

Desert Dancer (2014)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour 44 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 5; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 2.

Our star rating (1-5): 4.5

*... a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn,
and a time to dance...*

Ecclesiastes 3:4

*Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin
Israel! Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth
in the dance of the merrymakers.*

Jeremiah 31:4

First-time director Richard Raymond's "based on a true story" film takes me back many years to another film in which dance is central to the story. No, it is not *Footloose*, mentioned by other reviewers of the film, although the comparison is a valid one, both films dealing with a character dwelling in a place where dancing is suppressed. My film is a far greater one, Michael Cacoyannis's *Zorba the Greek*, in which dance is the life-affirming symbol of a middle-aged Greek who attaches himself to a reclusive Englishman, thus changing his life for the better. Dance is also central to two other films that I love, which I will mention later.

Set in the Republic of Iran, where dance is frowned upon (especially between a man and a woman), director Richard Raymond's "based on a true story" film follows Afshin Ghaffarian (Reece Ritchie) and his college friends who, despite the dangers, form an underground dance company. In a flashback we see a young Afshin (Gabriel Senior) perform a

short dance in front of his delighted classmates while the teacher is out of the room. When the adult returns and catches the boy, he disciplines him harshly, thus foreshadowing what is to come.

A much more sympathetic teacher guides the boy into a secret school of the arts where he develops a love for the arts, especially dance. Thus Afshin discovers that there are two Irans, the public one—a nation of suppression of the arts and any other form of dissent, and a hidden Iran where people are free to express themselves.

It is at the University of Tehran that Afshin befriends Ardavan (Tom Cullen) and Sattar (Simon Kassianides), who take him to an underground student hangout where there is plenty of music, dancing, alcohol, and drugs. Here the student also accesses the world-wide Internet, quickly becoming a fan of YouTube clips of great dancing performances by Michael Jackson, Pina Bausch, Gene Kelly, Rudolf Nureyev, and others. The enthused Afshin convinces his friends to join him in forming a dance company. They find an abandoned factory to serve as their studio. When someone asks who will be their teacher Afshin replies that it will be the video clips.

At their first clandestine rehearsal an uninvited young woman shows up. She is Elahah (Freida Pinto), daughter of a professional ballerina belonging to the national ballet company before the revolution, but whose livelihood was wiped out when Islamic fundamentalists came to power and closed the company. Elahah performs such an exquisite dance that all are won over. Indeed, along with a semi-official teaching role, she also begins a romantic relationship with Afshin. He also discovers she has a dark side, the tormented young woman seeking solace in heroin from the harsh government regimine. While the students perfect their skills the 2009 Green Revolution is underway, the streets filled with chanting crowds carrying freedom placards. The streets also are ateam with thugs calling themselves the Morality Police, so the

friends at one point find themselves their victims with no one to help them.

As the dancers perfect their skills, Afshin longs to perform for their classmates. Given that no facilities exist in Terhan for them, he comes up with the idea of setting up a rendezvous in the desert, hence the film's title. Suspense is added in that the fundamentalist brother of one of the team members bullies him into revealing that his friends are planning to perform for their classmates. By the time of the performance all but three members are too fearful to participate, so it is Afshin, Elahah, and a friend who dance in the sand. The camera's cutting back and forth between the dancers and the club-wielding thugs in their vans searching for the dance site adds to the suspense. The dance is an early highlight, with Afshin and Elahah appearing to be almost in a dual, leading and then being led by each other as they leap about in the sand. Their hands come close to each other's but never touch, a reflection of the culture's abhorrence of a male and a female's dancing together.

Eventually, after Afshin is swept up in the street by thugs and badly beaten, his friends convince him he must leave the country if he is not only to survive, but also to exercise his passion for dancing. But without a passport, how? One of his friends who has been accepted into a London drama school provides the answer, unselfishly offering him his passport and papers so he can take his place.

In London, that Afshin could keep secret his not knowing the lines of a play until performance night stretches credibility! Yet there he is on stage, speechless when it comes time for him to say his lines. There is a long, long silence as the audience stirs uneasily. The faux actor freezes. His old teacher who had encouraged him in the arts, and who had fled Iran, is in the audience, anxious about his former pupil. Then, with just a few words of introduction, Afshin begins a dance, so powerful that it melted away my disbelief. Up and

around the stage, leaping high at times into the air, and lying flat on the floor, his arms stretched out at length and his hands and fingers grasping for what lies just beyond—every frantic motion telling his story of anguished oppression and insatiable longing for freedom. Even the critics who panned this film praised this sequence!

Through the years I have cherished three films centered on dance as symbolic of the joys of life, along with Sydney Carter's great hymn "Lord of the Dance." With the already mentioned *Zorba* these include the Japanese film *Shall We Dance* and *Dancing at Lughnasa*. All are thrilling examples of dance as celebrating life.

Rather than go into them here I refer you to my article reprinted later in this issue, one written originally for the journal *Christianity and the Arts*—"Celebration of the Dance in Cinema." Richard Raymond's film is not the equal of these, but it is nonetheless worthy to be considered with them. The film's three dances, beautifully created by dancer/choreographer Akram Khan, touch the heart so that we too are filled with the passion for a life of freedom and joy.

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the June issue of Visual Parables. A subscription to the journal will also give you access to Lectionary Links, a feature for preachers that links a film to one or more lessons from the Common Lectionary.