

Academy Award® Nominee
SHOHREH AGHDASHLOO

JIM CAVIEZEL

When a deadly conspiracy
became a shameful cover-up



One witness refused to be silent.

THE STONING of Soraya M.

BASED ON A TRUE STORY



ROADSIDE ATTRACTIONS PRESENTS IN ASSOCIATION WITH MPOWVER DISTRIBUTION AND MPOWVER PICTURES PRODUCTION A FILM BY CYRUS NOVVRASTEH SHOHREH AGHDASHLOO "THE STONING OF SORAYA M." MOZHAN MARIANI AND JIM CAVIEZEL
CASTING BY DEBORAH AQUILA CSA TRICIA WOOD CSA JENNIFER SMITH CSA COSTUME DESIGNER JANE ANDERSON MUSIC BY JOHN DEBNEY EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS GEOFFREY ROWLAND AND DAVID HANDMAN EXEC PRODUCER JUDY RHEE
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SCREENPLAY BY BETSY GIFFEN NOVVRASTEH & CYRUS NOVVRASTEH DIRECTED BY CYRUS NOVVRASTEH



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COMING SOON

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Developed by Heartland Truly Moving Pictures to accompany *The Stoning of Soraya M.* recipient of the Truly Moving Picture Award, an honored distinction given to films that unlock the vast potential of the human spirit and enable us to view stories that display courage, integrity and hope, taking entertainment to a higher level.

www.TrulyMovingPictures.org

www.thestoning.com

www.stoningparable.com



One Film Can

Heartland Truly Moving Pictures, a non-profit organization, recognizes and honors films and filmmakers whose work explores the human journey by expressing hope and respect for the positive values of life. We believe that one film can move us to laughter, to tears, or to make a difference. *The Stoning of Soraya M.* is a film that demonstrates that **One Film Can**.

Synopsis

In a world of secrecy, corruption and injustice, a single courageous voice can tell a true story that changes everything.

This is what lies at the heart of the emotionally charged experience of *The Stoning of Soraya M.* Based on an incredible true story, this powerful tale of a village's persecution of an innocent woman becomes both a daring act of witness and a compelling parable about mob rule. Who will join forces with the plot against her, who will surrender to the mob, and will dare to stand up for what's right? It is both a classic fable of good and evil and an inspiring tribute to the many fighting against injustice around the world, *The Stoning of Soraya M.* was a rousing runner-up to *Slumdog Millionaire* as the Audience Favorite at the Toronto Film Festival.

Academy Award® nominee Shohreh Aghdashloo stars in the heroic role of Zahra, an Iranian woman with a burning secret. When a journalist (Jim Caviezel, *The Passion of the Christ*, *Déjà vu*) is stranded in her remote village, she takes a bold chance to reveal what the villagers will stop at nothing to keep hidden.

Thus begins the remarkable account of what happened to Soraya (Mozhan Marno), a kind, spirited woman whose bad marriage leads her cruel, divorce-seeking husband to conspire against her, trumping up charges of infidelity, which carry an unimaginable penalty. Moving through a minefield of scheming, lies and deceit, Soraya and Zahra will attempt to prove Soraya's innocence in a legal system stacked against her. But when all else fails, Zahra will risk everything to use the sole weapon she has left—the fearless, passionate voice that can share Soraya's story with a shocked world.

The Stoning of Soraya M. is inspired by Paris-based journalist Freidoune Sahebjam's acclaimed international best-seller of the same name which, rife with intrigue and moral outrage, first brought global attention to the real Soraya, who in 1986 was buried to her waist in her hometown square and stoned by her fellow villagers.

Director Cyrus Nowrasteh, along with his wife and fellow screenwriter Betsy Giffen Nowrasteh, saw in Soraya one story that stands for thousands of untold tales around the world, from Africa to Asia, from Europe to America wherever people are battling prejudice and injustice. Their screenplay takes the hard facts surrounding Soraya's fate and carves from them a lyrical, fable-like entertainment that gets under the skin by posing a provocative question: who among us would throw stones and who would take a stand against them?

About the Author

FREIDOUNE SAHEBJAM

An international reporter, world historian and diplomat, Freidoune Sahebjam led an extraordinary life bringing stories to the world. He met with Che Guevara in Africa, conversed with General De Gaulle in Iran, interviewed John F. Kennedy in Hyannis Harbor, spent time with Salvador Allende in Chile and with Nelson Mandela in Pretoria, met with Pope John Paul II and the Dalai Lama, and was personally known to every Muslim sovereign across the globe. He accompanied Arthur Rubinstein to Persepolis and Audrey Hepburn to East Africa and consorted with numerous U.S. Presidents.

He also made his mark in investigative reporting in Iran. Sahebjam was the first to report on the crimes of the Islamic Republic against the Baha'ii community, as well as on the use of underage children in the Iranian Army during the 8-year Iran-Iraq War.

