

**Arash T. Riahi**

**presents his feature film *For a Moment, Freedom (2008)*,  
a project developed through a SOURCES 2 Script Development Workshop.**

**Girona/Spain, 1<sup>st</sup> April 2009**

ARASH: I began writing the treatment in 2000-2001. I applied to the Austrian Film Fund to get money for writing the script, but got turned down. They said the reason for the rejection was that no one would be interested in the story and it didn't have a target audience. But I also wrote two scenes, and the right-hand man of the head of the Film Fund told me that the two scenes were not bad, and that I continue writing. It didn't mean that it couldn't be made later.

So I knew I wouldn't have any support from Austria. That's why I worked. Then I had the money to attend SOURCES. I knew I had to go out with a treatment and work. I was selected, and got good feedback on the screenplay. I started to work on the script with David [Wingate]. I went to one of the young production companies in Austria. They're quite good people. They had just started their production company, and couldn't manage to do anything for the first year and a half that I was at their company because the film was big and had these three stories, and takes place outside Austria. It was clear it would have a bigger budget than a small film with one story in one room or something like that. So this made everything quite difficult. I was really happy to find someone like David because I think the work of a dramatic adviser is that he listens to you and to what kind of film you want to make. He helps you make the best out of your idea, and not make his film. A lot of people I met along the way wanted to convince me to take only one of the stories and make that one into the whole film.

I was aware that taking only one story would give a deeper view into that story. But the good thing about this kind of ensemble movie is that you can be more universal. You cannot dive too much into one of the stories, but you can have an overview of something else. That's what I always wanted to do. It also made the film complicated and difficult to make as my first film. For many years, people kept telling me it was not possible to make this film as my first film. I would have to do a smaller one first. So I made these two documentaries, which were quite successful. They helped me gain the confidence and trust of the film funds. But still, if the screenplay didn't work, I wouldn't be able to make the film.

There was a fourth story in the screenplay. In the end, I had fourteen drafts. Around the tenth draft, I found some new producers. I left the young producers in a good way after one-and-a-half years. They told me I should look for money outside Austria. I tried to find the main producer outside Austria, and then they could be the small co-producer in Austria. But that was absolutely unrealistic because I hadn't made a film before. No one knew me, and everyone asked me why I didn't have anyone in my own country. So I changed to another company, a bigger one, the one which makes the [Michael] Haneke movies. The problem was that the script was too long. They timed it, and it was 164 minutes. So the only thing I had to promise was to not make a film that was longer than 120 minutes.

I then had to think about which compromises I would make and which ones I wouldn't, and whether or not I really wanted to do this. I said to myself that if I got the chance to make this film, I must be able to make it in 120 minutes. So I spent the next one-and-a-half years shortening it in a way that worked and where I could still see my story in it.

We had a fourth story in the film. I cut out a lot of things, but this story was still there with three or four more scenes. It's the story of this smuggler. After he brings the people to Turkey he goes back to his village. As revenge, the military has killed everyone in the village. The smuggler finds out that only his son is still alive. So we see him returning to the village and discovering that everyone is dead. This was one of the most emotional scenes. We shot it. And the next scene is where we see him with his son on his horse, riding toward the mountains. The next one is where you see him in line at the United Nations, and you

understand that he has become a refugee himself. The woman comes out, sees him, and he brings her back and she gives him as payment her documents so that he can sell them.

But in the editing it didn't work. The scenes themselves worked very well emotionally. The village scene was probably one of the best. But what I learned from that was that through the shortening, the story became only a skeleton. Only the peak scenes remained. This character was too large for a supporting character so it didn't work. If it had been the village of Manu (Fares Fares), the guy with the big nose, then maybe it would have worked. But here it didn't work.

I tried everything, but it was just too much. It will be on the DVD. Now the film is 110 minutes. If I had realized this before, I would have had ten more minutes to work on the other stories. That's something about the scriptwriting.

I always liked this idea of a smuggler becoming a refugee himself, but it didn't work. One of the reasons was that I also wanted to break this cliché – well, it's not really a cliché, but it's a reality – that most of these smugglers are assholes and use these people. But what I experienced myself when I fled Iran with my parents when I was nine was just what you see in the movie. A lot of smugglers do this as a kind of political act. They're people who are fighting against the dictatorship in Iran. Kurdish people. Of course they get money. It's also dangerous, and they have to feed their families. But mainly they do it for political reasons, and I wanted to have one of these people in the movie.

