

NEW YORKER FILMS PRESENTS

**SMELL OF CAMPHOR,
FRAGRANCE OF JASMINE**

A film by Bahman Farmanara

**OFFICIAL SELECTION 2000
New York Film Festival**

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SMELL OF CAMPHOR, FRAGRANCE OF JASMINE

Credits

Director/Writer.....Bahman Farmanara
Producer.....Morteza Shayesteh
Executive Producer.....Fazlollah Yousefpour
Director of Photography.....Mahmood Kalari
Art Director.....Zilla Mehrjouii
Music.....Ahmad Pejman
Editor.....Abbas Ganjavi
Sound.....Parviz Abnar
Special Effects.....Abbas Shoqi

Cast

Bahman Farjami.....Bahman Farmanara
Woman Hitchhiker.....Roya Nonahali
Dr. Arasteh, The Attorney.....Reza Kianian
Homayouni, The Actor.....Valiyollah Shirandami
Abdollah, The Servant.....Hossein Kasbian
Memorial Sign Rental.....Firouz Behjat Mohammadi
Farzaneh..... Parivash Nazarieh
Bahman's Sister.....Mahtaj Nojoomi

In Farsi with English subtitles

Aspect ratio: 1:85

Running time: 93 minutes

Mono

SMELL OF CAMPHOR, FRAGRANCE OF JASMINE

Director's Statement

When you are not allowed to work at your profession for twenty years, the all-consuming disease of bitterness conquers your soul. The line in the opening monologue "I do not fear death. I fear a futile life," is the gist of what my film is about.

My film is bitter, but not without hope. Humor plays a major part in getting the poison out of my system.

Because this film is a product of the last couple of years of liberalization, I have attempted to make it a mirror of what is happening to us in the Iran of today.

In my culture, camphor is associated with death and burial rites. But it is also used to bring about impotence if mixed in your food. The jasmine and its fragrance also brings the spring and summer to mind, this is rooted in memories of youth and vitality. It is with this vitality that I hope we can nullify the camphor and the intellectual impotence that totalitarianism tries to bring about by strict censorship.

The fact that sixty-five percent of the population of my country is under twenty-five makes me very hopeful that the fragrance of jasmine will be the eventual victor.

- Bahman Farmanara

SMELL OF CAMPHOR, FRAGRANCE OF JASMINE

Synopsis

Bahman Farjami, a fifty-five year old filmmaker, has not made a film for twenty years, since being banned by the Post-Revolutionary Censor Board. The death of other filmmakers of his generation, his own heart problems and a strange set of coincidences convince him that the Angel of Death must be near. As a means of confronting his fears, he decides to make a film about his own funeral, under the guise of a documentary on Iranian funeral rites for Japanese television.

As he researches the funeral rites of his country and culture, Farjami glimpses a side of Iranian society which he was not aware of, including teenage suicides, abused women and the serial murders of intellectuals. In the midst of this, his view is shaded by his problems with his sick mother, domineering sister and aging man-servant. All of these things get tangled together in his mind and take him on an emotional roller-coaster ride that culminates in a Fellini-esque dream so intense that it may lead to his actual death.

BAHMAN FARMANARA

Writer/Director

Bahman Farmanara was born in Tehran in 1942, studied at the London School of Music, and then went on to graduate from the University of Southern California with a degree in film direction in 1966. He returned to Iran where he began a career in filmmaking and proved himself as a profound voice in contemporary cinema.

After making several short documentaries, he made his feature debut in 1973 with HOUSE OF GHAMAR KHANOOM, based on a popular Iranian television series. The following year he made the successful and award-winning PRINCE EHTEJAB, which established his reputation as one of Iran's most promising young filmmakers. In 1977 Farmanara became head of film production at the Iranian Film Industry Development Company where he oversaw films by recent film school graduates and actively promoted the Iranian film industry to the rest of the world. While there he made his third feature film, TALL SHADOWS OF THE WIND. The making of the film coincided with the 1979 Islamic Revolution and was never released.

