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production

**A film by Ali Abbasi**

# **HOLY SPIDER**

Mehdi Bajestani  
Zar Amir Ebrahimi

Script : Ali Abbasi, Afshin Kamran Bahrami

**Duration : 1h57**

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## LOG LINE:

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A female journalist travels to the Iranian holy city of Mashhad to hunt a serial killer.

## SHORT SYNOPSIS:

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Female journalist Rahimi travels to the Iranian holy city of Mashhad to investigate a serial killer targeting sex workers. As she draws closer to exposing his crimes, the opportunity for justice grows harder to attain when the murderer is embraced by many as a hero. Based on the true story of the 'Spider Killer' Saeed Hanaei, who saw himself as on a mission from God as he killed 16 women between 2000 and 2001.

## LONG SYNOPSIS:

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Female journalist Rahimi (Zar Amir Ebrahimi) travels to the Iranian holy city of Mashhad to investigate a serial killer who believes he is doing the work of God, cleansing the streets of sinners by murdering sex workers. As the body count mounts, and Rahimi draws closer to exposing his crimes, the opportunity for justice grows harder to attain as the 'Spider Killer' is embraced by many as a hero. Based on the horrific true story of serial killer Saeed Hanaei, acclaimed writer-director Ali Abbasi (*Border*) unveils a gripping crime thriller, and a daring indictment of a society in which rough justice is routinely a fact of life.

## DIRECTOR'S NOTE

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**HOLY SPIDER** is a film about the rise and fall of one of Iran's most infamous serial killers: Saeed Hanaei. In a larger context, the film is a critique of Iranian society, as the killer is a very religious man and a well-respected citizen. I was still living in Iran in the beginning of 2000s when Saeed Hanaei was killing street prostitutes in the holy city of Mashhad. He managed to kill 16 women before he was caught and put on trial. It was during his trial that the story really caught my attention. In a normal world there is no doubt that a man who had killed 16 people would be seen as guilty. But here it was different: a portion of the public and the conservative media began to celebrate Hanaei as a hero. They upheld the idea that Hanaei simply had to fulfill his religious duty to clean the streets of the city by killing these 'dirty' women. This was when the idea of making this film came to me.

My intention was not to make a serial killer movie. I wanted to make a movie about a serial killer society. It is about the deep-rooted misogyny within Iranian society, which is not specifically religious or political but cultural. Misogyny everywhere breeds through the habits of people. In Iran, we have a tradition of hatred towards women, and it often rears its ugly head. In Saeed Hanaei's story this is present in its purest way. This makes it necessary to show different perspectives that demonstrate a range of opinions in Iranian society; those on his side and those who oppose him.

Saeed Hanaei is both a victim and a criminal. As a soldier at the front of the Iran-Iraq war, he has given his youth to his country, to make it better and to give meaning to his own life. He then finds out that society doesn't care about him, that his sacrifices during the war didn't change anything. He exists in an existential vacuum, in spite of his belief in God. Saeed goes to the mosque and cries in the house of God. He finds a new mission, a mission for Allah.

**HOLY SPIDER** is not intended to make political points against the Iranian government. It is not another critique of corrupt societies in the Middle East. The dehumanization of groups of people, especially women, is not unique to Iran but can be found, in different variations, in all corners of the world.

I see the movie as a specific story about specific characters, and not a "theme" movie about certain social problems. We don't want to let Saeed's story and persona saturate the film. Instead of making another movie about different ways a man can kill and mutilate women, we want to underline the complexity of the issue and the stakes on different sides, especially on behalf of the victims. Rahimi's story is as important as Saeed's. I want to get close to her and understand how she deals with conflicts within herself, with her family, and society while she follows the case.

Hanaei's victims were not generic street women, they were individuals with their own personalities, and we hope to restore a part of their dignity and humanity that was taken from them. Not as saints, not as unfortunate victims, but as human beings, like all of us.