Any questions? Comments?

MAN IN AUDIENCE: How did you cast the movie?

ARASH: It took one-and-a-half years to find the actors. I always had Fares Fares, the funny guy, in mind while writing the story. I sent the script to his agent. Fares Fares said he liked it and would do it. So this was kind of easy. But it was clear that this was the only role that could be played by someone who's not Iranian.

Then we searched for one-and-a-half years. We looked for Iranian actors in Sweden, Germany, France, and Great Britain. The most difficult thing was that first they had to be good actors. Secondly, I had two main young men around twenty, and you cannot find really professional actors that age. They're all in schools. And they should be able to speak the language the same way as people in Iran so it would be believable. They shouldn't sound like Iranians who left Iran twenty years ago. Of course, the language changes, and it's unbelievable if you feel that they're fakes.

I also had three big roles for children. They had to speak Farsi, and the parents had to be willing to bring the kids out of their countries for one or two months in the middle of winter [for the film shoot].

But the most difficult thing was that I didn't want to have people in the film who were politically not in line with my own beliefs. It's like when you make a film that takes place during the Nazi era, and you don't want Nazis to be in the movie. So with each of the actors, I had to find out what kinds of political views they had, and what their backgrounds were, which was very difficult. Sometimes you could figure it out by talking to them. Sometimes I had to do some research, ask other people, and so on, especially for the woman who plays my mother.

In real life, my sister and brother were too small when we fled from Iran. They came one-and-a-half years later with my cousin and his friend. When we found the actress who should play the mother in Vienna, I told my mother that her name was Manoutcheri. My mother perked her ears and said that the guy who tortured my father when he was in prison for five years before the revolution was also named Manoutcheri. I heard something about her father, that he was killed or something. So suddenly, I had this problem. Finally, after one-and-a-half years, I found the right actress, and said, "Yes, we'll take you." Then my parents thought she was the daughter of this torturer. My mother said that even though it's kind of unfair,

she could not accept having her character played by the daughter of the man who tortured my father. This was quite a problem, so I had to find out what this woman's story was.

The husband of my aunt, who lives in America, was a big official during the Shah period before the revolution. I found out that the name of this girl was only her pseudonym. This was good because she was not the torturer's daughter. But there was still this mystery of her father. And my aunt found out through her husband in America that her father was a kind of double agent for one of these groups, and he was shot on the streets in Turkey.

So everything was very connected, and most of the people who are in the movie are refugees themselves or the children of refugees, children of people who are against the regime. This was kind of important.

In the end, it was a mixture of amateur actors, theatre actors, children, and some professionals. I knew that the most difficult thing would be to create an atmosphere in which the audience doesn't realize who's professional and who's not. Especially if the children are good, it's very difficult for professionals and non-professionals to be as good as the children.

WOMAN IN AUDIENCE: Who's famous among the actors?

ARASH: Fares Fares. And also the guy [Michael Niavarani] who plays the father of the children. He's a famous comedian in Austria. He's originally half-Iranian and half-Austrian. He's very popular in Austria. He has a show every week. Among Iranians he's very famous. The Austrians love him. I had this concept of taking a foreigner that everyone in Austria loves, and creating a tragic story behind him so that the Austrians would see this person who symbolizes other refugees or foreigners with different eyes. The problem, in the end, is that it took so long to make this film that this guy became so famous that when Austrians see him now, they have to laugh. So now during the scene where the children show his picture, one-fifth of the audience starts to laugh, even though it's not funny. [Arash laughs] But this is only a problem in Austria.

MAN IN AUDIENCE: Where did you shoot the film?

ARASH: In Turkey. One month in Ankara, two weeks in the mountains, and one day at the Iranian-Turkish border. That's the shot where they first arrive and stand there and look out across the lake. This is the famous city called Van. It's near the border, and it's a very important city for Armenians and a lot of other people. When we fled when I was nine, I also stood there. We rebuilt the insides of the hotel rooms in Vienna. And we shot one day in Berlin. It was a total of forty days of shooting.