In 1980 Farmanara realized that he did not have a future in filmmaking under the new government and left Iran for Canada, where he became a successful film distributor. After living and working in Canada and Los Angeles for many years, Farmanara returned to Iran to head his family's textile company. But his heart

still belonged to filmmaking and he slowly started to find his way back to it, teaching a graduate film program. Then, finally, after twenty-two years, Farmanara received permission from the Iranian government to make the highly personal and moving **SMELL OF CAMPHOR, FRAGRANCE OF JASMINE.**

SMELL OF CAMPHOR, FRAGRANCE OF JASMINE went on to win eight awards at last year's 18th Fajr Film Festival in Iran and has been warmly received at film festivals all over the world.

Farmanara is currently making plans for his next film and continues to head his family's textile company in Iran.

FILMOGRAPHY

As Director:

- 1971 NOWROOZ AND CAVIAR (Documentary)**
- 1972 TEHRAN, OLD AND NEW (Documentary)**
- 1973 HOUSE OF GHAMAR KHANOOM**
- 1974 PRINCE EHTAJAB**
- 1978 TALL SHADOWS OF THE WIND**
- 2000 SMELL OF CAMPHOR, FRAGRANCE OF JASMINE**

As Producer:

- 1975 DESERT OF TARTARS, Directed By Valerio Zurlini**
- 1976 WIND AND CHESS directed M.R.Aslani**
THE DIVINE ONE directed by Khowsrow Haritash
- 1977 NIGHT NEVER ENDS directed by Parviz Sayaad**
THE CROW directed by Bahram Beyzaii
THE REPORT directed by Abbas Kiarostami 1977
- 1978 TALL SHADOWS OF THE WIND**

**Bahman Farmanara:
Twice Upon a Time**

Hamid Dabashi

It is impossible to exaggerate the extraordinary impact of Bahman Farmanara's "Prince Ehtejab" (1973) when it premiered in Tehran Film Festival. Adopted from one of the major landmarks of contemporary Persian fiction, Houshang Golshiri's "Prince Ehtejab" (196?), Farmanara's stunning visual adaptation brought to a new synergetic height the successful wedding of Iranian film and fiction inaugurated by Daryush Mehrjui's adaptation of a story by Gholam Hossein Sa'edi in his pioneering "Cow" (1969).

Born in 1942 in Tehran, Bahman Farmanara received his college education first in London and subsequently at the University of Southern California. By the mid-1960's he was back in Tehran promoting art films on the National Television. By the early 1970's he had made his first short films. "Prince Ehtejab" established him as one of the leading filmmakers of his generation. At the wake of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, he made yet another screen adaptation of a Golshiri story. "The Tall Shadows of the Wind" (197?) has "the dubious distinction," as he puts it half-jokingly, "of having been banned by both the Shah and Khomeini's regime."

After the Islamic Revolution, Farmanara and his family left Iran and gradually resided in Canada. He was instrumental in a rather successful film distribution company when in mid 1980's his obligations to his family's textile company took him back to Iran. Almost immediately upon his return to Iran he began submitting scripts to Islamic censor for approval. None was approved. "Smell of Camphor, Fragrance of Jasmine" (2000) marks his return to Iranian cinema after an absence of some twenty years.

Excerpts from the following conversation took place in New York City on Thursday, September 28, 2000 when Farmanara attended the premiere US screening of his "Smell of Camphor, Fragrance of Jasmine" at the 38th New York Film Festival.

At the Dawn of the Revolution

DABASHI : In this period, 1989, you have just gone back to Iran and the Iranian cinema movement is taking momentum. Kiarostami, Makhmalbaf, Bani-etemad, Beiza'i, etc. Are you now back into this circulation? Are you in touch with them?

FARMANARA : Oh, I was always in touch. Kiarostami and I were friends since "The Report." Beiza'i and I had been friends, but we didn't meet as much. Mehrju'i and I used to play tennis. I also started teaching at the University.

DABASHI : Oh, when did you do that?

FARMANARA : When I went back, I think, from 1992, I started teaching for about four years at the Arts University, Cinema Section, and I used to teach two classes.

DABASHI : They didn't have any objection to your teaching.

FARMANARA : No. That was actually no problem. I used to teach at the master's level, so, the students were older and more mature, and we discussed things that the newspapers didn't have anything to do with it.

DABASHI : How would you characterize your attitude towards the new filmmakers who were now emerging in cinema at the time? Not now, but at the time when you were close to them, and you see the emergence of a new generation of filmmakers.