Ali Abbasi

## ABOUT MASHHAD

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**Mashhad**, with 3.5 million residents, is the second-most-populous city in Iran and a deeply conservative religious center. The second-largest holy city in the world, Mashhad attracts more than 20 million tourists and pilgrims every year, many of whom come to pay homage to the giant Imam Reza Shrine, the largest mosque in the world, described as "the heart of the Shia Iran." The spot has been a pilgrimage since medieval times, and as those who complete the pilgrimage to Mecca receive the title of *Haji*, those who make the pilgrimage to Mashhad are known as *Mashtee*, a term also applied to its inhabitants. On 30 October 2009 (the anniversary of Imam Reza's martyrdom), Iran's then-President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declared Mashhad to be "Iran's spiritual capital".

## A CONVERSATION WITH ALI ABBASI

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**You're an Iranian native who was living in Iran during Saeed Hanaei's killing spree and arrest in 2001. What was fascinating to you about his story?**

I had one foot in Iran but I was moving to Europe to study abroad in 2001. During that time, we had a reform-minded president, Mohammad Khatami, who had opened up the political and cultural space, so there was a general sense of hopefulness there. Then 9/11 happened, and before that Saeed's killing spree and arrest. These events are not related but they felt stranger than fiction, like when reality and Hollywood become indistinguishable. I wasn't that interested when the killings started the prior year because serial killings are not unique in Iran. Being the country it is, it's relatively crime-infested. My interest in the story started when some people started referring to Saeed as a hero — saying that he was doing his religious duty by murdering female prostitutes in Mashhad. This was a person who had killed so many women and people were debating whether he did something wrong or not.

**What shocked you the most about this story?**

I had watched Maziar Bahari's documentary *And Along Came a Spider*, which came out in 2002 after Hanaei was hanged — it's available on YouTube — and I found myself sympathizing with the killer in a strange way. I was expecting to see some kind of Buffalo Bill\* character. But Saeed was charismatic and came across as naïve or innocent. Because he had no media training, he said things on camera that were against his own interest. But he seemed happy and at peace with his crimes. This wasn't a manipulative person, there was a sort of honesty coming from

him. Not to say I liked or approved of anything he did, but it made the story and his character more complicated than I expected.

\*the killer in *The Silence of The Lambs*

**Your story dramatizes the events, introducing a Tehran journalist who travels to Mashhad to investigate the crimes...**

Rahimi's character already existed in a way — there's a female journalist in Maziar Bahari's documentary who discusses the case on camera and interviews Saeed. Although she is from Mashhad, she didn't investigate the crimes. She covered the trials and wrote an excellent piece on his execution which inspired me. She wrote that his last words were "this was not our deal," suggesting there was some kind of deal with the authorities.

**How did your own version of the story evolve or change over time?**

I've been working on this story in one way or another for almost 15 years. Early drafts followed the story faithfully but then I began asking myself why I was writing this movie. I wasn't trying to recreate the events I wanted to make a bigger point. Over time I gave myself license to deviate from the actual story, because I felt the story wasn't solely about Saeed — it's about misogyny. Rahimi's character became as important as Saeed's. Dramatically, it felt correct that their paths should collide.

**You identify Saeed early in the film, breaking the rules of conventional thrillers...**

In a straightforward serial killer movie, you have a killer with a twisted mind and a cool, smart detective or journalist who is trying to decode that mind for the audience. The criminal is revealed over time, as in *The Silence of the Lambs*. But the climax of Saeed's story for me has always been the fact that he was hailed by some as a hero. This story is not about the mystery of being a serial killer — it's about the banality of Saeed's life, how ordinary and unsophisticated he was. For me this is more interesting than a mythical Buffalo Bill-type character.

**The city of Mashhad is character in the movie. What's your relationship with it?**

I never lived there but I visited several times and even stayed there. It's the second-largest city in Iran and has one of the holiest sites for Shia Muslims, the Imam Reza Shrine, which is also the biggest mosque in the world. It's a rich city bordering Afghanistan, very international because it's a huge pilgrimage destination, and also on the drug route from Afghanistan to Europe. It's an industrial metropolitan area with a dark underbelly which also happens to be a famous religious center. Prostitution is rampant — you don't even have to go to a particular district, it's out in the open everywhere, even close to the mosque. My feeling is that it's tolerated because it's an economy, part of the hospitality industry of Mashhad. Law enforcement looks the other way.

