them live happily together in the same chalet in Austria, until tensions between Jim and Catherine arise because of their inability to have a child. Jim leaves Catherine and returns to Paris. After several exchanges of letters between Catherine and Jim, they

resolve to reunite when it is discovered that Catherine is indeed with child after all. However, the reunion does not occur after Jules writes to inform Jim that his and Catherine's unborn baby has miscarried.

After a time, Jim runs into Jules in Paris. He finds that Jules and Catherine have returned to France. Catherine attempts to win Jim back, but he rebuffs her, saying he is going to marry Gilberte. Furious, she pulls a gun on him, but he wrestles it away and flees. He later encounters Jules and Catherine in a famous (at that time) movie theater, the Studio des Ursulines.

The three of them stop at an outdoor cafe. Catherine asks Jim to get into her car, saying she has something to tell him. She asks Jules to watch them and drives the car off a broken bridge, killing herself and Jim. Jules is left to deal with the ashes of his friends.

About the Director: François Truffaut

François Roland Truffaut (6 February 1932 – 21 October 1984) was an influential film director, screenwriter, producer, actor, and film critic, as well as one of the founders of the French New Wave. In a film career lasting over a quarter of a century, he remains an icon of the French film industry, having worked on over 25 films.