For his controversial reportage, he was sentenced to a death fatwa in absentia by the new Iranian Revolutionary Court. Despite this, he returned to the country incognito to investigate sensitive issues regarding the Tehran Islamic Regime, which is when he was exposed to the story of Soraya's stoning. More recently, he covered the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan for the French daily *Le Telegraph*.

An aristocrat of Qajar heritage, he was also the author of several novels in French, including *La Femme Lapidée*, *Le Dernier Eunuque* and *Le Vieux de la Montagne*, as well as a recently published biography on his mother entitled *Une Princess Persane*.

Since its publication in 1994, *The Stoning of Soraya M.* has become one of the landmarks of Sahebjam's storied career, published in countless countries and translated into a dozen languages, as well as used as a teaching tool in classrooms throughout the world.

Sahebjam passed away at his home in Neuilly-sur-Seine in March of 2008 at the age of 75.

Excerpt courtesy of The Stoning of Soraya M. Production Notes

Understanding the Setting of the Story

For some, *The Stoning of Soraya M.* is an exploration of another culture and an introduction to a gruesome form of corporal punishment practiced in some countries today. It is not a mainstream practice, but stonings do still occur in Iran although in December 2002 Iran's judiciary chief, Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, declared a moratorium on stoning.

The Stoning of Soraya M. is set in Iran in 1986. Seven years before the movie takes place, in 1979, Iran became the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran is governed by Islamic law, *sharia*, which governs personal status and is a set of regulations pertaining to marriage, divorce, inheritance and custody (Vriens). In *sharia* there are certain offenses that receive a specific punishment and these are referred to as *hadd* offenses. These *hadd* crimes are "unlawful sexual intercourse (sex outside of marriage or adultery), false accusation of unlawful sexual intercourse, drinking wine, theft, and highway robbery" (Vriens). The punishments for these offenses are flogging, stoning, amputation, exile or execution. It is important to note that there are several variations of *sharia* with both liberal and rigid interpretation of the law. This law is not applied widely throughout Iran or other Islamic republics, but it is the backdrop upon which the story of Soraya takes place.

Betsy Giffen Nowrasteh, producer of *The Stoning of Soraya M.* highlights the reason for telling the story on the big screen in this way, "Stonings happened in Judaism, crucifixions in Christianity and Catholics had The Inquisition, certainly. But those times are over. They reformed and those religions are stronger than ever. So this isn't about Islam. It's about examining a ritual, much like the lynchings that happened in the U.S in a different era, that needs to change, that can change if there is an outcry around the world." (*The Stoning of Soraya M.* Production Notes)

Additional Resources

To learn more about Iran and Islamic law, visit the following sites:

Central Intelligence Agency: www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html

The Library of Congress: lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/irtoc.html

Council on Foreign Relations: www.cfr.org/publication/8034

Vriens, Lauren (March 23, 2009).

Islam: Governing Under Sharia. Retrieved May 23, 2009, from <http://www.cfr.org/publication/8034>

Human Rights

The Stoning of Soraya M. gives voice to a story that might not otherwise have been told. What Zahra did to combat the wrongs done against Soraya required great courage; both to bring a voice to a story that wouldn't otherwise be heard and to question the authority of the religious and political figures in the town.

While stoning is certainly a central issue in this story, there are a multitude of other human rights violations throughout the film. Think about Soraya's story and that of the other individuals in the book and film as you explore the questions below.

Discussion Questions

- Stoning is a form of corporal punishment that not only impacts the victim, but also the community. No one person throws the fatal stone, but the participants collectively kill the individual. The film demonstrates the ways different individuals react when made to be a part of this execution. Consider different characters in the film and the way in which each dealt with being forced to throw a stone. Think in particular about Soraya's father, Ali, Soraya's two sons and Hashem.
- When the first stones failed to strike Soraya some women cried out that it was not God's will and that the stoning should be stopped. These voices were ignored. Why do you believe this was the case?
- What were the ways in which the structure of the religious and political authority in Soraya's town stripped away her rights? What should have been the role of the religious leadership in this story?
- How did the rights of men and women differ in this story and what are the cultural, political and religious reasons for this disparity?
- How did the mob rule that was portrayed remove the rights of others in the town as well? Examine in particular Hashem and his son.
- After witnessing Soraya's situation what is your appreciation and understanding of your rights? Is there anywhere Soraya could have turned to escape this situation?

Additional Resources

To learn more about Human Rights, current issues dealing with these rights, and what you can do to help, visit these sites:

Human Rights Watch: www.hrw.org

Amnesty International: www.amnesty.org

Violence Against Women

The story of *The Stoning of Soraya M.* examines a culture in which women have very few rights and many suffer abuse by their husbands or other men. One form this takes in the film is domestic violence, but throughout the world women suffer other violence against them.

Violence against women occurs in all cultures. According to the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), at least one out of every three women around the world has been abused in some way over the course of her lifetime. These abuses are both mental and physical and manifest in beatings, rape and consequences of rape such as HIV/AIDS.

