

1001 FRAMES

a film by Mehrnoush Alia

US / Iran | 2025 | 85'

PRESS NOTES

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Synopsis

A famous filmmaker is casting young women for the role of Scheherazade in his horror version of *1001 Nights* (a.k.a. *Arabian Nights*) in his black box studio.

What, at the beginning, seems like a normal audition, slowly begins to be dubious when the questions become very personal. The arrival of the director's ex-wife, one of his friends, and a mysterious woman confirms there is more to these auditions. As his camera becomes more voyeuristic and his demands cross more lines, women fight back but are faced with more serious obstacles.

Based on true stories, we get a glimpse into these women's lives, stories of honor killing, abuse, and worse.





Mehrnoush Alia – Director

Mehrnoush Alia is an Iranian-American screenwriter and director. She is a graduate of UC Berkeley and Columbia University's film school. She wrote and directed two narrative shorts *Faranak* and *Scheherazade* as well as a web-documentary, and several promotional videos. She also collaborated on several documentaries and has produced over a dozen short films. Mehrnoush is the co-founder of Maaa Art, a film and theater production company working between New York and Tehran. She is also an alumna of Berlinale Talents Campus.

Filmography

2015 *Scheherazade* (short film)

2019 *Sang Saboor* (short film)

2021 *Faranak* (short film)

2022 *At Eye Level* (short documentary, director Iran episode)

2025 *1001 Frames* (fiction feature), *Hamsayeha* (short film)



Picture by Mahka Eslami



Picture by Mahka Eslami

Mohammad Aghebati – Producer / Actor

Mohammad Aghebati is an award-winning Iranian director, actor, and film producer. He has worked with directors such as Asghar Farhadi "Hero" (Cannes Jury Prix 2021) and played the lead in the Berlinale award winning feature film "The Great Yawn" (2024). His plays have toured internationally and been commissioned by places such as the Japan Foundation. Aghebati is also the producer of several short films and two feature films.

Sina Sharbafi – Producer

Sina Sharbafi has a diverse academic and professional background. Initially studying Civil Engineering in Iran, he later pursued degrees in Computer Science, Film Studies, Communication, and Film Producing in Sweden.

Sina began his career in advertising at HobbyFilm in Stockholm. In 2011, he transitioned into narrative filmmaking, producing *Nailed to the Ground*, which premiered at the Maine Film Festival. He later produced music videos and photography projects before moving into short films.

Between 2015 and 2016, he produced *Untitled* and *RED*, both screened at Cannes' Court Métrage section. His 2018 short *Cover* screened at over 20 festivals, winning multiple awards, including Best Narrative at Moscow Shorts.

Sina ventured into feature films in 2020, executive producing *Ballad of a White Cow* (Berlinale 2021) and later worked on *Tara* (2021) and *Numb* (2022), both selected for major festivals.

In 2024, he produced *Sunshine Express*, which premiered in IFFR's Tiger Competition 2025, and *1001 Frames*.





Hamed Hosseini Sangari – Cinematographer

Born in Tehran, Hamed is an independent Iranian artist, cinematographer, photographer and screenwriter who studied graphic design. He has participated in film festivals such as Venice, Locarno, Torino, Rotterdam, and received awards for Best Cinematography. His first feature film, Mostafa Sayari's *The Graveless*, was selected at the Venice Film Festival and was nominated for Best Cinematography at the Shanghai International Film Festival. An activist in the field of independent cinema, Hamed resists cooperating with mainstream and governmental Iranian cinema.

In 2025, Hamed participated as a cinematographer at the International Film Festival Rotterdam with two movies: *Sunshine Express* in the Tiger Competition and *The Crowd* in the fest's Bright Future section.

Interview with director Mehrnoush Alia

By Tania Ahmadi

The women auditioning for the role of Scheherazade seem to be at risk of objectification within the audition process. Iranian cinema has traditionally depicted women's bodies, often navigating between cultural restrictions and artistic expression. In what ways does your film both critique and engage with these longstanding portrayals?

1001 Frames deliberately places the audience in a space where power, performance, and control intersect—an audition room where young women are subjected to the scrutiny of an unseen authority. The film critiques the way women's bodies have historically been framed in cinema, particularly in industries where the male gaze dictates not just how they are seen, but how they are allowed to exist.

Iranian cinema has long operated within cultural constraints that limit the depiction of women's bodies, leading filmmakers to rely on subtext, framing, and suggestion rather than explicit representation. This has often resulted in a paradox: while restrictions prevent overt objectification,

they also reinforce a kind of invisibility, shaping how women are perceived in storytelling. *1001 Frames* engages with this tradition by using the audition setting as a microcosm of the larger cinematic world—one where women's voices, movements, and expressions are scrutinized, controlled, and even manipulated.

