

# about elly

**Monday, July 20, 7:30 pm**

*Reviewed by Stephen Holden – NY Times Not Rated 118 Mins.*

If the setup of the Iranian filmmaker Asghar Farhadi's devastating film "About Elly" sounds familiar, it's because this story of a young woman who disappears during a festive weekend outing at a coastal resort resembles that of Michelangelo Antonioni's classic "L'Avventura." In both movies, a frantic and futile search ensues.

But in "L'Avventura" that search is soon abandoned. In "About Elly" the tension mounts, and accusations fly over who is to blame. With reputations at stake, lies are told. As the travelers — three married couples who have brought their children — confront the possibility that Elly may have drowned, perhaps on purpose, the camaraderie among them curdles to rancor, and they are increasingly racked by fear and guilt.



Mr. Farhadi, who achieved international recognition with the similarly complex and brilliant film "A Separation," made after "About Elly," uses the story for other purposes. Where Antonioni's film evoked the metaphysical malaise of Italy's leisure class in that country's postwar boom, "About Elly" depicts the strains between strict Islamic traditions and modernism within Iran's affluent, sophisticated middle class.

On one level, Mr. Farhadi's film is a story of reckless matchmaking gone awry. An organizer of the trip, Sepideh (Golshifteh Farahani), has pressured Elly (Taraneh Alidousti), her daughter's shy, attractive kindergarten teacher, to join the friends on a three-day getaway to a resort on the Caspian Sea. One purpose is to introduce Elly to the handsome Ahmad (Shahab Hosseini), who lives in Germany and whose short marriage to a German woman

recently crumbled. In Ahmad's words, "a bitter ending is better than endless bitterness."

The early scenes plunge us into friendly social high jinks as the joyful vacationers arrive from Tehran and settle into a house that is considerably more decrepit than the place where they had expected to stay. As the group plays charades and volleyball, Elly, polite but nervous, lurks on the fringes. Sepideh is relieved that Ahmad and the others seem to like her.

A major lie has already been told. The old woman who rented them the beach house believes that Ahmad and Elly are newlyweds and brings the bedding for their room. From the outset, Elly, who was reluctant to come, lets it be known that she can stay for only one night.

Back-to-back crises erupt. While the men play volleyball on the beach, Elly agrees to keep an eye on the children. As she helps one of them fly a kite, she momentarily loses track of a little boy who wanders into the rough surf. The other children send up alarms, and the adults rush into the water and barely save his life. The rescue is a thrilling set piece; the cinematography makes you feel on the verge of drowning yourself as the water surges over the wobbling camera.

No sooner have the revelers heaved a collective sigh of relief than they realize that Elly is nowhere to be found, and a second search begins as they try to determine whether Elly drowned in an attempt to save the boy or left without saying goodbye. There are deepening mysteries. If she left, as she said she might, why did she leave things behind?

Sepideh, who spends much of the film on the brink of tears, and her stern, bullying husband, Amir (Mani Haghighi), nearly come to blows when the extent of her machinations comes to light. The movie gives Sepideh's ill-conceived attempt at matchmaking a political dimension by implying it was an act of defiance on her part, and the underlying tension between the couple typifies the state of marriage in Iran's urban middle class. At any moment, the patriarchal prerogative might explode into abuse, and beneath the civilized facade of Iranian life lurks the possibility of violent sexual warfare.

With the appearance of a distraught friend of Elly's, the secrets and lies become more elaborate and far-fetched. And you begin to wonder to what extent the film is a critique of an entire society in which the disparity between tradition and modernity is irreconcilable.

"About Elly" is gorgeous to look at. The ever-changing sky and sea lend it a moodiness so palpable that the climate itself seems a major character dictating the course of events; the weather rules.

In Persian with English subtitles.

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# THE WOLFPACK

Monday, July 27, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Manohla Dargis - NYT    Rated R    84 Mins.

Movies can change your life, but can they save it? For most people that probably sounds foolish, but the six brothers featured in the astonishing documentary “The Wolfpack” aren’t most people. For much of their lives, these six ingenious young men used the movies to imaginatively if not physically break out of their Lower Manhattan apartment in a building run by the New York City Housing Authority. Even as their father all but imprisoned them (one year they never left the apartment), they made great metaphoric escapes by immersing themselves in the fictional realms created by directors like Francis Ford Coppola and Quentin Tarantino.