**Discuss the spider in your title.**

There's a double meaning there. In the Iranian press, Saeed was referred to as the Spider Killer because he was luring victims into his web — often his apartment itself. The metaphor came out of that. But when I flew into Mashhad, I saw the famous shrine in the center of the city and

it looked like a web. Saeed probably visited it often, and many of his victims were picked up in the vicinity. The idea of him coming out of that web and dragging his victims into darkness became a strong image for me, because in his mind he was doing holy work.

### **The Mashhad underbelly is so alive in the movie. It's noir to the core.**

You don't have to dig very deep to get to the underbelly of Iranian society. I love film noir as a genre and I wanted to create a Persian noir from its familiar elements. All those lost souls, broken dreams and dark places that emerged out of post-war America are part of the everyday landscape of most Iranian cities. I wanted to find a language and iconography that came from the place itself, in this case Mashhad, rather than from a Humphrey Bogart movie, or *Chinatown*, or David Fincher's *Zodiac*.

### **Why is this movie threatening to Iran?**

It's not like we've made an explicit movie — but it's one of the few movies set in Iran that conveys a certain realism. There has been severe censorship in Iranian cinema for the past 50 years. Any movie you see is presenting a parallel reality of Iran, like movies from the Soviet era. Almost all of them adhere to a set of written and unwritten rules, even movies critical of the Iranian government. The taboos that are never broken in Iranian films include nudity, sex, drug use and prostitution. But those things remain a big part of Iranian society and they are relevant to my story, even part of its atmosphere.

### **Are your actors well known in Iran?**

Saeed is played by the stage and screen actor Mehdi Bajestani and he's taking a huge career risk by appearing in this film. It was important to me that we cast an actor who had some of the same lived experience as his real-life counterpart. Mehdi hails from the Mashhad region and could speak in the same working-class accent as the real Saeed. Plus, he's a great actor who was open to doing things in his performance that are taboo in Iran. Western audiences don't have a frame of reference for the risks he is taking with this role, but it's the equivalent of a Hollywood star playing a pedophile who commits pedophilic acts in the movie. He's also trying to humanize a very distasteful person, which is another risk.

### **Your lead actress has left Iran and now lives in Paris. What's her story?**

Zar Amir Ebrahimi has been my ally on this movie from the beginning and if there's one person who has authorship of it besides me and the producers, it's her. She was a huge TV star in the early 2000s in Iran, but an explicit personal video of hers leaked, which was a new thing in a very conservative country. People started selling her video on the street, which ended her artistic career. She couldn't work anymore, and finally left the country. She started as my casting director on this film, but we had to re-cast Rahimi at the last second and decided it would be great to cast Zar in her place. Coming on board changed the character — Zar channeled into her performance some of her frustrations from her private and public life after the video leaked.

### **You were probably never going to shoot this movie in Iran...**

I tried to! I went to Iran and was honest and transparent with the authorities. I gave them the script and said I would be willing to work within the Iranian framework and compromise if they let me shoot the movie on location — capturing the authenticity and vibe of Mashhad was so important to me. They didn't say yes but they didn't say no, which is their way of saying no. After a year of waiting, I had to find someplace else to make this movie.

**You tried to film in Turkey, but in the end, you filmed in Jordan.**

Erdogan's cultural policy was already a threat to the production. The Iranian government found out about the movie and made the Turks kick us out of the country after we had been there for a month scouting locations — some areas of Turkey near the Syrian border had the same vibe as Mashhad. We wound up shooting in Amman, Jordan. It was vital to me that we recreate Mashhad's underbelly in a satisfactory way, and Jordan had everything we were looking for. It's a relatively nondescript place and resembles almost any part of the Middle East depending on where you look.

**How did filming in Jordan affect your production design in terms of the exteriors?**

We were working on a tight budget and for political and security reasons we couldn't bring a lot of props out of Iran, so we had to recreate approximations of Mashhad in Amman. We removed signs and flags in certain locations and added posters and signage that made it feel Iranian. It worked very well because many parts of Jordan have a nondescript industrial vibe — exactly what we were looking for.

