



Girl shows true grit

FESTIVAL FILM

Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame (M) ★★★★★
 Nikbakht Noruz, Abbas Alijome
 Directed by Hana Makhmalbaf
 Review: Pier Leach

Necessity may well be the mother of invention, but the delightful six-year-old central character of the Farsi-language film *Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame* takes invention to the level of sheer entrepreneurialism.

Her determination to attend school against all odds is an exercise in single-mindedness that would leave much older Western children slack-jawed in disbelief. Not only does she bargain like a UN hostage negotiator, the pint-sized dynamo literally crosses mountains and rivers in her quest to learn how to read funny stories.

Twenty-year-old Iranian director Hana Makhmalbaf (who was 19 when she made the film) crosses the border into Afghanistan to the village of Bamyán for her fable-like story of the violent legacy left after years of political instability.

She films on the site where in 2001 Taliban forces demolished giant, centuries-old statues of the Buddha carved into the rock face, grainy newsreel footage of which frames the film.

Like fellow Iranian director Jafar Panahi's 1995 film *The White Balloon*, Makhmalbaf (daughter of Kandahar director Mohsen Makhmalbaf) casts a sweet-faced little girl at the centre of her documentary-like tale of a youngster on mission.

Bakhtay (Nikbakht Noruz) is supposed to be looking after her baby sibling while her mother is out. But when the boy from the cave next door (Abbas Alijome) starts reading stories to her, Bakhtay decides she wants to learn, too, and after tying the baby to a makeshift leash in the cave, sets out to acquire the necessary notebook and pencil. It's an astonishing, wholly endearing quest in which eventually the tenacious little girl barter her way to a crisp new notebook (she can't afford the pencil, so she takes her mother's lipstick instead).

But if that seemed difficult, what follows makes it pale in comparison; on her way to school, under the remnants of the Buddha statues, the diminutive Bakhtay encounters a gang of boys pretending to be Taliban soldiers, who subject her to an ordeal the director (working from a script by her mother) makes sure we never know for sure is

play-acting or destined to end badly.

It is a harrowing turn after the sweet first act and it is here that the film threatens to falter, as Makhmalbaf struggles to maintain the naturalism in a part of the film heavy with messages about the challenges faced by girls in Afghanistan and the ramifications for all children of growing up amid violence and instability.

But it recovers itself in large part courtesy of Noruz's entirely engaging central performance.

The title comes from a comment by Makhmalbaf's father about the huge Buddha statues witnessing so much violence. The images of their collapse she uses as a metaphor for the suffering of the Afghan people.

Like the earlier PIAF film from Kazakhstan, *Tulpan*, *Buddha Collapses Out of Shame* offers a thought-provoking window into life in a part of the world few of us are ever likely to visit.

***Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame* is on at Somerville each night at 8.30 until Sunday. It then moves to the Joondalup Pines for one week.**



Determined: Nikbakht Noruz as Bakhta