to train children – both boys and girls – to become professionals, a daunting task in the face of internal discouragement and external threat. One can only hope that the musicians of Afghanistan, now well documented by Western researchers, can thrive in the often hostile environment of a country under stress that carries conflicting views on the purpose or viability of music as a cultural form of expression. Baily quotes the Kabuli singer Qassem Bakhsh as a fitting end to his study: 'O God, bring peace to this country/Whose people are tired of war' (p. 88).

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Films

Tasfiya, by Sharofat Arabova, Tajikistan, 73 minutes

Where films from the Persianate and Iranic world are concerned, it has long been countries such as Iran and Afghanistan that have received the lion's share of attention – and perhaps not surprisingly so, given Iran's illustrious history of art house cinema and plethora of renowned directors, and recent events in Afghanistan that have prompted not only local filmmakers but ones from Iran as well (for example, the acclaimed Makhmalbaf family) to focus their lenses on the country's history and culture. Aside from a smattering of films, often unfortunately relegated to niche film festivals around the world, Tajikistan has received considerably less attention than its sister countries to the west. Luckily, for those far from the fertile plains and steppes of Central Asia, filmmakers such as Sharofat Arabova are messengers of the richness and splendour of a culture too long obscured by the towering Pamirs and the vicissitudes of modern history.

Born in Uzbekistan and raised in Tajikistan, Arabova's first feature film is, not surprisingly, deeply entrenched in indigenous Iranic culture. Based on a story written by the Tajik poet, playwright and novelist Temur Zulfiqorov, *Tasfiya* tells the tale of Mehri and Shams, a sort of modern-day Vis and

Ramin, or Leyli and Majnun. Zulfiqorov had originally titled his story *Rashk* (Jealousy), and appropriately so; it is, after all, jealousy that incites Shams to murder his beloved and embark on a path of renunciation, repentance and redemption, in both a physical and spiritual sense.

As opposed to films such as the Russian-language *Luna Papa* (*Moon Father*, 1999), loaded with imagery and elements harking back to the Soviet era, *Tasfiya* is distinctly Tajik on almost every level. First are the idyllic settings and the recurring image of the old man and his son enjoying their humble repast beneath the shade of a tree, which bring to mind the quatrains and very visage (albeit imagined) of Omar Khayyam, the old 'Tent Maker'. There is also an overt nod to Zoroastrianism in the vows of fidelity that Mehri and Shams take, in which they invoke the creed of the ancient Iranian prophet and thereby seal their fate. As well, the music, colours and landscapes of Arabova's film, very much like those in Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Gabbeh* (1996), beautifully blend to paint an image of a Tajikistan unmarred by modernity, political ideologies and conflict; the country and culture are presented in perhaps their purest element. Arabova's sounds and images, quite unlike those of contemporary Iranian cinema (which often gives precedence to realism and the 'now'), are laden with nostalgia and yearning for a way of life and stories once commonplace, but increasingly hidden and tucked away in the dusty annals and tomes of classical Persian literature and Iranic folklore. Adding to the birdsong and the melodies of gushing inlets are languid, limpid tones of a Persian that may fall on the ears of those in nearby Iran as romantic and even arcane – and recalling the verses of the epic *Shahnameh*, Arabova's script contains few Arabic loanwords and, aside from the use of Sufi metaphors and Shams' name, scant traces of Arabo-Muslim influence.

That is not to say, however, that Arabova's film is solely the stuff of miniaturist fantasies, or that it is limited to a celebration of Iranic themes and visuals. After murdering Mehri in a fit of passion, Shams turns himself in to the village headman, who sentences Shams to ten years' gruelling labour in a uranium mine, and expects him to last three years at most; a body working towards the service of the national cause – the development of the atomic bomb – will prove far more useful than a dead one, he figures. Shams has no objections, and goes further to ask that he be given the most physically demanding tasks. If it was the maxims of Zoroaster that prompted the two lovers to take their vows, Shams' rejection of the world and spartan will to annihilate his physical being are rooted in the Persian Sufi tradition; in light of this, one might deem that Arabova's character was aptly named. Like the august monarchs of the *Shahnameh* and Sanskrit lore, who after their respective reigns retired to a stoic life of the remembrance of God, deep in the forests, so too Shams tires of life and prepares himself for what lies beyond. Shams, however, does not have *his* soul in mind, but rather Mehri's, his beloved's. Wasting away in the uranium mines, Shams' dishevelled frame and frayed locks conjure the image of Majnun. At the same time, the departed Mehri assumes the character

of Leyli and, like the two doomed lovers from the pages of Arabic lore (and later, in Nezami's celebrated Sufi allegory), Mehri and Shams are fated to live their lives in hell on earth, and unite in heaven. Whether or not Mehri and Shams' love had been consummated is unclear, but, like the love of their fabled counterparts, Arabova portrays it as chaste and almost childlike, thus warranting such comparisons.

As with Makhmalbaf's *Gabbeh* and Maryam Shahriar's *Dokhtaran-e Khorshid* (Daughters of the Sun), Arabova's debut feature film leaves one recalling images and feelings, more than anything else. While plot is certainly central to *Tasfiya*, it is the lush and serene scenery of the Tajik countryside, the twang of the *dotar*, the gaiety of folk costumes and rosy-cheeked puppets, and the images of poets, lovers and prophets Arabova evokes that make her film such a feast for the soul, above and beyond all else. 'What is love, and how can I prepare for it?' asks the young boy of his father at the beginning of the film. Watching *Tasfiya* might be a start.

Joobin Bekhrad, founder and editor of REORIENT, and award-winning writer

Die Neue (The New Girl), by Buket Alakus, Germany, 90 minutes

Buket Alakus' didactic portrait of the ongoing German debate on 'integration' illustrates divergent views within a small public space – the classroom. Working within the framework of Goethe's poem *Prometheus* and the basic question of intended isolation and the placing of a lost individual, teacher Eva Arendt (Iris Berben) poses this question to the class: 'Is *Prometheus* still valid today?' The feeling of differing from predominant norms becomes embodied in Sevda (Ara Çelik), a new student in the class, who is clad all in black when she enters the scene and who appears actively to isolate herself from the group ('You Germans'). While in Goethe's poem Prometheus turns away from God, Sevda gains her isolation through indulging him. The Muslim girl with Turkish roots, donning an 'Islamic' headscarf, thus personifies a controversial issue from the beginning and splits the class community into different groups, which metaphorically represent the German population. Karl, a liberal leftist, tries to engage her by showing respect for her apparent faith; a group of girls (representing the bourgeoisie) criticises what they see as Sevda being 'suppressed' by her religion; troublemaker Goran chants populist slogans (representing the newly established nationalist citizens' movement *Pegida*). To round out the representation of German society, Sevda's parents personify a group of 'secular' Muslims not keen to engage in religious affairs publicly and therefore critical of their daughter's choices. Consequently, the teacher Eva stands for the German government trying to 'integrate' and support Sevda (also because Eva sees herself in the young girl). The teacher's strategy is to impose special rights for the Muslim girl: she does not have to sit next to a male classmate and