**The sound design and score create an atmosphere unto itself, bringing Mashhad alive in a unique way.**

I wanted the score to be contemporary and to connect with the rough, industrial part of the Mashhad's underbelly. If we have one constant sonic element in the movie it's Saeed's motorbike, and the music grew organically out of that sound. Our Danish composer Martin Dirkov was adamant about avoiding the ethnic music you might hear in an American production set in the Middle East, so our inspiration came from grunge music from the '90s, and industrial music. He took it in a non-Western direction, so instead of creating a specific instrument or tonality, he went for a sensibility that was essentially Iranian grunge.

**What would you like audiences to take away from *Holy Spider*?**

I don't want people to see this as a message movie, although misogyny and dehumanization are themes we explore. My intention was to hold up a mirror to Iranian society, and while the mirror might be dirty or broken, it shows a good portion of what it feels like to live there. This movie is as much a political statement as a comprehensive view of society and while I don't think Iranian society is a sick place, I do believe the representation of reality in Iran has become sick in terms of how women's bodies are depicted on-screen. They have been dehumanized into non-existent figures with faces buried in cloth. Almost every family has access to unregulated cable TV that routinely shows Britney Spears dancing in a bikini, but Iranian women are seldom depicted as having a sexual life. Also, after thinking about this story for more than 10 years, I feel a fundamental injustice because the families of Saeed Hanaei's victims are seldom mentioned. A tragic injustice befell the women who were killed — they became

numbers and people stopped caring about them, much less their families. These were real people, and by showing their fate in a specific way, their survivors can remember them as human beings like anyone else.

## CAST BIOS

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**Mehdi Bajestani** (Saeed) is a well know Iranian theater and movie actor. He made his acting debut on stage of the City Theater of Iran in 1997, where he was cast for his first role in a Bertholt Brecht play (*The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, directed by Hamid Samandarian). Since then, he has worked with contemporary Iranian theater directors including Vahid Rahbani, Shahab Hosseini and Maedeh Tahmasebi, appearing more than 800 times on stage. He has appeared regularly in TV and movies for the past two decades, including the feature films *Nargesi*, *Sweet Taste of Imagination*, *Azar*, *There Are Things You Don't Know* as well as the TV series "Whisper" and acclaimed director Asghar Farhadi's "The Story of a City."

**Zar Amir Ebrahimi** (Rahimi) is an Iranian actress living in Paris. She grew up in Tehran, where she received her Performing Arts University degree. She performed on stage and in high profile TV series and movies, gaining national attention with TV soaps like "Help Me"(2004) and "Nargess" (2007). Her feature movies made in Iran *WAITING* (2001) and *A TRIP TO HIDALU* (2006) were not screened due to authority censorship.

Outside Iran, she became known to a wider audience through her performance in the Rotoscoping Animation film *TEHRAN TABOO*, which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2017. In 2018 she won Best Actress at the Nice International Film Festival for her performance in *BRIDE PRICE VS DEMOCRACY*. Her latest film *TOMORROW WE ARE FREE* screened at the Talinn Black Nights Film Festival and Filmfest Hamburg, among others. Coming up, she has *LES SURVIVANTS/WHITE PARADISE* directed by Guillaume Renusson, in which she plays the lead female role alongside Denis Ménochet.

## CREW BIOS

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**ALI ABBASI (Director)** is a writer and director. He was born 1981 in Iran and left his studies in Tehran to move to Stockholm, where he graduated with a BA in architecture. He then studied directing at the National Film School of Denmark, graduating with his short film *M FOR MARKUS* in 2011. His feature debut, *SHELLEY* premiered at the Berlinale in 2016 and was released in the US. He is best known for his 2018 film *BORDER*, which premiered in Cannes, where it won the Prix Un Certain Regard. The film was chosen as Sweden's Academy Award® Entry, was widely released internationally, won the Danish Film Award and was nominated for three European Film Awards including Best Director, Best Screenwriter & Best Film. He is currently shooting the TV adaptation of "The Last of Us" for HBO in Canada.

