



The Past

Director: Asghar Farhadi

Country: France/Iran

Date: 2013

A review by Mark Kermode for *The Guardian*:

In the Oscar-winning drama *A Separation*, the Iranian director Asghar Farhadi painted a piercingly insightful picture of a failing marriage framed within the strictures of a rigidly regulated society – the personal and political intertwined, with painful consequences. Although the film depicted (and was indeed made under) often difficult circumstances, its characters were as rich, vibrant and diverse as any that have graced our screens in recent memory, their trials and tribulations at once regionally specific yet oddly universal. In *The Past*, Farhadi returns to the theme of broken marriage, this time in the altogether more laissez-faire world of a Parisian suburb, where the issue of self-determination seems both open and secular. Yet even in this very different society, Farhadi finds his characters trapped, not by the constraints of an overbearing authority but by the spectre of the past.



Cannes prize-winner Bérénice Bejo brings both heft and mercuriality to the role of Marie, a soon-to-be divorcee who has unfinished business with her estranged Iranian husband, Ahmad (Ali Mosaffa). Summoned to France to sign the final legal papers several years after their initial separation, the apparently unreliable Ahmad arrives from Tehran to find Marie pregnant with the child of her new lover, Samir (the brilliant Tahar Rahim), whose own wife, Céline, has drunk poison, to the horror of Marie's alienated teenage daughter, Lucie. Marie wants Ahmad to talk to the

troubled girl, but is there something more aggressive about her insistence that her ex stays in the small residence that now houses her new partner and his angry, bewildered son?

At times, *The Past* plays like an emotional whodunnit, replete with an all-but-dead body (the subtitled dialogue refers repeatedly to Céline's "suicide" rather than "attempted suicide") lying in the hospital while the finger of suspicion and/or blame points to each character in turn. Everyone, it seems, has reason to feel guilty about the demise of a character whose comatose condition Farhadi likens to "a sense of uncertainty", a "notion of doubt" upon which the entire film is built. Yet while the narrative may echo the almost Hitchcockian twists of Farhadi's early film *About Elly*, *The Past* is in essence a portrait of people caught between two states: marriage and divorce; childhood and adulthood; love and hate; life and death; past and present. Just as Céline is floating in limbo between this world and the next, so each of the other characters is in suspended animation, unable to choose between moving on toward the future or being borne back ceaselessly into the past. Marie is almost divorced, but the shadow of her marriage lurks in every corner of her house, despite her pointed attempts to redecorate; Samir is devoted to Marie, but still wedded to a woman who may or may not be alive and to whom he remains inextricably bound; Ahmad is stateless, physically separated from his own country, a stranger in his own home. And so on.

At the centre of this simmering turmoil is Bejo – utterly convincing as the complex Everywoman whose actions and reactions ring true even as the narrative flirts with overwrought contrivance (some may balk at the juxtaposition of naturalistic performance and labyrinthine dramatic intrigue). Having proved herself in *The Artist* to be a master of silent comedy – that ruthless, rigorous genre in which intense physical choreography is everything – Bejo applies the same precision to her portrayal of a character in flux, beset by confusion, longing for change. Often, Mahmoud Kalari's camera (with more steadiness than the handheld immediacy of *A Separation*) catches her listening as others speak, her facial responses and body

language never overplayed, yet requiring no subtitles. One could write volumes on the meaning of the fleeting glances Bejo throws as she moves through the drama like a dancer, a whirlwind of warring emotions, fragile yet indomitable.



Astonishingly, the rest of the cast are just as good, from the dispossessed children, who seem to be living rather than performing their roles, to the speechless adult whose single teardrop cuts to the heart of the film's enigma. Benefiting from Farhadi's intense rehearsal and precise direction (Bejo describes key scenes being "put together like a ballet"), the players seem to find their own space within his meticulous frame. Nor does working in a foreign language appear to have fazed Farhadi; the French-born critic and academic Ginette Vincendeau has praised the "subtle array of oral tonalities" deployed in *The Past*,

suggesting that Farhadi's ear for truthfulness is not constrained by geographical or linguistic boundaries. Like the characters in his films, he is acutely aware of, but never defined by, national or cultural specificity.

Add to this a depiction of Paris that avoids both touristy picture-postcard clichés (take a bow, Woody Allen) and fashionable post-La Haine homegrown grime and Farhadi is reconfirmed as a film-maker of truly international scope. As for Bejo, the French-Argentinian performer nominated most promising actress at the César awards in 2001 would now appear to have the world at her feet. Bravo!

From: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/mar/30/the-past-review-whirlwind-warring-emotions-mark-kermode>

Further viewing:

Asghar Farhadi has made several other powerful dramas, including *Fireworks Wednesday* (2006), *A Separation* (2009) – which won the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar in 2012 - and *About Elly* (2011). His previous films are all set in Iran.

This *Winter Wednesdays* film season is supported by Film Hub North West Central, proud to be part of the BFI Film Audience Network.