So maybe I'll talk a little bit about the work with the children. I was very afraid of this. I prepared myself as best I could. I had about eighteen books that I wanted to read before making this film. But as we all know, life can be very stressful, and there are a lot of things that we have to do, so I was only able to read about half a book, which was about working with actors. The other seventeen-and-a-half I couldn't read. I told myself I had to trust my feelings and my way of dealing with people. I can work well with children. Before the shoot, I talked to the parents and asked them to write down one or two pages about their children: what they like to eat, when they cry, when they laugh, when they're supposed to go to bed, what kind of character they have.

This was the first step. The second step was to ask the actors who play their parents in the movie to meet them in Paris because the children were all from Paris, and go with them to parks and spend time with them without the real parents so that when the audience watches them in the cinema they would feel that they're connected. They have a kind of friendship, and it's not just actors and children who don't belong to these people. I also asked them to ride ponies in parks in France. This had the effect that when we went to shoot the film, our children were not afraid of the horses. But the doubles we had from Turkey, who were supposed to double the children in long shots and stuff were very afraid of the horses. We didn't expect this, of course.

The next thing was to become like an uncle to the children and to give them the feeling that they could trust me and that I wouldn't do anything they didn't want. Of course, if they don't want to do anything that you want, you have to find some tricks to get them to do the scenes. I knew that the little boy loved cars so I had a collection of the best cars that you could get in Turkey. I knew that he didn't have the cars from Turkey. He had all the cars from Paris, but he didn't have the ones with the signs from Turkey. So I had these.

I also knew that he really liked to eat, and he wasn't allowed to eat everything. So I always had some sandwiches and chocolates that he wasn't allowed to eat in my pockets without his parents knowing it. [audience laughter] Whenever he didn't want to do something, I negotiated with him. Then he did it and he got a bit of the sandwich. This was our secret.

Another thing that happened was that the two little boys fell in love with the little girl, and they were always trying to outdo each other. So there was this kind of competition between the two little boys in front of the girl, which helped me a lot. Also, when kids are this young, they don't realize that you can't replace them. So if one of them didn't want to do something very easy like lying quietly in bed, I told him I'd bring the other one and he'd do it. And that would get him to do it immediately. [laughs] This is a very good trick that works sometimes with children. In the scene in the end where the child has to cry, I knew I had to get him to cry. But it was in the middle of the shooting, and if it's a traumatic experience for him, he won't continue with the shoot. So this scene and the scene in the shower were the two scenes I was most afraid of.

First we had the scene in the shower. And the child's mother said he would never do it because he's shy about being naked. But of course he wasn't naked. The children were all from France, and the rules for working with children there are very strict. You're only allowed to work 2-3 hours per day with them, which was a big problem for us because going from the hotel to the mountains sometimes took us an entire hour. Then it took another hour to start shooting. So this was a big problem.

We had an extra wagon to take the children to the mountains. They could play there and sleep there, and they had a teacher there, and everything. This helped. A psychiatrist in France also had to examine the children before and after the shoot. So after finding the children after a year and a half – we had only these three children, and they were really the best – we had to send them to a psychiatrist. He had to test them, especially the middle boy. The production company didn't like my decision to cast him because he was the only child who could be older. The other children that we found were not good, so I chose him. He was very sensitive, and everybody was afraid that he would fail in front of the psychiatrist because he was really so sensitive that he started to cry during the casting when I asked him to give me his necklace for a second. When I said this two or three times, he started to cry. We were all afraid, but from the psychiatrist's point-of-view, he was the best.

At the end of the shoot, I had the feeling that all of the children became kind of mature through the whole thing. Of course, everyone hugged and kissed the stars. At the end, they were all kind of sad. The girl cried and the middle boy ran away after the last shoot. He said he'd miss all of us. The little boy told me I could call him in two months, and he'd be ready for the next movie. He needed two months' rest, but then he'd do it.

For the shower scene and the scene where the child pees his pants, I had to write down a one- or two-page explanation for the French censors or whatever about how I was going to shoot the scene. I wrote that the child would not be naked, and that it would not be a bad scene for the child. I didn't think the shower scene would work because the mother had told me it wouldn't work. But I also had my swimsuit on, like the boy and the woman, and got into the shower with the child sort of half-naked, and showed him that it was no big deal. He could take his own toys with him, and it was very easy.

