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"I Am Neda"

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Frontpage Interview's guest today is Nicole Kian Sadighi, an actress, writer and now first time Director of the award winning movie, "[I Am Neda](#)." The daughter of famous Iranian journalists, she was born in Tehran, Iran but has lived in London, England since the age of two. She is a graduate of Brookland Performing Arts School and holds a degree in Fine Arts. For more information about the film, visit [IAmNeda.com](#).

FP: Nicole Sadighi, thank you for joining Frontpage Interview.

Let's begin with why you decided to make a film about Neda.

Kian Sadighi: Thank you Jamie.

For me, Neda was the representation of a courageous Iranian woman. Since the inception of the current regime in Iran, Islamic laws have enforced limitations on the lives of the Iranian people, prohibiting their fundamental human rights — whether they are the religious minorities, the labor force, the students or women. Sadly, women have been the most exploited and targeted of the penal codes.

At the same time, it's also been the Iranian women who have been at the forefront of the ongoing demonstrations — as there is a massive women's movement in Iran. When the world watched with bated breath as the streets of Tehran erupted in 2009, those of us Iranians living outside of Iran were glued to our television and computer screens, multi-tasking every news that came out through the social media and leading news outlets. And of course, we saw this young woman Neda, one minute innocently standing there, and then the next she was gone right before our eyes.

We usually see casualties in the aftermath of the war and turmoil but never during, never as close up as this. It was so shocking. There are no words to describe it. You go through an array of emotions. I was angered when I first saw it. She didn't deserve it. I wanted to know more about this girl called Neda. What inspired her, what were her beliefs, her likes, dislikes? What was she like in private amongst her loved ones, what was her driving force? Who was she?

So I started to research her and put pen to paper and wrote her story through my eyes. I say through my eyes, but this film is really through her eyes. This film, as I feel, is Neda's calling card. She is my inspiration.

It's difficult not to get involved in someone's story whilst researching it. She saw the world with such hope and romance and beauty despite the depressing restraints of the country she lives in. Wow, what a woman! It doesn't matter who you are, Iranian or otherwise, Neda's story translates all language barriers. It's a human story. And that is exactly what I have hoped to have achieved with "I Am Neda."

FP: You have received a fantastic reception at various festivals, specifically at the Cannes and Houston film festival where you were awarded the top prize. How do you feel about this great success?

Kian Sadighi: I cannot begin to express my excitement and pride for this film. Since we locked the final cut last autumn, it has been awarded the Platinum Remi Special Jury Award at Worldfest Houston International Film Festival and was the Honorable Mention Winner at the Los Angeles Movie Awards, and so far it has been showcased at eleven film festivals, most recently as a finalist at Cannes American Pavilion.

Receiving this tremendous news is a great sense of achievement for me as a first time director. But what all this really means is that these festivals believe in the message of the movie, and appreciate it as an artistic form of telling a story. They are moved by Neda's story as I have been. At the same time, amongst the celebrations, it is also a time to sit back and reflect on why I began walking the

path to make this movie in the first place. A moment in history, that was engulfed by tragedy, an inspiring legacy that Neda left behind. Like the nameless man standing in front of the tanks in Tiananmen Square, or the little naked girl running away from the napalms during Vietnam, Neda is an iconic image forever engraved in our minds. Whether they are aware of it or not, these great festivals are giving a voice to the voiceless, for which I will be internally grateful because they believe in this movie as I do. They are not only giving this movie a platform but also something much greater than all of us. This is huge. It gives me a sense of warmth and hope.

FP: Aside from the awards, what do you hope that your film will achieve? And what is the film's one single message that you would like to get through to people?

Kian Sadighi: The world only knows of Neda in her tragic death. We will never forget that beautiful face. Those glaring eyes. I wanted to know her in life and I wanted to share what I had discovered with everyone. Neda was no different from any other young woman. There are many preconceived ideas, particularly in the west, of Iranians in Iran. They are no different from the rest of us. Neda had the same dreams and aspirations as anyone. There's nothing unusual about the Iranian people living in Iran that is any different from the rest of the world, except for the tragic circumstances they live in.

I hope that an audience member can see that no matter what language we speak, Neda could be any one of us, your sister or brother, your girlfriend, boyfriend, wife, husband, your children, your best friend or you. I wanted to bring a human factor to this tragic image that we saw of her. In addition, I wanted to show the innate difference between the people of Iran and the Iranian regime. The two should not be confused. Neda represented that difference. The tragedy is that the government has made enemies of its own people.

A film like "I Am Neda" will speak to everybody who sees it in different ways. A million people will see a movie like "I Am Neda" and they will have many different opinions and reactions. I think that the subject matter of tyranny and torment will never be exhausted –such as WWII films and the horrific atrocities of the Nazis. Likewise, the many horrific events during the last 30 years in Iran like the 2009 Green Movement and the massacre that we witnessed. The personal reaction that people had to those events, no matter where you were watching them from, can't be 100% duplicated, but it can be echoed in a movie like "I Am Neda." That can be the power of film regardless of the subject matter. More often than not it can translate audiences' feelings better than they are able to express by themselves.