However, rather than simply exposing this dynamic, the film weaponizes it. The camera, rather than serving as a passive observer, becomes an oppressive force, trapping the women within a structure that demands their submission under the guise of storytelling.

The director character is not just a filmmaker but a gatekeeper of narrative power, echoing a long history of how women's stories have been dictated by those behind the camera.

At the same time, the film draws on the figure of Scheherazade—the storyteller who survives through the act of narration. Unlike traditional portrayals where women are seen and not heard, *1001 Frames* challenges whether performance can be a form of resistance. Can these women reclaim agency within a system that seeks to define them? Or does

the act of performing for the camera only reinforce their entrapment?

By navigating between these tensions, *1001 Frames* doesn't just critique the history of women's representation in cinema—it forces the audience to confront their own complicity in consuming it.

In many ways, this film echoes the #MeToo movement, in which women have been speaking out against exploitation in all kinds of industries. Do you see this film as a response to or commentary on that movement, especially within the context of Iranian society and cinema?

1001 Frames exists in a world where power is exercised through storytelling, and in that sense, it inevitably resonates with the #MeToo movement. The film is not just about an audition—it's about the structures that demand women perform for their survival, whether in the film industry, in society, or in private spaces where power remains unchecked. The audition room becomes a distilled version of this reality, where authority dictates the terms, and the women—each hoping for a role—must navigate the thin line between submission and resistance.

The industry has long forced women to exist within carefully crafted frames—sometimes literal, sometimes metaphorical—where visibility is regulated, and voice is negotiated. *1001 Frames* engages with this reality by questioning who controls the frame, who controls the narrative, and what it means to be seen under such circumstances.

The film does not offer easy resolutions. Unlike traditional #MeToo narratives where speaking out is seen as a form of liberation, here, even storytelling itself is fraught with risk. The figure of Scheherazade is central to this dilemma—she survives by telling stories, but at what cost? Does performance empower, or does it reinforce the power of the one who demands it?

Rather than positioning itself as a direct response to #MeToo, I hope that it expands the conversation, especially within contexts where silence has often been the only viable form of resistance. It asks: What happens when the frame itself is the trap? What happens when speaking is not enough? In doing so, the film not only critiques the abuses that have been exposed but also explores the ones that remain hidden, sustained by systems that have not yet been dismantled.

Your film presents strong, multifaceted women. Could you share your approach to writing these roles, and how did you guide the actresses in bringing them to life on screen?

I had done the short version of this film while I was a film student, so for the past several years I have been very much aware of all the social movements around this issue. When “me too movement” happened, I was in shock. I could not believe how widespread this issue is. Since then, I talked to as many people as I could and read a lot on the subject, and followed the social media pages such as “metoolran” closely. These stories gradually wove themselves into the fabric of this narrative, becoming an integral part of its unfolding. I also wanted the actresses to be a part of this process. I worked with each one differently, depending on my understanding of their characters and their backgrounds. With some we had in depth conversations about their own experiences in the industry and in life in general, and we worked together to build on those characters together. With others, I decided to let them improvise and not give them any directions for the first take. I wanted a raw and authentic performance, and I knew I would ruin it if I explored it too much with some of them. It was very much depending on the actor’s need and what I thought works best with each one. I was also privileged that I know some of them very

intimately, and those I didn’t, Mohammad Aghebati, the actor who plays the director knew very well. Mohammad has been teaching acting for the past decade, and as the casting director he suggested some of the most talented ones for this film. Since they had all trained with him for several years, he had a great understanding of their range and capabilities as actors which helped a lot during a production.

Your film blurs the line between personal experience and broader political themes. The phrase “the personal is political” feels very relevant here. Can you talk about how you’ve drawn from real-life gender injustices in your film, and what you hope audiences will take from these personal stories?

For me, *1001 Frames* is deeply personal, but in a way that I think will resonate far beyond my own experiences. The phrase “the personal is political” is especially relevant when discussing gender and power because these dynamics don’t just exist in grand, public moments of injustice—they permeate the everyday, the intimate, the unspoken. The audition room in *1001 Frames* is not just a setting; it’s a symbolic space where societal power structures play out in their most distilled and insidious form.

Like many people, I've witnessed and heard stories of the quiet compromises, the coercion masked as opportunity, the subtle (and sometimes overt) ways in which women are controlled within creative and professional spaces. The film industry, whether in Iran or elsewhere, is built on these tensions.

