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From Afar

Az Dourdast

(Iran) A Cima Film Center/Azersam Films production. (International sales: Cima Media Intl., Tehran.)
Produced, directed, written by Ramin Mohseni.

Omid, Mehran, Majid - Kourosch Tahami
Sheik, painter,
Majid's father - Jamshid Hasempour

By **DEBORAH YOUNG**

Reaching for subtle, disturbing emotions, three poetic episodes delicately trace the malaise of a young artist and intellectual in Rahman Mohseni's debut feature "From Afar." The three stories, which vary in quality, become progressively more accomplished as the film goes on. In each, the young protagonist journeys toward a spiritual insight or emotion. Pic is not overtly religious, and is subtle enough to fit neatly into programs geared to spiritual cinema or films about art.

Since the pic never spells out the meaning of its Twilight Zone-like coincidences of people, places and things, viewers are left to sink or swim in a mood piece. First story overreaches itself as it problematically shifts between ancient times and contempo Tehran. During a barbarian invasion, an old sheik (Jamshid Hasempour) struggles to save some of his precious books from being burned; in the present day, a film student (Kourosch Tahami) is forced to sell his book collection to pay the rent. The only volume he has left to read is the Quran. Unfortunately, too much back-and-forth editing distracts from the story's point about the sacredness of knowledge.

In the middle tale, Mehran (Tahami) is an asthmatic businessman with a domineering mother (Behnaz Jafari) and a secret passion for art. His wife has just left him and, at the end of a long trek into the mountains, he finds solace gazing at the beauty of nature. Hasempour appears in the enigmatic and rather unnecessary role of a hermit-like painter.

The most linear and relaxed episode is the third. Here Majid (Tahami) is a successful architect and family man. When his father (Hasempour) suddenly dies, he struggles to come to terms with his grief, finally returning to the country to gaze at a remote mosque tower which he visited with his father as a child. The distant cry of "Allah Akbar" ends the film. With less story to tell, Mohseni hits his stride creating a rich, convincing atmosphere and a sustained rhythm.

Surprisingly versatile in their triple roles, Tahami and Hasempour provide continuity in a film often hard to grasp hold of. Cinematographer Farshad Mohamadi has a startling eye for beauty, whether it be found in

buildings and nature, or camera lighting and framing. Likewise Karen Homayoonfar's score, which seems overused in the first part of the film, becomes subtle and moving by the end. **With:** Behnaz Jafari, Darioush Arjomand, Homayoon Ershadi, Mahboobeh Bayat.

Camera (color, 35mm), Farshad Mohamadi; editor, Bahram Dehghani; music, Karen Homayoonfar; art director, Iraj Raminfar; sound, Sa'eed Amadi, Amid Mirshekari. Reviewed at Fajr Film Festival (competing), Jan. 25, 2006. Running time: 104 MIN.

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