

Nicole Lohfink: New Generation - New Ideas

In Sarvnaz Alambeigis Dokumentarfilm Maydegol steht das Mädchen Maydegol im Zentrum. Sie ist eine junge Frau aus der im Iran lebenden afghanischen Minderheit, die zusammen mit ihren Freundinnen Muai Thai-Boxen betreibt und ohne Papiere lebt. Dabei stehen ihr Kampf um ein selbstbestimmtes Leben, die Chance, an internationalen Wettkämpfen teilzunehmen und ihr eiserner Wille, ihre eigene Identität zu leben im Mittelpunkt. Im Wettbewerb Generation 14plus des Berlinale Filmfestivals vergab die Internationale Jury eine Lobende Erwähnung an diesen Langfilm, dessen Existenz an sich schon ein politischer Akt sei.

MERZ Maydegol belongs to a group of people who live in Iran as part of a minority. Was that of special interest to you or how did this project come about?

ALAMBEIGI It is always fascinating for me to learn more about the young generation, but especially about the Afghan minority in Iran. I first met Mohadesseh (Maydegols friend) and was talking to her about this idea I had, to learn more about their community. Fact is, because this generation is born in Iran – and some of them have never even travelled to Afghanistan –, they are neither Iranian nor Afghanian people. They're living in our country, go to the same school as we do, have the same experiences but my society generally doesn't accept them as part of the Iranian identity. And they also don't know to which country they belong to. They have parents, who live the Afghan culture, and are themselves something in between. I think this contrast is really interesting regarding identity, and as a cultural crisis too. So when I first met Mohadesseh, she was really generous and connected me to her friends. And after one year, I met Maydegol –Mohadesseh said „there is a girl in my club I think you would like to meet“. When I did meet her, I knew immediately, she was a good representative for this community, and for the young generation of Afghans who live in Iran. MERZ In this documentary there are existential topics like human rights, identity and domestic violence – you accompany Maydegol in her life, and she is generously open with her story and herself. How did you establish this kind of trust?

ALAMBEIGI It was a long process, of course, this does not happen through one night, but we have been working together for more than three years. And I also share my personal experiences with them – so it wasn't just like I was listening and they were talking. We helped each other. I had difficult times, they had difficult times. You should have a distance as a professional person when doing a documentary as I understand it. But I also think it's very important that they know you are a human; you also have problems. Maybe that's the key.

MERZ The distance is necessary because you are still working on a movie. For that matter, how was the filming process and how do you choose what to show and what not?

ALAMBEIGI For me it's very good to work with non-actors, because they bring something new to the film. They say the dialogue in front of the camera just the way they are as persons. It's documentary, so I don't want to tell them what to do. And if I touch it or if I move it then the result would be a disaster. That's their movie and they should feel that this is their film. They are a young generation, they have their own, new ideas. And I was open to their ideas, so maybe that's also a reason for the deep trust we shared.

MERZ So what was important for you with regard to the content of the film – and what was important for Maydegol to show?

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ALAMBEIGI For Maydegol it's very important to make aware of several things: One is the silence about domestic violence. She said that we shouldn't be silent. And that we shouldn't blame ourselves. It's not our fault if our father, or mother, or one member of our family is beating us. It rather means that we are victims of domestic violence. We should say that out loud and we shouldn't wait for that one day when they will be better. Because this is not happening. Another thing is that Maydegol wants to just tell the world that all these obstacles exist but she continues. She has her goal. She doesn't want to quit. And I think that's beautiful.

MERZ You mentioned the new generation has new ideas – can you elaborate on that

ALAMBEIGI They know what they want from life. I think they are aware of the world because they grow up with Social Media. And there they don't have any privacy, they just share everything with the world. That's maybe one of the reasons Maydegol so generously shares her personal private life with everybody. Because that's equality for the new generation. It amazes me a lot. It's their culture not mine, but it's very important to them that everybody knows what's happening to them. They are somehow connected to each other, not separated like my generation. I don't want to say I want to do that because I am not a Social Media person, to be honest, but I really like these differences. Because within this generation - they know everything about each other, and these days it doesn't matter if they live in Iran, in Afghanistan, or in Europe.

