Maziar Bahari meets "Rosewater"

Behind the scenes with the Iranian-Canadian journalist

By Katherine Brodsky

IT ALL BEGAN with a segment on Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*, where Iranian-Canadian journalist Maziar Bahari spoke with one of the satirical news show's "correspondents" Jason Jones. Soon after, while in Iran to cover the presidential election, Bahari was accused of being a foreign spy and thrown into solitary confinement for 118 days. His captors used the segment as evidence against him.

Bahari wrote an account of his experience, *Then They Came for Me: A Family's Story of Love, Captivity, and Survival*, and Jon Stewart, moved by both his bizarre connection to Bahari's arrest and the memoir, decided to make his directorial debut telling that story. He called it *Rosewater*, the scent of Bahari's interrogator.

In the movie, Rosewater's superior instructs him: "You must not just take his blood, you must take his hope."

But despite the grim reality, Bahari managed to see through the absurdity of his situation and the regime that held him captive, and hold on to his humanity. He survived.

"Even as a child, I always found the claim of the Iranian government funny, that they can create a perfect society with perfect people and a perfect ideology," recalls Bahari, "because when you look at the people within the Iranian government, and also all these authoritarian regimes, they are not perfect. They're just ordinary or less than ordinary people among the regular citizens—and when they claim that they can make something perfect it's just funny.

"So when you're in solitary confinement and you go to an interrogation room with someone who is obviously ignorant, who doesn't know many things but boasts about being better than you and being able to create a perfect society, that is just funny. But of course it's funny and scary at the same time because he has the power to ruin or finish your life. Many people's lives, unfortunately, have been finished by people like Rosewater."

Bahari knows that many people within the Iranian government may have formal education. Many hold PhDs in engineering, or other disciplines, but, says Bahari, "[t]hey do not know much about the rest of the world.

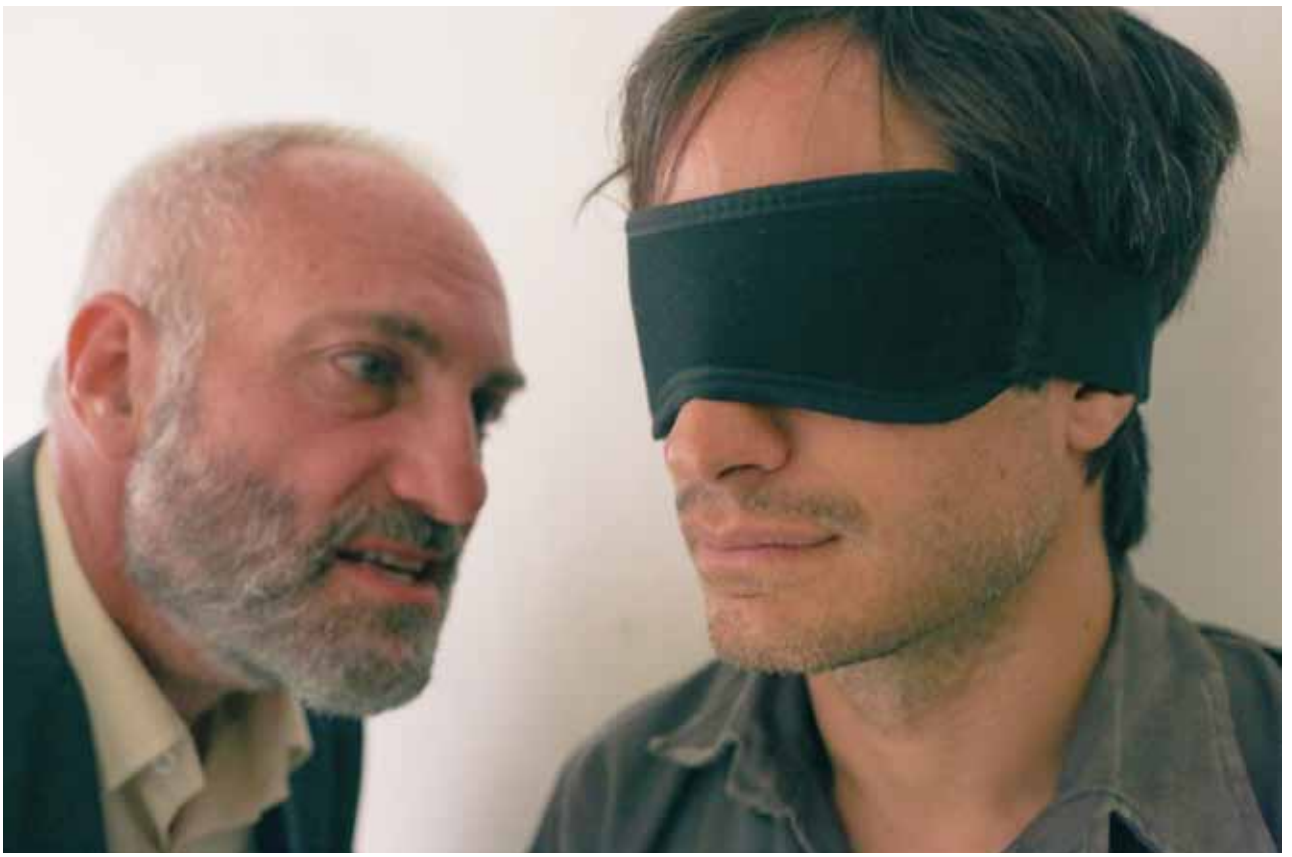
"They do not know how other people think, that other people's ideas can also be valued. They don't question their belief system and as a result I don't think that they are really educated...[which to me] is about learning about the rest of the world and constantly doubting yourself."