Young women are taught to believe that silence is survival, that endurance is part of the process, that the ones in power will decide whether they are worthy of being seen or heard. *1001 Frames* takes that reality and makes it visible, makes it undeniable.

But I didn't want the film to simply document injustice. I wanted to explore the complexity of performance itself—not just in the sense of acting, but in the way women are forced to perform in everyday life. The act of auditioning becomes a metaphor for navigating a world that demands women constantly read the room, adjust, calculate risk. When you speak, are you telling your own story, or are you saying what someone else wants to hear? And if survival depends on playing the game, where is the line between agency and entrapment?

I hope audiences leave *1001 Frames* unsettled, questioning their role as observers. If the film is uncomfortable, it's because the realities it reflects are uncomfortable. My hope is that it sparks reflection—not just about the film industry, but

about the invisible structures that shape power in all aspects of life. Because in the end, *1001 Frames* is not just about an audition. It's about a system. And systems don't change unless we expose them.

Your film powerfully conveys the weight of the male gaze without explicitly focusing on the body. Even without showing specific body parts, you can still feel its oppressive presence. How did you approach the cinematography to capture this subtle yet powerful tension, particularly through the actresses' facial expressions and the composition of each shot?

The challenge—and the intent—of *1001 Frames* was to make the audience feel the weight of the male gaze without ever needing to *show* it in an overt or obvious way. The film is not about explicit objectification but about something more insidious: the feeling of being watched, judged, controlled. I wanted the camera itself to become an extension of that gaze, making the audience complicit in the same power dynamics that the actresses experience in the audition room.

Cinematographically, we focused on tight framing, particularly on faces—expressions, micro-reactions, the subtle shifts in emotion that reveal discomfort, resistance, or forced submission. The absence of

wide shots was intentional; by rarely pulling back to show the full space, we trap the viewer inside the same confined reality as the women auditioning. There is no escape from the scrutiny, no relief in distance.

The power imbalance is also built through the composition of each shot. The actresses are often framed slightly off-center, or in positions that suggest unease—either too still, as if waiting for approval, or shifting uncomfortably as they try to navigate an unseen force controlling the room. The tension comes not from what is explicitly depicted, but from what is implied: the way they hesitate before speaking, the darting of their eyes, the stiffness in their posture.

The unseen director's voice plays a crucial role, too. Instead of cutting between perspectives in a traditional shot-reverse-shot style, we keep the actresses in frame while the voice of the director lingers off-camera, creating a constant imbalance. The women are always being addressed, always being observed, but the one in control remains unseen—present only as a looming force.

By never explicitly showing the male gaze but making its effects deeply felt, the film shifts the focus from how women *look* to how they *experience* being looked at. That, to me, is far more

unsettling. It forces the audience to step into the actresses' shoes, to feel what they feel, rather than simply witnessing it from a safe distance.

In the film, the audition for Scheherazade mirrors a director demanding each actress tell a captivating, even erotic, story in order to be allowed to leave. What inspired you to create this parallel, and how does it enhance the themes of power and control in the film?

The parallel between Scheherazade's storytelling and the audition process was central to *1001 Frames* from the very beginning. In *1001 Nights*, Scheherazade tells stories to survive—she must entertain the king night after night to postpone her execution. This dynamic, where a woman's voice is both her weapon and her prison, felt deeply relevant to the world of auditions, particularly in an industry where women are often required to reveal parts of themselves—emotionally, psychologically, even physically—in order to be considered “worthy” of a role.

In the film, the director's demand for a compelling story becomes a test of submission. He isn't just looking for talent—he is looking for control. The women must perform, not just through their words, but through their vulnerability, through their

willingness to conform to his expectations. The more they resist, the longer they are trapped in the room. Like Scheherazade, they are made to believe that their only means of escape is to surrender to the performance he desires.

This structure amplifies the film's themes of power and manipulation. Who truly has agency in a system where speaking is a necessity, but the terms of speech are dictated by someone else? Is storytelling an act of autonomy, or is it just another means of coercion when the audience holds all the power?

By mirroring Scheherazade's predicament within a modern-day audition, *1001 Frames* exposes the unsettling ways in which performance, especially for women, is so often tied to survival. It's not just about being chosen for a role—it's about navigating a world where being seen and being controlled are often indistinguishable.

One of the film's most impactful and striking moments comes when the actresses realize the door is locked, forcing them to go beyond acting in order to escape. What inspired this twist in the story, and were the actresses aware of the entire script, or did they experience this revelation along with their characters?

