

**STRAND
RELEASING**

presents

SUN CHILDREN

A FILM BY
MAJID MAJIDI

Starring Rouhollah Zamani and Ali Nasirian

PRESS NOTES

*OFFICIAL SELECTION
Venice International Film Festival*

Country of Origin: Iran
Format: DCP/1.85/Color
Sound: 5.1 Surround
Running Time: 99 minutes
Genre: Drama
Not Rated
In Farsi with English Subtitles

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SYNOPSIS

SUN CHILDREN is the story of 12-year-old ALI and his three friends. Together they work hard to survive and support their families, doing small jobs in a garage and committing petty crimes to make fast money. In a turn of events that seems miraculous, Ali is entrusted to find a hidden treasure underground. He recruits his gang, but first, to gain access to the tunnel, the children must enroll at the Sun School, a charitable institution that tries to educate street kids and child laborers, close to where the treasure is located.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

SUN CHILDREN is the story of children who must work to support their families. To this date, there are 152 million children in this situation. International organizations are waging a desperate fight to support these young people who are subjected to abuse and deprived of their human right to education. The message of SUN CHILDREN is that we are all responsible to these children, many of whom are extremely talented and all of whom are precious. It is simply not tolerable that their social and economic status consign them to a future of limited opportunities and poor prospects. SUN CHILDREN demonstrates the abilities and humanity of these children. Our main juvenile actors were all child labourers and all proved to be astonishing and extremely intelligent performers.

Q&A WITH MAJID MAJIDI

The world of children has been a focus for your films, what is it that you find so inspiring?

I've been always excited by the surprising world of children. It has an irrefutable authenticity and it helps audiences relate, of course, but it's not just a simple device for me. I'm genuinely attracted by kids as a filmmaker, I'm inspired by them: their passion, originality, imagination and the freedom that allows them to participate in adventures. They see what adults can no longer see and they demonstrate a courage that adults do not have. I will never have enough of filming them and having fun with them on set. Their sensitivity and delicacy in relationships lead me to respect them simply. Usually, you get much more from them when you ask them to do what is close to their hearts. Their truth and sense of realism is stunning when you trust them and become their friend and accomplice.

What was your process to find the young cast - particularly Rouhollah (Ali) and Shamila (Zahra)?

In all my films, casting is the most time-consuming part of the pre-production phase. It is a difficult and complicated process. The process of elimination is very painful and heartbreaking and requires lots of tact and empathy, especially with kids so as not to shatter their dreams. It's a big responsibility. We had over 3000 auditions, over a four month period, before identifying our actors. Some are real street children, like Shamila (Zahra) and her brother Aboulfazl. They are Afghan immigrants on screen but also in real life. They live with their parents and just like in the film, they split their days between working in the streets or subway and attending a school for child workers. I visited their school a year ago. Shamila was like a light, so self-assured, with a natural charisma. I then met with her younger brother and I asked them to argue in their language. They were so natural and perfect that we asked them to come to the casting. Their acting strength came from their life experience.

As for Rouhollah (Ali), he too had never acted. He was pure, with a raw energy, determined to give more than expected. To cast the main character was the hardest task. But Rouhollah

surpassed all the others because he had such an intensity, such a desire to get the lead — much like the character in the movie, so determined to find the treasure and save his mother.

You have worked with a young cast previously, what is your approach to bring out the best performances from them?

Finding the right child actor is 50% of this work. Then you must get to know each child and allow their talent and their passion to shine and blossom. I'm very close to them, they tell me many stories, and we joke together with tenderness. I need to create a true complicity with each of them. We have good times together and I encourage their freedom. This turns into trust that allows them to master their parts because they're no longer afraid, and they want to shine and please.

This sincerity and innocence are captured naturally. I also accept some improvisation when it's better than what is on the page and then I adapt the script to them, rather than the opposite. Improvisation with them is always a limitless source of richness, it's magic.

Much of the film is shot in on location as well as public spaces, what is the importance of that choice and what were the challenges?

Most of the locations were real because we wanted the movie to feel seamless, not like a fiction but more like a documentary. Some of these, like the subway, had restrictions, but we managed against the odds to make it work.

One very important location was a set: the tunnel and the water tank were constructed especially for the film, and it was the most challenging part of the shoot. Every part of this tunnel was built separately to accommodate the actors' movements and to allow the camera to film from different angles. It took a month to complete and was tough.

Do you and the cinematographer have certain methods of working to capture moments with the young cast in these natural environments?

We prepared all the camera movements in the actual settings, several times, without the actors. In the subway, regular traffic did not stop and there were a lot of regulations that made it harder for our shoot. So, we practiced the entire scene with the actors and without the cameras. The emotional moments were the most difficult ones as they had to be captured in one or two takes, maximum. We had no control over the scene of the conversation between Ali and Zahra: they had to get off a real train with the camera following them and they had to deliver their lines immediately.

When we were filming this scene, I prepared Zahra by asking her to keep in mind that she could be sent to a camp and then deported with her whole family. As the train stopped, she was completely ready. When the kids got off, I got off quickly too, stood behind the camera and just filmed. Zahra performed beautifully. She delivered naturally but powerfully. It might look cruel at the first sight, but to shout this statement out loudly and clearly in a film was a relief for her, a weight she took off her. It gave her pride to express this injustice.