FARMANARA : Well, you know, I did something for the Iranian cinema that not that many people know about, but all the time that I was in Los Angeles, every time I used to meet Beheshti and other people at the festivals, they would suggest that I help distribute the Iranian cinema in Europe. I eventually had an agreement with them to consult with them for one year, and I set up a tour of sixteen Iranian films which began at UCLA. My only condition was that I chose the films myself. Because I was really adamant that Beiza'i's films be part of the tour and also Amir Naderi, who had moved outside of Iran; I wanted his films to be part of the tour. So, I knew most of the filmmakers, and they knew me, because when I was acting as a producer, a lot of them had found different projects that . . . we didn't do, of course. I've always kept close...I knew Abbas Kiarostami of course and I was always close to him. We always discussed everything and every movie that was being made, and once this movement really started, there were two things that were really important to consider in Iran. One was the Farabi Foundation, which was set up to support this cinema in international festivals, and they also promoted their successes inside Iran very, very properly. In fact, all of a sudden, the audiences realized that Iranian films were being admired everywhere, and this was quite good. The government support was very, very important. And also, banning old foreign films, brought a new kind of audience to the Iranian cinema that before the revolution, only looked at American and French films. They would think it was beneath them, you know, to see Iranian films because they were supposedly upper class and more educated, and so on. But later on, they were forced to see Iranian films, because there was nothing else to see, and the success outside also surprised them. So now, the Iranian cinema not only has the audience that it did not have before, and before the revolution, Iranian films never moved beyond Shah Reza Avenue in the upper part of Tehran, because all those cinemas

were in the hands of the American companies. So these things really helped, and now, we have really a new generation like Samira Makhmalbaf and Bahman Ghobadi. Iranian cinema, it's uniqueness in structure, is that you have three generations of filmmakers working successfully side by side.

DABASHI : Absolutely. But before we get to Samira Makhmalbaf and Bahman Ghobadi, and others, you were enumerating causes of this renaissance. Obviously, the question of banning of foreign films is a critical factor, as you said, but it is not true that Iranian films were shunned and looked down upon, because, obviously, the most celebrated Iranian filmmakers were the staple of high culture among the Iranian bourgeois.

FARMANARA: True. But we're talking about the general audience, and our films, even before the revolution, were not widely distributed...our films always played to a limited audience in Iran, even, before the revolution.

DABASHI : But wouldn't you say that still is the case about a film like "Taste of Cherry", for example, that it is not a movie which is as successful as commercial movies that are made inside Iran?

FARMANARA : Yes. That is true, simply because in the sociological situation in Iran which is highly charged and pressurized because of economic factors, two things have happened to movies. Number one, they're looked upon as pure entertainment and nothing but by most audiences. Second, 65% of the country is below the age of 25, so these people also want a reflection of their own lives, not my generation. I was surprised at the Teheran Film Festival when they paid a lot of attention to my film, "The Smell of Camphor, the Fragrance of Jasmine," and as I explained it the other day, it was very surprising to me, but then again we have a new generation of university graduates, and so on. Every year, we have a 1,200,000 high school graduates coming to the job market.

DABASHI : The last year, it was 3,000,000.

FARMANARA : Yes. So what is happening is that they are moving the industry in a direction so that famous producers want only things that relate to the youth, but at the same time, films like "Taste of Cherry" still made 30 million Tomans in box office, which is not a lot in Iranian terms at the present time, but it still means that a lot of people were curious to see this film. But it's not the film that is helped by word-of-mouth, simply because you either get it or you don't get it. And I always tell Abbas Kiarostami that he does everything so the audience will get up and leave, and his genius is that they don't leave.

DABASHI : You see, my point is not to underplay these sociological and demographic changes that you mention. They're absolutely true, and they're certainly instrumental in what is happening in Iranian cinema. But I want to see whether from your perspective, somebody who is so central to the Iranian cinema before the revolution now looking at this new generation, you notice something aesthetically different, something schematically, thematically different. Is our cinematic culture changing in your judgment?...Other than the obvious and perhaps inevitable influence of Kiarostami if you sense some other elements that are now evident. Because of the revolution, because of the war, because of any number of similarly critical factors, do they have consequences

on the make up of the Iranian cinema that make it qualitatively different from the cinema of your generation?