The locked door was always meant to be the turning point in *1001 Frames*—the moment when the audition stops being just an audition and becomes something far more sinister. Up until that point, there is still the illusion of choice. But when the actresses realize they cannot leave, the true nature of the power dynamic is exposed. It's no longer just about performing for a role—it's about survival.

This twist was inspired by real stories of entrapment, both literal and psychological, that women have faced in creative industries. Whether it's the pressure to comply with a director's demands, the fear of professional consequences, or the feeling of being trapped in a system where saying “no” is not an option, the locked door is a physical manifestation of that reality. It strips away the ambiguity and forces the characters—and the audience—to confront the horror of the situation head-on.

As for the actresses, we wanted to maintain a level of authenticity in their reactions. Some of the actresses had full script, and they were aware that there was going to be a locked door. While some of the others were aware of the general arc of the film, the specific timing and manner in which the door would be locked were not revealed to them in advance. We filmed multiple takes, allowing for moments of genuine uncertainty, capturing the

shift in their body language and expressions as they moved from acting to something more instinctual. That sense of real-time realization was crucial—it mirrored the experience of countless women who enter spaces believing they are safe, only to gradually understand the imbalance of power they are caught in. It was, however, very important for me that they have a choice and not be thrown into it without warning. So I made sure to talk to each one, telling them that there is going to be a surprise element, that not knowing what it was, it might help their performance. They all chose not to know. But to make sure that none of them have previous similar experiences, I asked them about that.

The locked door is not just a plot twist—it's a statement. It forces the audience to question how many real-life audition rooms, meetings, and closed-door conversations have carried this same, unspoken threat. The horror in *1001 Frames* is not just in what happens—it's in the stark realization that, for many, this is not fiction.

The final scene, when you break the fourth wall, step onto the stage, and embrace your actresses, is incredibly moving. You can also sense the empathy in the actor playing the director, along with the puzzled expressions of some of the other

cast members. How did this intense story impact your team, both on and off screen?

The final scene was always meant to be a rupture—a moment where the boundaries between fiction and reality dissolve, exposing not just the mechanics of the film, but the emotional weight that making it carried for everyone involved. Throughout *1001 Frames*, the actresses are trapped in a constructed nightmare, subjected to a power dynamic that, while exaggerated for the story, is deeply familiar to anyone who has ever felt powerless in an audition room or in life. Breaking the fourth wall was my way of acknowledging that. I didn't want the film to simply end with a sense of despair; I wanted to reach across that divide and remind them—and the audience—that they were seen, that they were not alone.

This was an emotionally taxing film for all of us. The actor playing the director, despite his role, carried his own weight of discomfort, knowing what his character represented. The actresses, even though they understood it was fiction, were still channeling something real—past experiences, cultural realities, personal fears. The tension in the room wasn't just acting; it was a confrontation with something deeply ingrained in all of us.

When I stepped onto the stage in the final scene, it wasn't just as the director of the film, but as a human being—someone who, like them, had been navigating these dynamics for years. The embrace was unscripted, an instinctive response to everything we had just put ourselves through. Some cast members were visibly moved, others puzzled—because in that moment, we weren't just making a film anymore; we were breaking the structure of control that had defined the entire story.

Off-screen, this process changed us. It sparked long conversations, moments of reflection, and a deeper bond between everyone involved. We weren't just making a film; we were exposing something raw, something that many of us had felt in different ways throughout our lives. I hope that, by leaving this moment in the final cut, audiences will feel that too—the weight of it, but also the catharsis. The understanding that storytelling, even when painful, can also be an act of reclamation.

Credits

CAST

Mohammad AGHEBATI – Director
Leili RASHIDI – Director’s Friend
Mahin SADRI – Firoozeh
Behafarid GHAFFARIAN – Dorsa
Parastoo GHORBANI – Mina’s sister

And:

Shayesteh SAJADI
Aisan GHANBARI
Avin TAFAKORI
Mahsa REZAEI
Dorsa PANJEHBAND
Helia SHADIFAR
Maryam ARABZADEH
Fereshteh ALIYARI
Fatemeh SALEHIAN
Mahdieh MOHAMMADI

Credits

CREW

Director & writer

Mehrnoush Alia

Cinematography

Hamed Hosseini Sangari

Editing

Mehrnoush Alia

Music

Ava Rasti

Sound Design

Amir Hossein Ghasemi

Production Design

Morteza Farbod

Hamed Hosseini Sangari.

Casting

Mohammad Aghebati

Producers (Maaa Film, US/Iran)

Mehrnoush Alia

Mohammad Aghebati

Producer (Distorted Pictures, Iran/Sweden)

Sina Sharbafi