These enterprising boys are given a task, with challenges and dangers. The drama is both enjoyable and touching, and occasionally tense – what was the importance in making a film with humor, thrills and sincerity?

I did not want to make an earnest polemic about child labour. I wanted to make an entertaining, energetic, joyful film full of adventure and courage, showing just how capable, resourceful and resilient these children really are. I also hoped though that it is clear how astute the kids are about relationships. They have to be shrewd about adults and sensitive with each other. They are extremely observant, wise even. I hoped all these elements would make my fundamental argument for their rights even stronger.

To embark on dark subjects such as child labour, you need to bring empathy and humor and I decided to create a dangerous adventure in search of a treasure. The word 'treasure' excites everyone. The elderly school janitor immediately follows Ali. Treasure means something different for everybody as it's an unexpected hope to find something special, magic. One of the characters during this adventure finds the treasure is actually him!

The school offers them something other than the 'treasure' they seek beneath it. It is a lovely juxtaposition – what does the film say about the importance of access to education?

The real treasure, in my opinion, is these kids and their potential. Education is their inalienable right and it is the key to their futures. Of course, not all children are natural scholars, and many don't like sitting in a classroom, but it gives them time to breathe and to grow and to discover themselves and others around them. It's a chance all kids need. The juxtaposition of the school and the treasure creates a metaphor to highlight the importance of education and the need to dig inside yourself to find your treasure.

Was there an actual school or schools for street children that inspired the story? Or teachers that you have met?

Absolutely. The idea of this film came from the school in Tehran established by a young NGO. I was inspired by it and I believe this initiative should become wider and adopted by all countries. My hope is that this movie will help to create awareness and trigger initiatives.

What do you hope audiences, and particularly younger audiences will take from the film?

A film which reaches the audience's heart and conscience can create awareness without lecturing. I hope younger audiences will see these children facing huge challenges, trying and then succeeding, even with unlikely, far-fetched dreams. I don't want kids anywhere to despair—the consequences are terrible. As for the adults, I want to show that we are all responsible for all children, and we should create a safe and secure society for them.

You have said the film is a dedication to street children – what is the message you want to impart to the audience?

The card in the beginning of my film says that, according to the statistics of world children rights organizations, such as UNICEF and ILO, there are 250 000 000 across the globe out of which 152 000 000 child labourers in dangerous conditions. Even though it has been decreasing constantly, thanks to world institutions and numerous associations in 190 countries, it is still a very shocking number. We should see the whole world as a family and these kids as members of this family, our family. If any of these kids are misled, or get involved in criminal gangs, drug dealing or theft, all of the family, our world community, suffers. I'm deeply committed to children rights. Children should not be deprived from their childhood and miss their development. Children deserve to be treated with more protection, dignity and justice and I hope my film can contribute to that.

DIRECTOR'S PROFILE

Born in Tehran in 1959, Majid Majidi is the first Iranian director to receive an Academy Award® Nomination for Best Foreign Language Film for *Children of Heaven* (1996).

Majidi worked as an actor before beginning to direct short films. His debut feature, *Baduk* (1991), was presented at Cannes Directors' Fortnight, and his second effort *Father* (1995) secured Majidi's first major prize, at the San Sebastian Film Festival.

Majidi is a triple winner of the Grand Prix des Amériques at the Montreal World Film Festival for *Children of Heaven*, *The Colour of Paradise* and *Baran* (2001). His movie *The Song of Sparrows* (2008) won the Golden Bear for Best Actor at the Berlin International Film Festival.

Since then he has directed *Muhammad, The Messenger of God* (2017) and *Beyond The Clouds* (2019).

CAST

Hashem
School Vice Principal
Ali's Mom

Ali Nasirian
Javad Ezzati
Tannaz Tabatabaie

Ali
Mamad
Zahra
Abolfazl
Reza

Young Actors
Rouhollah Zamani
Mahdi Mousavi
Shamila Shirzad
Abolfazl Shirzad
Mani Ghafouri

School Janitor
School Principal
School Teacher

Introducing
Safar Mohammadi
Ali Ghabeshi
Babak Lotfi

CREW

Director
Screenplay

Majid Majidi
Majid Majidi
Nima Javidi

Director of Cinematography
Editor
Sound Mix & Design
Consulting Producer
Producers

Hooman Behmanesh
Hassan Hassandoust
Mohammed Reza Delpak
Mohammad Reza Saberi
Majid Majidi

Executive Producers
Set Designer

Amir Banan
Mehdi Badrlou
Keyvan Moghadam
Ramin Kousha
Alir Reza Sabzevari

Composer

Project Manager

First Assistant Director

& Coordinator

Make-Up Designer

Visual Effects Supervisor

Sound-Recording

Costume Designer

Head of International Affairs

Still Photographer

Logo Designer

Mohammad Asgari
Mir Mohsen Mousavi Madani
Javad Matouri
Hossein Bashash Bafekr
Amir Malekpour
Mohammed Reza Tashakkori
Sahab Zaribaf
Mohammed Rouholamin
Mohammed Houshmandi

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