FARMANARA : Well, I think the censorship and the codes that have been used have forced everybody to look at new ways of presenting their ideas. Oscar Wilde said that censors are necessary, because if they were not, people would say what they think and where would we go from there. And when you also see the comparison with the Eastern European cinema before the coming down of the wall, you see that there are a lot of exciting things coming out of that territory, which, also, had their own very strict censorship code of what they could talk about. So, you know, in effect, the fact that sex has gone out of the movies, it's coming back again to Iranian films. But also, they were all forced to take a new look at how to present general subject matter. The reason they went to villages is that in the villages most of the women wear the scarf, anyway. Whether you have the law or not, in the village that's their attire. And also, outside of Teheran, you didn't have to deal with daily problems of life in Teheran, and a lot of people moved outside. And these stories that Panahi did and other people did prior to this film "Circle," most of them take place outside of Teheran. And to answer your question, yes, there are elements that have forced taking a new look at this cinema, where the sex and violence is taken out. You have to go back to basic human stories that are very much elements of the neo-realism of Italy. Now, we are using it in a different sense. They used non-actors, as well. We are also using non-actors in a lot of our new films, but the look is different.

DABASHI : True.

FARMANARA : . . . because Iran, comparing to Italy after the war, is still is a more restricted society than even Italy was. So, what is happening to our cinema and especially because of the success outside of Iran, and it is possible to make money from outside territories, rather than Iran, some films are losing the connection with the people inside . . . while connecting to the outside.

"The Smell of Camphor, the Fragrance of Jasmine"

DABASHI : But before we talk about what hopefully would be your next project, let's go back to what led to the making of "The Smell of Camphor, the Fragrance of Jasmine."

FARMANARA : Well, after this particular script that was refused, I really went off the deep end.

DABASHI : Did you submit that script during Mir Salim's time as the Minister of Culture or during Mohajerani's time under Khatami?

FARMANARA : No, Mohajerani's time. I really went off the deep end. I had one of my most severe depressions, and I thought they were never going to let me make films in Iran.

DABASHI : When you went back to Iran in 1989, did you ever come back to visit the United States?

FARMANARA : Sometimes, you know, for 10 days or so.

DABASHI : But you were now actually living in Iran since 1989.

FARMANARA : Yes.

DABASHI : After an absence of almost a decade.

FARMANARA : Yes. So because of that depression, I wrote the synopsis of this script for “The Smell of Camphor, the Fragrance of Jasmine” about a director who is not allowed to direct, and he’s dying, because he has a heart condition, and he makes a decision to make a film about his own funeral through the video camera, but does not need the permission of the Minister of Culture. And really, as a joke, I gave it to the Ministry. I gave it in the morning. They called me the following morning. That was so fast, it really got my attention. I went there, and they said, why haven’t you submitted this before? I said, because I thought about it at the end of that meeting last week. They said, you can write things this fast? I said, well, it’s the age. You know, sometimes things come a bit faster than normal. So they asked me to write the full script. I still didn’t believe that I was going to get the permit, but I wrote the full script, the first draft of it.

DABASHI : This is now 1998.

FARMANARA : Yes. Since I was sure that they were not going to approve it, and since “Prince Ehtejab” was being shown here in New York at the Brooklyn Museum, (I also had some real problems; I used to pass out) I used this as a pretext to come and also get a check up. While I was away for a month, an assistant of mine called me and said, they gave me the permit. I went back to Iran and I really had a good look at this script because now we had to make a film, and I think by the time we actually shot the film, the script that I shot was about 40% different from the one they had actually approved. But since two different bodies looked at the film, one at the finished film and one in the script stage, there was no problem. But it went through about eleven drafts before it became the script that became the film.

