



ASIAN FILM ARCHIVE

The Chess Game of the Wind (1976)

by Gita Aslani Shahrestani

RESTORED

Original Title:

Shatranj-e Baad / شاترنج باد

Director:

Mohammad Reza Aslani

Runtime: 93 minutes

Country: Iran

Language: Farsi with English subtitles

Rating: PG

Celebrating the classics of Asian cinema and beyond, *Restored* is a regular series showcasing Asian films that have been meticulously preserved and restored by different institutions from across the world. The platform revisits these classics in a new light and allows them to be appreciated by new generations of audiences.

The Chess Game of the Wind is perhaps one of the most emblematic films in the history of Iranian auteur cinema, although its visibility was limited to a disastrous preview at the Tehran International Festival in 1976. Due to an artistic disagreement between Aslani and the festival programmer, the projection was sabotaged, its reels disorderly and the projector out of balance. Critics therefore left the cinema during the screening, as did the jury which removed it from the competition. The film, immediately deemed elitist, was refused by all distributors. Discouraged, the producer did not even send the film to international festivals.

After the establishment of the Islamic government in 1979, *The Chess Game of the Wind* was banned because of its non-Islamic content and the film rolls were then declared lost. Only a censored VHS copy of very poor quality circulated in the parallel circuits.

Long-time forgotten, the aesthetic value of this film was rediscovered belatedly in 2000 by a new generation of movie-buffs and critics who classified it as one of the lost masterpieces of Iranian cinema.

The Chess Game of the Wind is a singular film, at the confluence of the aesthetics of Visconti and Bresson. The influence of painting can be found in each shot and the careful screenplay toys with multiple plot twists. It was only in 2015 that Aslani found the negatives of *Shatranj-e Baad*, quite by chance at a flea-market for vintage film costumes and props. He bought the reels and immediately sent them to France where they could safely be restored. Now we can fully rediscover all the originality and modernity of this fascinating film, which has spent almost 45 years in the shadows.

Gita Aslani Shahrestani is a writer and academic based in Paris, oversaw the restoration of *The Chess Game of the Wind* together with her father, Mohammed Reza Aslani, the film's director.

By Ehsan Khoshbakht

The Chess Game of the Wind, a mystery thriller filtered through the Iranian New Wave is a story set in the early 20th century masterfully depicting the rise of a new bourgeois class, surpassing the feudal past in a bitter and bloody fight for power and money.

One of the least seen, almost invisible films of the Iranian pre-revolutionary arthouse cinema, *The Chess Game of the Wind* was directed by writer, poet, scholar and filmmaker Mohammad Reza Aslani. Known for his scholarly work on and the teaching of classic and modern Persian poetry, visual arts and eastern philosophy, Aslani was born in 1943 and if made only one other feature-length film aside from *The Chess Game of the Wind*, he directed an array of classic documentaries on subjects mostly related to Iran's cultural heritage.

The Centre for Developing Film Industry produced *The Chess Game of the Wind*, an Iranian company owned by the sister of the Shah which is now mostly known for the co-production of Orson Welles's essay film *F for Fake* and his ill-fated *The Other Side of the Wind*. Even if making *The Chess Game of the Wind* was far from the cursed and hectic production of a Welles picture and it was completed within a year, still it shared a similar fate as being abandoned and literally lost.

Some of the mightiest names of Iranian stage and screen offered their talents to the ensemble cast of the film, including Fakhri Khorvash and the Oscar nominated Shohreh Aghdashloo. However, with a story too confusing to the audience of 1976 Tehran Film Festival (where the first and last screening of the film occurred) and also suffering from a poor projection, *The Chess Game of the Wind* was first harshly criticised and then never distributed. A year later, with the revolutionary anger in the air, there was hardly any room for cinema and when the revolution won in 1979, the screening of the film became impossible: the film was confiscated due to its production company's association with the Pahlavi regime and also featuring unveiled actresses.

Years later, upon Aslani's insistence to learn about the fate of his film, it turned out that the original material were lost. Yet, there was another unexpected turn to this extraordinary story. Four decades later, someone bought some cans of film in an antique shop in Tehran which turned out to be the original camera negative of *The Chess Game of the Wind*. How did it end up in a seedy antique shop? Add it to the long list of the unsolved mysteries of cinema.

Aslani calls the operation of sending the negatives to a secure location in Paris the second miracle, as any form of shipping film material from Iran is prohibited and could be done only by official permission which is usually very hard to obtain.



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