The next thing was the scene where he cries when the father is beaten up by everyone. I was really afraid of this scene because I knew he really had to cry otherwise the whole film would not work. I asked the mother how we could do this without traumatizing him. She told me that he has two teddy bears that he loves: If you take them away, he cries. And if you give them back, he's happy again. We had them there,

and I chose one of the guys in the crowd to be the bad guy, and take it away. The boy was outside, and we pointed the camera downward, and I yelled, "He's not going to give it back! He's not going to give it back!" At first he didn't take it seriously, and laughed. But then he cried. But when we gave it back to him, he was happy again. He didn't mind the next day. When children are very young, they forget these things easily.

After the shoot, I have to say that the work with the children was great. I'd love to continue working with them. As I said, all three of them were from Paris. First we found the girl. We concentrated on France, on Paris, because we knew there were a lot of Iranians there. It's better when the kids are all from one city because they can talk to one another in French. We needed only one teacher, which was easier.

**MAN IN AUDIENCE:** I've got a comment about what you were saying before about the restrictions on filming with children from France. It's not a censorship board; it's a child welfare agency which protects children from being overworked and exploited.

**ARASH:** Yes. The other problem was with the young guy who brings the children and stays in Turkey. He's also an amateur. He didn't know anything about filmmaking. We put up some posters in Iranian restaurants and such places. His father saw one of these, and told him and his friends to go to the casting. He told me that he came because he'd heard that when you're in a film, there are lots of beautiful girls there. So that's why he came. But he was very natural, and I knew that we had the problem that the other guy who brings the children to Austria in the end – he was the first guy we found – was too good-looking. I had to find a person who was believable and that the girl could fall in love with instead of with the other guy. I had to find a completely different type. Finally we found him, but he didn't want to do it because he didn't believe he was any good. He asked me, "Are you sure? I've never acted in anything before. I'll mess up your movie," and stuff like that. And I said, "No, I feel that you're good for what I want."

I knew I would have to change some things in the script because he could not play the sad things. So I wrote the sad things for the other guy. In earlier versions, it was more mixed. I made a sort of sunny boy, naive type of guy who doesn't see what's going on. And in the end, we had to reassure him that he wouldn't lose his place at the university. Later he told me that his father was very suspicious of me because he thought it was strange that some guy wanted to take his son and make a film with him. When they were there at the production company to sign the papers, the father sent his son outside and told him he had to ask some questions. He went to our French producer and asked him if I'm gay because he thought I wanted to have a sexual relationship with his son. [laughs]

So some very strange things happened during the discussions for this film. But finally the boy was there, and we took a picture for his father – us together hugging. [laughs]

**MAN IN AUDIENCE:** What format did you shoot on?

**ARASH:** We shot on 35mm, 3 perf. Actually, if I were to make the film all over again, I wouldn't shoot on 35mm. I think it was a bad decision because all the equipment is so big. There's no spontaneity about it. It would have been better to have shot with two 16mm cameras. We would have had more time to shoot, and more material to work with. What I really didn't like is that when I rehearsed with the children and with the actors, I saw new things in them that I liked and that I wanted to put into the story. But this was impossible except two or three times, for example in the scene where the children eat the snow. I just watched them, and I told the cameraman we had to shoot it. But it takes about ten minutes before you have the right lens on the camera and all that, and then the snow was kind of gone, and the children were somewhere else. This was very limiting.

Of course, the other problem was that my story was so complex that I couldn't allow myself to let it go and do this and that. It was very important to stick to my concept and get all the shots that I needed to tell my story. And then if there was still time, which there never was, I could do some spontaneous stuff. So what I learned from this is that I had cut my 160-minute screenplay down to 120 minutes, and there was nothing superfluous in it. It was so packed that it didn't give me any space. Next time I'll do this differently: I'll write

less story and leave more space for trying out things. But with this story, it wasn't really possible. So never again 35mm!

MAN IN AUDIENCE: If you're never going to work in 35mm again, then what format are you going to use for your next projects?

ARASH: It depends on the story. I've now shot two small documentaries with the Red, and it's great. The handling afterwards is a bit difficult, but it works. It looks great, and you can shoot as long as you want. On the third day, I shot the scene where the children run in the park and they laugh at the couple who kiss each other. This was the first shot with the children, and I let the camera roll for two minutes. The next day the production company was kind of angry and said, "That's too much. You can't do that."