In one scene in *Rosewater*, some young Iranians introduce themselves saying 'We are the educated.' To Bahari that meant that they were the ones interested in the rest of the world, the ones who want to know more. And indeed, they weren't referring to formal education, but rather to the learning they received by tapping into satellite signals that connected them to the outside world.

This is not so different than the experience in the Soviet Union, where kids bootlegged recordings of banned western music and worked their way around jammed radio signals to catch broadcasts of programmes offered by the Voice of America and BBC.

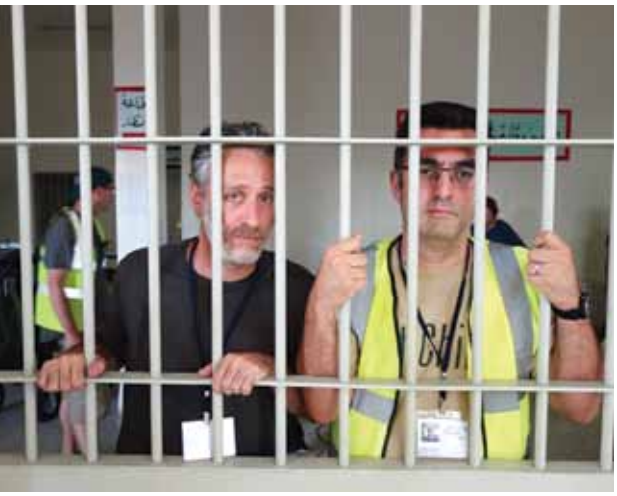
Thinking of his youth in Iran, Bahari remembers that the opposition to the Shah was naïve. "Even with my parents [who were communists], how can they even think that Soviet Union can be a perfect society," recalls Bahari. "It doesn't look like it's perfect from the pictures and... from what they are saying, it's not."

To Bahari, hope for the future lies with the many young Iranians who are choosing to be 'the educated.' He recalls the pride he felt seeing millions of young Iranians in the streets of Iran peacefully marching against a very violent regime. "I think you need a level of understanding, a level of education, in order to treat a violent regime with a certain degree of respect and restraint because that is a more



From top: Gael García Bernal plays Maziar Bahari in *Rosewater* (dir. Jon Stewart, 2014); Kim Bodnia, as 'Rosewater,' interrogates García Bernal.

COURTESY TIFF



From left: Director Jon Stewart and Maziar Bahari; Bahari with Iraqi cleric Moqtada al Sadr.

COURTESY MAZIAR BAHARI

sustainable way of resistance," says Bahari.

Technology itself has also turned its back on the authoritarian regime, argues Bahari. It's difficult to operate a dictatorship in the 21st century. The current fundamentalist Islamic regime may know how to suppress short wave radio, shut down newspapers, or arrest people, but digital technology is proving to be a worthy opponent. "They don't know what to do," says Bahari. "They just don't know with Facebook, Twitter...satellite television; it's just not possible to control it."

> "This regime is not an extremist group like ISIS that was created a few years ago. It's been in power for 35 years." **—MAZIAR BAHARI**

According to Bahari, Jon Stewart manages to capture an image of Iran that is very close to reality. "It's not like the *Homeland or Zero Dark Thirty* image of the Middle East where people are backwards and there are no cars," says Bahari. " [Some of] the footage you see in the film was shot in Iran...[by] a couple of friends....

"We're talking about a regime that has been stable and has been around for 35 years. They have institutionalized the form of psychological torture. This regime is not an extremist group like ISIS that was created a few years ago. It's been in power for 35 years."