Use examples from the movie to think about the impact of violence against women and how the cycle perpetrates itself if people's only response is silence.

Discussion Questions

- Ali's character was an abusive one whose selfishness destroyed lives. Consider his character and the behavior he instilled in his sons. How did his abuse affect the family dynamics of he and Soraya's household?
- Although Ali and Soraya had two sons and two daughters, these children were not treated evenly. Explore the differences in the treatment of the children by Ali and by Soraya. How did these differences in treatment impact the children individually?
- The young girl Ali wanted to wed was only fourteen. This early marriage is another form of violence against women. Consider the girl's rights that were removed in this transaction between Ali and her father.
- What are the different roles people can take to help prevent violence? Are there different responsibilities that men and women have to help stop violence against women? What are they and how can you take action?
- Violence against women happens as domestic violence; sexual violence; traditional practices such as female genital mutilation, dowry murder, honor killings, early marriage; human trafficking; HIV/AIDS; and violence and crime against women in situations of armed conflict. For an extensive look at the facts and figures associated with these violences against women visit UNIFEM at www.UNIFEM.org.

Additional Resources

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence: www.ncadv.org

Family Violence Prevention Fund: endabuse.com

Find the facts on International Gender-Based Violence at:
endabuse.org/userfiles/file/Children_and_Families/International.pdf

Breaking the Silence

It happens every day all over the world. Someone breaks the deafening silence. Someone stands up against injustice, risks her very life to defy a tyrannical government, to battle corruption and deceit, to aid an innocent victim, to tell a shocking story that the world must hear to a journalist. And yet, these inspirational, emotionally gripping stories, while often told to journalists, rarely come to the powerful medium of cinema. *The Stoning of Soraya M.* takes one such astonishingly true story – that of a fearless Iranian woman and a probing war correspondent who brought the stoning of a woman by an entire village to the world's attention – and transforms it into a moving and suspenseful movie parable about how mob rule turns some into villains. . . and a few into courageous heroes who will risk everything to bring hope to others.

Excerpt courtesy of The Stoning of Soraya M. Production Notes.

Zahra is a supreme example of someone rising up against the wrongs she sees and shedding light on issues that need to experience change. She is a loving and supportive aunt to Soraya and fights for her rights even after Soraya's death. The courage Zahra displays can act as inspiration for others to get involved and take action to advocate for a cause and to make a difference.

As an individual or a group, you have the ability to shed light on a certain issue. To be an advocate for change be sure to research your issue, find people who are passionate about the issue as well, then develop your strategy and launch a campaign. Write, call and use the media to reach out to the appropriate political figures as other who can help spread the word and make a difference.

*A number of organizations are deeply committed to the fight for the fair and humane treatment of women under all legal systems, including such international groups as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Additional web resources include:

- **The Global Campaign to Stop Killing and Stoning Women:** www.stop-stoning.org
- **The International Campaign Against Honour Killings:** www.stophonourkillings.com
- **The International Committee Against Stoning:** www.stopstoningnow.com
- **Stop Stoning Forever (an Iran-based Group):** www.meydaan.com/english/default.aspx
- **KAFA (Lebanese-based Women's Advocacy):** www.kafa.org.lb/advoc1.html
- **The Network Against Honour Related Violence:** www.minheder.nu
- **Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan:** www.rawa.org

** Resources courtesy of The Stoning of Soraya M. Production Notes*

THE STONING of Soraya M.

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Truly Moving Moments

The Stoning of Soraya M. has been honored as a Heartland Truly Moving Picture Award-winning film. This award was created to honor films released theatrically that align with Heartland's mission to recognize and honor films and filmmakers whose work explores the human journey by artistically expressing hope and respect for the positive values of life.

These award-winning films are made up of moving and inspiring moments – those moments that cause you to think, see something in your life differently, and be inspired to take action. They are what make the film and its message remain with you well after you've left the theater.

Think about *The Stoning of Soraya M.* What were the moments that stood out to you? How did they make you feel? How will they cause you to think about things differently in the future? Share these moments with others at www.TrulyMovingPictures.org. Simply create a membership or login, if you already have one, and then search the movie list for *The Stoning of Soraya M.* You can leave your review of the movie or thoughts about this film in the "Thoughts and Reviews" section.

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WINNER
RUNNER UP
AUDIENCE CHOICE
AWARD
TORONTO
International Film Festival

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FOR A DISTURBING SEQUENCE OF CRUEL AND BRUTAL VIOLENCE, AND BRIEF STRONG LANGUAGE. SOUNDTRACK AVAILABLE ON TARGETS KARABANDE

MPOWER PICTURES

DOLBY DIGITAL

SCREENPLAY BY BETSY GIFFEN NOWRASTEH & CYRUS NOWRASTEH DIRECTED BY CYRUS NOWRASTEH

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