**SOL BONDY (Producer)**, born 1979 in London, is a multi-award-winning producer based in Berlin. After graduating from the German Film and Television Academy (DFFB) in 2010 with the EFA-nominated *Reported Missing* by Jan Speckenbach, he founded his company One Two Films, specializing in international co-productions. These include Pan Nalin's *ANGRY INDIAN GODDESSES*, which picked up Audience Awards in Toronto and Rome or Juho Kuosmanen's *THE HAPPIEST DAY IN THE LIFE OF OLLI MÄKI* which won the Prix Un Certain Regard in Cannes and



a European Film Award and Jennifer Fox's Sundance breakout hit THE TALE starring Laura Dern. Bondy was named a "Future Leader" by Screen International and chosen as one of "10 Producers to Watch" by Variety, is a TAP alumnus and a member of the European Film Academy. He teaches at the Met Film School, Raindance Institute, FAMU Prague, Film University Potsdam and DFFB Berlin.

**JACOB JAREK (Producer)** was born in Krakow, Poland and grew up in Norway. He graduated from the National Film School of Denmark in 2011 and co-founded Profile Pictures the same year. In 2013 he graduated from the Inside Pictures program. Jarek has produced and co-produced numerous award-winning films and series that have premiered at festivals like Cannes, Berlinale, TIFF, Sundance, Venice and Series Mania, among others. A selection of his work includes RAMS (2015) by Grímur Hákonarson, DARKLAND (2017) by Fenar Ahmad, SPEAK NO EVIL (2022) by Christian Tafdrup, the HBO MAX series KAMIKAZE (2021), and SHELLEY (2016) and HOLY SPIDER (2022) both by Ali Abbasi. Jarek is a member of the European Film Academy and received the Danish Directors' Ib Award in 2017.

**HAYEDEH SAFIYARI (Editor)**, born 1960, Gorgan, Iran, is an Iranian film editor and a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. She graduated in Art Cinema from a reputed university in Iran and decided to pursue her professional career in movie editing. Immediately after graduating, she was recruited by the national TV of Iran. The majority of her work has been for internationally renowned filmmakers such as Asghar Farhadi, Bahram Beyzai, Bahman Ghobadi, Reza Dormishian, Alireza Raeesian, Shahram Alidi, and Mani Haghighi. She has received several prestigious awards, namely the Crystal Simorgh, the Statue of the Cinema House, the Asian Film Award, the Fajr Film Festival Award, and Iran's Film Critics & Writers Association Award; and nominated for the Cinema Writers Circle Award, ICS, and the Goya International Cinephile Society Award. She worked in numerous countries, including Spain, Sweden and Turkey, and has edited over 80 feature fiction films and several documentaries. Many of these films have been selected by leading international film festivals and received prestigious awards: Cannes, BFI London, Berlin, Venice, Golden Globes, and Locarno. Two of the films on which she served as editor, THE SALESMAN (2016) and A SEPARATION (2011), both directed by Asghar Farhadi with whom she has enjoyed a longstanding collaboration, won Best Foreign-Language Film Academy Awards®.

**OLIVIA NEERGAARD-HOLM (Editor)** is a Danish film editor, who graduated from the National Film School of Denmark in 2013. She has worked on various feature films, TV series and documentaries. Her latest credits include PLEASURE by Ninja Thyberg, MISS OSAKA by Daniel Dencik, GRANS (BORDER) by Ali Abbasi, HOLIDAY by Isabella Eklöf, DAVID LYNCH – THE ART LIFE by Jon Nguyen and Olivia Neergaard-Holm, THE CHARMER by Milad Alami, SHELLEY by Ali Abbasi and VICTORIA by Sebastian Schipper.

**NADIM CARLSEN, DFF (Director of Photography)** Nadim Carlsen is a Danish cinematographer. He graduated from the National Film School of Denmark in 2011. Since then, he has worked on a wide range of feature films some of which have competed at internationally renowned film festivals such as Cannes, Berlin, Venice, Toronto and Sundance. In 2018 Nadim was on Variety's list of '10 Cinematographers to Watch' and he received critical praise for the cinematography on GRANS (BORDER) by Ali Abbasi, which won the prestigious Un Certain Regard award at the Cannes Film Festival. GRANS (BORDER) went on to become Sweden's entry to the Academy Awards alongside Norway's WHAT WILL PEOPLE SAY by Iram Haq, also lensed by

Carlsen. In 2019 Nadim was awarded the annual Danish Bodil Prize for his cinematographic contribution to HOLIDAY.

