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'Sonita': IDFA Review

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Courtesy of Wolf Consultants

The Bottom Line

Inspiring but familiar notes of against-all-odds uplift.

Venue

IDFA, Amsterdam (Competing)

Director

Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami

Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami's documentary on a teenage Tehran rapper was a wide-margin winner of the audience award at the Dutch festival.

Not so much "good girl gone bad" as "good girl done good," *Sonita* tracks the eponymous Tehran teen in her indefatigable quest to become the next Rihanna. World-premiering in competition at Europe's documentary behemoth IDFA, Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami's debut feature-length profile of a charismatic young Afghani performer beat well over a hundred rivals to run away with the event's Audience Prize.

The picture therefore departs Amsterdam a certified crowdpleaser — one which, while breaking no new ground formally or content-wise, does eventually raise some intriguing questions about directorial responsibility and interference. With its pressingly topical concern with feminine self-expression amid and against the confines of traditionalist Islam, the

Swiss/German/Iranian co-production is guaranteed plentiful festival play and appeals as a likely prospect for arthouse exposure in receptive territories.

Twelve months ago Berit Madsen's thematically similar *Sepideh* — about a gifted Iranian teenage girl who dreams of becoming an astronomer — bowed at IDFA before debuting Stateside at Sundance. With its presentation of Utah as a kind of promised land for the globe's creative up-and-comers, *Sonita* looks a safe bet to repeat that feat.

The tale of how Sonita Alizadeh — who at the start of the film has lived as an undocumented Afghan refugee in Iran for over a decade — ends up enrolling at Wasatch Academy in the Beehive State is a convoluted, unlikely and inspiring one. It involves overcoming all manner of circumstantial, familial and bureaucratic hurdles. And it also involves the crucial involvement, at more than one juncture, of writer-director Ghaem Maghami, who basically pays off Sonita's implacably stubborn mother in order to delay a seemingly inevitable forced marriage.

Ghaem Maghami's camera is never any kind of fly on the wall, and the voluble Sonita's chattily informal relationship with the older director (best known for 2011's mid-lengther *Going Up the Stairs*) is clearly a crucial element in her personal development into the super-confident, irrepressible young woman she becomes. At the fifty minute mark, however, Ghaem Maghami irrevocably crosses the line from observer to participant when she pays the mother the \$2,000 she demands, thus entering the kind of territory associated with the Czech documentary doyenne Helena Trestikova.

But whereas in her best work (such as the astonishing *Rene*) Trestikova explicitly and challengingly foregrounds her own ethical dilemmas, Ghaem Maghami opts for a more straightforwardly celebratory depiction of her heroine-protagonist and keeps the spotlight trained largely on Sonita. Engaging, articulate, intelligent and wholly admirable in her audacious campaigning against forced marriage in particular and misogynistic Islam in general, it's a little surprising that she should be so fixated on Rihanna of all role models — given the Barbadian icon's controversial Chris Brown shenanigans over the years.

On the evidence presented here, including the entirety of a video-clip made to showcase Sonita's signature track, she's a diamond in the rough, still very much in the process of truly finding her own voice. The film is, for all its emphasis on free-spirited individuality, likewise more conventional than particularly distinctive, with Moritz Denis's score underlining poignancy and uplift by means of some very familiar beats. Not that Sonita herself will mind, riding this efficient vehicle for her protean talents all the way to the end of the rainbow: loud, anti, unapologetic.

Production company: TAG/TRAUM

Director / Screenwriter: Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami

Producers: Gerd Haag, Kerstin Krieg

Executive producers: Aline Schmid, Rokhsareh Ghae Maghami

Cinematographers: Behrouz Badrouj, Ali Mohammad Ghasemi, Mohammad Haddadi, Arastoo Givi, Torben Bernard, Parviz Arefi, Ala Mohseni

Editor: Rune Schweitzer