MERZ There were scenes with black screen and solely audio depicting the situation in the family of Maydegol that she decided to record. Those must have been a special challenge considering it is a real life situation?

ALAMBEIGI One day Maydegol told me about the situation at her home and had this idea to bring out this material. And I said while her safety and security is a priority for me if she thinks it's okay, then yes, she can record the voices. And since this is a recurring thing in her family she knew how to do that in the middle of the situation. As soon as I had this material I realized, yes, we cannot go to her house, we cannot show her father but we can show what is happening inside the house. And her house is not only her house – it's a country.

MERZ Maydegol herself decided to take the risk and document her regular experience of domestic violence. What about the rest of her family – did she follow a role model in doing that?

ALAMBEIGI Maydegol is not like her mother. Her mother is in the same situation. But after heavy violence she leaves the house to stay with a sister. Then she comes back and life continues, it's like nothing happened to her. And it's not only in Afghanistan or Iran, I mean, there are many women around who don't tell that those things happened to them. And Maydegol doesn't want to repeat this circle of silence. When Maydegol spoke up and said out loud what happened, Farsane and Mohadese said: „We had the same problem“. There is a pattern that is repeating itself and no one is talking about it. But this generation – they are talking about it – and that is really precious.

MERZ There are only a few grown ups so to speak, more experienced adults, for example her trainer, but they are rare and barely seen. Was there a special reason for that?

ALAMBEIGI The coach is the only visible man in the film. I really like his figure and his behaviour towards them because of the positive possibilities. They don't have a very good male figure whom they could trust. He is a famous Muai Thai coach in Iran and he isn't only training them in the physical side of the sport but is also helping them to mentally be strong. I

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liked that there is someone talking with them about that. And it matters that we should trust another gender. It's very important because in her society and in her country seemingly nearly all the men are not really trustworthy and it's good that they know that the kind people also exist.

MERZ Maydegol also struggled with the problem of not being able to get a passport and be a documented citizen, and the risks of going to Afghanistan for that purpose. Did she actually manage to get an official passport?

ALAMBEIGI She went to Afghanistan in January (2024), crossed illegally the border between Afghanistan and Iran. She finally got her passport there which was very, very difficult and with a big portion of luck. If you followed the news it was interesting to notice it was only for three or four days that they actually gave passports to people. And Maydegol was sleeping for 3 days at the same organisation and finally got her passport and then travelled back to Iran. But the point is: We thought when she has a passport the situation would be better for her. But is it? I don't think so.

MERZ Why?

ALAMBEIGI Because she is Afghan and she can't get a visa. We wanted to bring her here to Germany to the Berlinale Film Festival. We tried very hard for that but even in the visa evaluation they didn't accept her documents. It's a dilemma. But hope still exists, Maydegol continues every day, she goes to the gym even if she is not sure if she can participate in any international competition.

MERZ There are strong symbolic gestures in the film where Maydegol deals with her many roadblocks in order to keep going. Were there moments where she couldn't keep going and how were you two dealing with that?

ALAMBEIGI There was a night, that was the darkest night for her, where she wanted to kill her father. She called me and was crying a lot. I was really worried about the whole situation. So we talked for several hours. That was a difficult time in the whole process. I mean, yes, we show that she is brave but we know she is sensitive at the same time. She is a human and I don't want to make a hero out of her because we're talking about a normal life. I think that's the beauty of her life: She is a hero but she has a normal life, and this is honest and true. This is what it is. Life continues yet the darkness is there but also affection, and love, and kindness between these girls. I love that. If Mohadesseh and Farzaneh wouldn't be in the film it wouldn't be my film. Maybe that's one of the reason these young people want to capture themselves in Instagram and Social Media – because that gives them some sort of voice, even reputation. Everybody knows their lives are important. And even if they don't have an important life they believe that our lives are important. That's a beautiful message.

MAYDEGOL

Iran / Deutschland / Frankreich 2024

73 Minuten

merz

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Regie: Sarvnaz Alambeigi

Darstellende: Maydegol, Mohadesseh, Farzaneh