DABASHI : As evidenced in “The Smell of Camphor, the Fragrance of Jasmine” you have not been affected by this cinema. But you have introverted it. You have bridged it into your own vision, and the vision of your generation. This something that some of our greatest filmmakers of your generation have not been willing or able to do. I say “introverted” it, which is a kind of concocted term, because, “The Smell of Camphor, the Fragrance of Jasmine” shows a critical intimacy, not just with what has happened in the Iranian cinema of the last two decades, but also with the Iranian society at large...It seems to me that after twenty years of silence, or is it darkness in this case, you come out with a film that is so deeply grounded in your

own cinema, deeply rooted in the cinematic culture of your own generation, and yet organically related to what has happened over the past twenty years. So this, and this really is the point I am trying to make, is a restoring of dignity to a cinema that nowadays is forgotten and nobody pays any attention to it, and yet, equally important, it is a very contemporary film.

FARMANARA : Yes, I understand that. You see, structurally I tried to be different from other things that I was doing before and that's actually what I like to do with each film. The next film, again, is going to be different totally from this and I'll go back and negotiate the story and I'll do another film completely different from this. Because that's the only way I can make films. They have to be different from one another, although now, looking back at the number of films I have made I notice that there are similarities between them. You were talking about some of those similarities. I see other things as well, or things that other people are pointing to. But what I had to do with this particular story was, number one, break it down in a structure that allows me to unburden myself, weave a lot of things that have not been said for so many years, and I want to say them in one film, and I want to get rid of them. All the bitterness . . .

DABASHI : I want to take you now into a global picture, because I see this slightly differently. I don't think they're rejoining because what has happened is visual mutation in our creative imagination...The Iranian cinema over the past few decades is the first form of Iranian art – massively globalized. We are not talking just about a major interest that evolves in Europe and North America; we are talking about the Arab world, Indian sub-continent and Latin America. All we have to do is go to Amazon.com and look through it and see that somebody in Brazil has watched an Iranian film and they can make comments. It has phenomenally developed globally. Never, ever in the history of Iranian art has it happened. I wonder, in your judgment, what is the effect of this global ordinance in our art, that we have always been sort of speaking to each other? Ten, twenty years ago, this would have been something very private to our country and our culture and what would happen? Now, sort of half of our eyes and ears are towards the launching of the film. What is the effect of this global ordinance?

FARMANARA : Well, I think what has happened to us is that we have found – aside from our own equals and our own countrymen – we have found an audience that maybe totally does not understand us, but definitely has their own concept of what you're talking about. And when you globalize, as you referred to – the way cinema has – two things can happen: Number one, in movies and cinema, is the economic factor. But now, we can have income from an art that we were the importer of locally and now we are exporting it.

DABASHI : I see. That's the economic factor.

FARMANARA : That's the economic factor, but other factors affect the films because now we're being accused of making films that have an eye to what the French audience thinks about themselves relating to Iran. I, being very conscious of this, want to reverse this trend. I want to make it in a way that we succeed inside Iran as well – commercially – in a way that promotes a better kind of film making, because we now have gone back to the popular, commercial, love stories and very, very low based comedies, which are more Benny Hill type of comedies, which is very strange for Iran, but it is happening. And they constitute ninety percent of the production coming out of our film business. If the French and Americans and the British like the film also, for me that's like the icing on the cake.

DABASHI : I understand.

FARMANARA : My case is the Iranian audience. And that is where my concentration comes.

DABASHI : Of course.

FARMANARA : And that's not accusing anybody of trying to make films for outside, but I'm just saying that this is what we're being accused of, that they're losing touch with their own people while making connections to the people whose daily life is not affected by our films...

DABASHI : One last question. That is again, exactly about the movie. That is the title and the color. Two colors are paramount. One person is white. The camphor is white, the jasmine is white. Two albinos appear when the character imagines his wife –Yet, if white is not... White was always ambiguous. White is life and love. White smells good but white also reminds us of death. This is one for ambiguity or duality or two colors that sort of dismantle this notion that every color has to represent one. Were you conscious of this?

FARMANARA : Well, I used white and definitely in the art direction when I asked my art director to take away all the bright colors in everything except the memorial signs sequence, you really don't see the grave color. And the last sequence where you definitely have the greens and so on, and it comes out. So, I'm quite aware of the use of color. Camphor, more than its color I used, because of the fact that it brings impotence and also because of its association with death. And I mentioned in another place that "they" have put camphor in our spiritual food and everything has lost its color. And that's why I use it as a snow, and the other one as a fragrance. Because the jasmine, yes, brings childhood memories and so on. And the fact that both in readings are white, it gives it duality. But that's the way I used it.