With that said, I also realized that I was not only documenting history but also retelling it, which is a huge responsibility and I wanted to do it with the honor and respect it deserved. In the process, I also made a vow to uphold Neda's legacy and memory. Neda has become a symbol of all the Nedas of the world. We mustn't forget any of them. In this amazing technological age of Twitter and Facebook, we cannot hide from the truth anymore. There is a reason that these innocent people across the other side of the world are filming what's really happening on the ground with their camera phones. They want us to take notice and listen – and we are listening.

FP: You never had the opportunity to meet Neda, how difficult did this make it and what kind of research did you do?

Kian Sadighi: Well, this was one of the challenges of course. In deciding to make the movie, the first step was to research her story and research it well. If I wasn't sure about something in her life or could not back it up, then it just had no place in the movie. After all, this was a real person, not a fictional character. I wanted to honor and respect the process of making this film and shining a light on her legacy. I spent the best of a year researching who she was. I read the articles, watched documentaries, and the first hand interviews with her family which came to be such valuable information for me. I went through many drafts until I was satisfied. It took the best part of the year. It was not only important to convey the atmosphere in Iran at the time but also to keep her story as authentic as I could.

FP: Can you give us an example?

Kian Sadighi: Sure. I discovered her love of music, the arts and literature. She was such a romantic at heart. One of her favorite books was Brontes "Wuthering Heights," so I searched high and low for the Persian cover of that book and included it in the film. The dialogue was elemental and it really helped watching interviews with her family about the conversations they had with Neda during those tumultuous days in Tehran. And they told stories about what kind of a girl she was since her

childhood.

There's one story that stood out for me: since her childhood Neda hated to wear the mandatory headscarf and when she was a young child, at school she campaigned hard not to have to wear it – and she succeeded! Neda had gumption and tenacity since a small age. She hated any kind of injustice and she seemed to be a little stubborn in that she didn't like to be told what to do. Her mother would recount how Neda had always been a little rebellious. Quite frankly, the more I learned about her, the more I grew to admire her. She really was a force for good. This added a lot of depth to the film.

FP: Please tell us about the cast, and also why you have cast yourself as Neda.

Sadighi: The award-winning famous Iranian actress Mary Apick plays Neda's mother Hajar Rostami. Mary is famous for being involved with thought provoking films and the famous theater production "Beneath the Veil," and the up and coming musician Poet Ali, who to my surprise is a very talented actor, he plays Mohammad, Neda's brother. Vida Irani plays Hoda, and I play Neda.

Having graduated from performing arts school, my first passion has always been acting. When you first set out to research the life of a person, it's very difficult not to get deeply involved in who they are. You can't help but get affected. I understood and looked up to her. At the same time on a time line and small budget like this film, it wasn't realistic to bring another actor on board and to trust them with such a responsibility and with having the same level of understanding of her as I did. Playing somebody like Neda, someone who inspires me, someone who is in my age group, I can identify with her, I admire her on so many levels, and it's been an honor to be able to play her.

FP: Tell us about the other challenges you faced in making this film.

Kian Sadighi: There were many. As a first time filmmaker, I have a limited budget and I had to wear many hats. I directed it, wrote it, produced it, and also starred in it. I had to find locations, cast the film, get a crew together and I didn't want this movie just to be about four people in a room, with a camera on a tripod. I really wanted to "up" the production value.

This is also a Persian film with English subtitles, with an American crew and the only people to speak and understand Farsi were the actors. So we not only had to have the script translated into Farsi-English but also into what we call "Penglish" which was Persian with English lettering so that the crew could follow.

In addition, Poet Ali and I only knew first grade Farsi, so with the help of a dialogue coach we spent countless weeks learning the script and a lot of the dialogue for the first time, for authenticity.

One of the biggest challenges of all was that we couldn't film in Iran. Although a lot of people think we did, which is a great testament to the crew and team who worked on this film, we actually filmed it in Los Angeles. But we couldn't film something like this in Iran without some kind of retaliation from the government over there. This is not a movie that can happen in a country like Iran, and also the parallels of making this movie and Neda's story, where here we have this young woman, Neda, standing up for her freedom, and with this film we are demonstrating the lack of that freedom by not being able to film inside Iran.

FP: Your future plans?

Kian Sadighi: My goal has been to inspire and educate people with "I Am Neda." I want this film to reach every corner of the globe, and allow Neda's voice to live on. I would ultimately like this movie to get into as many festivals as possible to reach as many people as possible. We want the whole world to see this film and eventually I would like to get this film to the 2013 Oscars and when it gets there, then we'll be satisfied to know that this film will ultimately reach the masses on a wide scale and Neda's legacy will live on forever.

FP: Any other future projects?

Kian Sadighi: I have another movie in the pipeline. It's an amazing WWII/Holocaust story that has never really been told. Its confidential right so that's all I can give away at this stage. But I know audiences will not be disappointed!

FP: Nicole Sadighi, thank you so much for joining Frontpage Interview, and thank you so much for making this film and for being the person that you are — and for shining a light in a world of much

darkness.

Our readers should know that "I Am Neda" has won the Remi Special Jury award at WorldFest Houston International Film Festival, and Honorable Mention Award at Los Angeles Movie Awards.

It has been finalist at Cannes American Pavilion for Emerging Filmmakers, USA Film Festival, Montreal World Film Festival, Beverly Hills Film Festival, Free Speech Film Festival, World Music and Independent Film Festival, BeFilm The Underground Film Festival, Arpa International Film Festival and Santa Rosa International Film Festival.

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