A week later, we got a letter from the completion bond company. It's a kind of insurance to make sure you get the film completed. Every night they get a shot list from the script person, and they have to say if it's okay or not. They control everything. If you don't shoot something you had planned to shoot, they ask you what happened with that scene. Will you shoot it or not? So after a week or so, my producer showed me an email from the completion bond company where it said he should sit down with his director over the weekend and find a solution because he's shot far more material than expected, and in the end this will cost 60,000 Euros more. Where do you want to get this money? It was a horrible situation, and they told me that not even [Michael] Haneke shot so much. I don't believe that, but as a first-time filmmaker it's very difficult because you don't know what's right and what's wrong. And I come from video: for me, two minutes of shooting is nothing.

MAN IN AUDIENCE: When was the film released in cinemas?

ARASH: The film started January 9<sup>th</sup> in Vienna, and it's still running. We started with seven or eight prints, and I guess we'll sell about 17,000 tickets. We thought we'd have about 20,000 admissions, but it's okay. Most Austrian films have less than 5,000. Of course, some Austrian films have a lot more. But for a film with subtitles and about such a difficult subject, it's okay. In France, I think we'll have about 30,000 admissions. It started there at the end of January with 20-25 prints. Canada will be next in two or three months. Then Germany. And we're waiting to hear back from some US distributors. There are one million Iranians in the US, so there's a big market there.

I decided to write my first script when I was in my mid-twenties. It was an experimental love story. My advisors told me to write about something that I know. So I changed my plans with the love story. Living in exile and having this story within me all became more and more important, and I decided to make this be my first film. When you're the child of politically-active parents, it leaves a mark on you. I remember visiting my father when he was in prison in Iran. And when I got older, I began asking myself: "Where am I? Why am I here? Am I becoming more and more Austrian? Am I still Iranian? And why did my parents leave everything behind and come to Austria? What did they do? What did they fight for?"

The older I become, the more I want to continue their struggle with my own weapons. And film is a powerful weapon. It was clear that I wanted to make this film, and make a contribution to all the refugees in my family and to all the people who went through this. That's why it was very important for me to keep going with this.

When I was casting the film, a lot of Iranians came and wanted to be in the movie because they said that they've been waiting for 20-25 years for this film. I didn't want to make a film about the time in Iran and the time in Europe, but more about the time in between so that the Austrians and the Europeans see what these people go through in order to live in their country. I didn't want it to be about current political affairs. I wanted to make a symbolic film. I'm not interested in saying, "This person is very political and deserves to be allowed in." For me, that's clear. It's not something I feel I need to discuss. For me, it was important to show that it's a human right to decide where you want to live. And if people go through this kind of journey, this kind of hell, it must be clear that they've left something which must be horrible. This was the concept.

What makes me very happy at the end with the movie besides the awards, which are great, is the emotional things. For example, if you look at the website there's a guestbook where people can write their reactions to the film. Not only Iranians, but all kinds of people have written things there. And even though we know that you can't change the world with movies, I'm quite sure you can affect some attitudes and opinions and mindsets. I can see this whenever I read the comments people have left in the guestbook. One Iranian guy in France told me that he went through the same story thirty years ago, but never talked to anyone about it. Now he wants to go watch the movie with his children. Some NGOs are using the film in their work, and have told me that everyday people come to them to tell them their stories, but they'd never had images of these. Now thanks to the movie, they can see what all these people have been talking about.

It was also very important to me to have humor in the film. I didn't want to have humor just to make it an easygoing film. For me, it's a means of surviving in life, especially for these people. I was very happy to hear the NGOs tell me how people come to their offices and show them their injuries from being tortured, and make jokes about them. Because when you're in such a situation and you don't have your family or money or anything, keeping your humor is cheap and helps you survive the difficult times. So for me it's a concept for life; that's why I wanted to have it in the film.

Maybe one of the most emotional comments I've received, except for some women writing poems and love letters to me, [laughs] is what an Iranian man wrote to me. He's been in Vienna for two-and-one-half months, and the fact that he's there in exile and he doesn't have anyone, and he can't speak the language is killing him, and he feels really lonely. He saw that the film was playing in the cinema, and he went inside. The theatre was full, and everyone cried and laughed, including him. At the end of the movie, they stood up and clapped. He was so overwhelmed that the Austrians, whom he couldn't understand, understood his story and his feelings and cried with him that he went to the same screening the next day in order to have this same feeling again. This was very nice. It made me feel like making a movie like this was the right thing to do, even though it took a long time.

Thank you.