**LINA NORDQVIST (Production Designer)** founded Lina Nordqvist Design following her graduation from Beckmans College of Design in Stockholm in 2007. She has since worked as a Production Designer on multiple feature films and television series, in addition to several short films, commercials, and a number of advertising campaigns.

In 2013 she won Best Production Design (Guldbagge Sweden) for the film CALL GIRL, the same year the film was awarded the Bassan Arts and Crafts Award for Best Production Design at the Torino Film Festival. Since then, several productions designed by Lina have gained recognition and won awards at festivals world-wide, including THE WAVE(2015 dir. Roar Uthaug), BORG VS. MCENROE (2017 dir. Janus Metz Pedersen) and SONJA THE WHITE SWAN (dir Anne Sewitsky 2018), for which Lina won an Amanda Award for Best Production Design (Nor).

**MARTIN DIRKOV (Composer)** is a Danish film composer, sound designer and musician. He graduated from the National Film School of Denmark in 2011. Martin has composed music for several documentaries and feature films including GRANS (BORDER) by Ali Abbasi, SHORTA by Anders Ølholm & Frederik Louis Hviid, HOLIDAY by Isabella Eklöf, THE CHARMER by Milad Alami and SHELLEY by Ali Abbasi. He also does sound design on films, commercials, animation and art films.

**PROFILE PICTURES** is a Copenhagen-based award-winning production company established in 2011.

The company's mission is to create visionary works with high impact and has a track record of producing and co-producing award-winning features and series both on a Nordic and international level. Of recent releases can be mentioned SPEAK NO EVIL by Christian Tafdrup, world premiering at the Sundance Film Festival 2022 and to be released in the US by Shudder/IFC in 2022, and the first Danish HBO MAX Tv-series, KAMIKAZE, released in 46 territories in 2021. Profile has been present in Cannes before; as co-producers on Grímur Hákonarson's Un Certain Regard winner RAMS (2015), while the company's partners have been there individually as producers on WHEN ANIMALS DREAM (Critic's Week, 2014) and co-producers on ONLY GOD FORGIVES (Main competition, 2013). With HOLY SPIDER, this marks the company's second feature film with Ali Abbasi after SHELLEY (2016).

**ONE TWO FILMS** was founded in October 2010 in Berlin. The company focuses on international feature films for the global market. Sol Bondy, a graduate of the dffb and a member of the of the European and German Film Academies, heads the company as managing partner and is supported by producer Fred Burle and line producer Daniela Ramin. Business partner Christoph Lange is the company's strategic investor. In the last 11 years, One Two Films produced 16 feature films, all of which had their world premieres at international film festivals such as Cannes, Sundance, Berlin, Venice and Toronto, including PERSIAN LESSONS by Vadim Perelman, the Emmy-nominated drama THE TALE or THE HAPPIEST DAY IN THE LIFE OF OLLI MÄKI, Un Certain Regard Winner & Finland's 2017 Oscar entry.

## **Main Crew**

Director Ali Abbasi

Writers	Ali Abbasi & Afshin Kamran Bahrami
Director of Photography	Nadim Carlsen, DFF
Production Designer	Lina Nordqvist
Editors	Hayedeh Safiyari & Olivia Neergaard-Holm
Composer	Martin Dirkov
Produced by	Sol Bondy, Jacob Jarek
Producer	Ali Abbasi
Co-producers	Eva Åkergren, Calle Marthin, Peter Possne, Fred Burle, Vincent Maraval, Pascal Caucheteux, Gregoire Sorlat, Olivier Père, Rémi Burah
Associate Producers	Holger Stern, Alexander Bohr, Barbara Häbe, Zar Amir Ebrahimi
Executive Producers	Ditte Milsted, Christoph Lange

### **Main Cast**

SAEED	Mehdi Bajestani
RAHIMI	Zar Amir Ebrahimi
SHARIFI	Arash Ashtiani
FATIMA	Forouzan Jamshidnejad
SOMAYEH	Alice Rahimi
ZINAB	Sara Fazilat
ROSTAMI	Sina Parvaneh
ZINAB	Sara Fazilat
JUDGE	Nima Akbarpour
ALI	Mesbah Taleb

**Produced by** Profile Pictures, One Two Films

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