Despite his experiences and the time it's taking for change to come, Bahari remains optimistic about the long-term future of Iran because of its large population of young people. "These young people are getting formal education. Women in Iran are at the advent of all the social changes in Iran and also, these young people here are interested in the real education that we talked about," he says. "So in the long term, I'm really, really optimistic about what's going to happen in Iran."

Now, however, Bahari is less sanguine. "In the short term," he says, "because of benefits for some people and because of shortsighted policies of the Iranian government, we'll see...policies that will be brutal. Many people unfortunately will suffer through that, many of my friends."

Every morning when he wakes up, even this morning, he hears of someone who has been arrested, intimidated, imprisoned, or tortured. Or perhaps yet another newspaper has been shut down. "These are immediate knee-jerk reactions," he says, "and I guess this is part of society's growth and the nation's growth to go through these phases."

Even before he was arrested, Bahari had no delusions about the time it was going to take for real change to come to Iran. When the U.S. and coalition forces attacked Iraq in 2003, Bahari had a front-row seat as a journalist. "They thought they were bringing democracy quickly to the country and I saw that it's not possible," says Bahari, "So, I've always favoured gradual, excruciatingly slow changes in Iran. Because that's the only thing that's sustainable and fortunately, many, many Iranians, especially young Iranians, agree with me."

Just look at the neighbourhood now, says Bahari: "You have Syria, you have Iraq, you have Afghanistan—and Iran is the most stable country in the region. Of course there's dictatorship there, there's an authoritarian regime, but when people look at that, they choose what they have and they gradually change."

Having Bahari's story told cinematically was important to him because he believes that ultimately it is a universal story, and a timely one at that.

Jon Stewart was the man for the job, and it's not beside the point that Bahari has been a *Daily Show* fan since the early days. "What I always

found interesting in *The Daily Show*'s humour is that they chronicle hypocrisy and what the institutions say and do," he explains, "You know, when a president says that 'Yes, we have solved this situation' and then they show that the situation is still disastrous, it's funny."

The urgency of Bahari's story is what convinced Stewart to take it into his own hands instead of letting Hollywood take turns procrastinating. "It had to be done now; it had to be done very quickly," says Bahari. And there was mutual trust that their collaboration would result in something "dignified and good."

Stewart's ability, recalls Bahari, was not only making everyone involved comfortable, but he also made them feel like they were doing something worthwhile. "We were all on the same wavelength, in terms of sense of humour and similar politics, so we all got along well," says Bahari.

"He rallies people," says Bahari's cinematic proxy, Gael García Bernal, of Stewart. "He's a good team leader." Even dealing with the dramatic elements, Stewart brought great levity to the set, which happened to take place in solitary confinement units in real prisons.

"What Maziar Bahari went through is incredibly comical, is ridiculous; it's absurd and he has a very good sense of humour," says García Bernal, "Maybe that's what helped him survive.

"To survive, we fall into an existentialist kind of conclusion where we think, okay, there is no hope, how funny is that? And by laughing about that you survive. Maybe it has that function, I mean why the hell do we laugh?"

Bahari wanted *Rosewater* to be accessible to everyone, so he convinced Stewart to make it in English instead of Farsi. The cast, too, was international. García Bernal is Mexican and the rest of the cast is Turkish, Danish, Egyptian-American and Iranian. "It was a very international, interesting collaboration," says Bahari.

For García Bernal the film was important in practical terms for its portrayal of the plight of journalists all over the world and the need to protect freedom of speech. "That exists everywhere, everywhere, everywhere, even in more sophisticated democracies it exists," he says, "And the other side is showing that solitary confinement is still... an accepted practice."

It happens everywhere and we don't consider it torture, he says, but it is torture. "It is the most effective way of torture," insists García Bernal. "It is the best way to make someone [feel] guilty of something,... It's very close to slavery."

Bahari hopes that the film illuminates what's going on in Iran, and that it can be used as a springboard for people to learn about Iran and about what journalists go through. "And also," he says, "it's a good story."

Although *Rosewater* is a film about politics, journalism and torture, it is also about family, love, culture and survival. And Leonard Cohen. "Leonard Cohen was always there, you know," Bahari admits. "He was basically the soundtrack of my imprisonment."

And that's the crux of Bahari's story: finding hope, comedy and joy, in the darkest of circumstances. As one of Cohen's most famous lyrics goes: "There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in."

Katherine Brodsky is a freelance writer specializing in film. Her work has appeared in *Variety*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Playboy* magazine, *Elle Canada*, *USA Weekend*, *Mashable*, *Backstage*, *Canadian Screenwriter*, and many other publications. Follow her on Twitter at @mysteriouskat or visit her website at katherinebrodsky.com.