The Angulo brothers — originally named Bhagavan, Govinda, Narayana, Mukunda, Krsna and Jagadisa, now ages 23 to 16 — made their escapes the way many people do, by watching movies at home on VHS and DVD. But they also recreated, on camera and off, favorites like “The Dark Knight” using handmade costumes, face paint and scripts they transcribed line by line without a computer. To replicate Batman’s signature Gotham-gone-Goth look, Mukunda explains, they repurposed yoga mats and cereal-box cardboard, displaying the kind of tape-and-spit creativity that’s a hallmark of movie-crazed youngsters and real independent filmmakers everywhere. The home-schooled Angulos weren’t goofing around in between play dates and Little League practices, neither of which they apparently experienced: For them, movies were a form of self-expression as well as a kind of survival.

That makes this warm, disarmingly optimistic documentary sound desperately sad when it’s anything but. Much of the back story for “The Wolfpack” could have gone full-bore Dickensian, as suggested by the family’s unusual history and rundown apartment, with its sad, shabby carpeting and cracked windows. It’s easy to imagine what an exploitative director, using artful editing and a sinister score, could have done to darken this material. At the same time, it’s hard to imagine a more sensitive director for this story than Crystal Moselle, a 34-year-old who five years ago discovered the brothers soon after they began making unaccompanied excursions outside. Sometimes, all you need is a great subject to make a great documentary — or a willingness to chase after total strangers.

A gifted editor helps, and “The Wolfpack” has one in Enat Sidi, a veteran who aided Ms. Moselle in shaping years of material into a streamlined 84-minute chronicle of love and resilience. The family’s story emerges elliptically as the boys grow up on screen, largely in intimate moments in which one or another — the four eldest boys do much of the talking — open up about their lives with indoor voices colored with hints of Steve Buscemi (of “Reservoir Dogs,” another favorite). Their mother, Susanne Angulo (she now uses her maiden name, Reisenbichler, as do two of her sons), met their father, Oscar Angulo, on the trail to Machu Picchu. She was from the Midwest, he was from Peru, and together they traveled the United States and had seven children (including Visnu, a disabled daughter) to whom they gave Sanskrit names.

Ms. Moselle tends to omit the kind of information that might have made it into another documentary, including outside testimonials, supporting evidence and even establishing identifiers. There is no introductory text to set the scene and no voice-over to fill in the gaps; the movie just opens on a bleak New York cityscape, the camera skittishly poking around outside a brick high rise. The only people

who speak in the movie are the Angulos and, presumably, Ms. Moselle, so you have to take it on faith that everything in it is true. (Ms. Moselle doesn’t identify herself, but I assume that’s her tossing out periodic off-camera remarks.) Yet what might elsewhere register as problematic, including a restricted focus and borderline naïve approach, actually strengthens the movie.



“The Wolfpack” has the virtue of an unfamiliar tale, one that’s further distinguished by the persuasive intimacy that comes from the Angulo brothers’ sincerity and openness, and their obvious love for their family. Ms. Moselle’s affable informality adds to the intimacy — the brothers tend to come across more like friends than subjects — as does the claustrophobia of their apartment, a warren of rooms with a long hall that seems to grow shorter as the movie unfolds. In one arresting video snippet, a few brothers zip down that hall on scooters, followed by another wearing in-line skates. For years, this narrow corridor, you realize, was their playground, their skate park, too. And their great outdoors? That was the world that they watched from their windows as it indifferently passed them by.

In its intense personal quality and complex family dynamics as well as in Ms. Moselle’s disregard for (or lack of interest in) the questions that some of her methods raise, “The Wolfpack” can bring to mind Albert and David Maysles’s “Grey Gardens.” It’s important to underscore that there’s never any question as to the mental health of the Angulo brothers, unlike with the mother-daughter duo in “Grey Gardens,” another documentary that benefits from closing the traditional divide between filmmaker and subject. The Angulo brothers come off as smart, well-adjusted and charmingly eccentric; in other words, they’re New Yorkers. And while they’re movie mad, they belong to the same great tribe that many of us do, a tribe that finds joy and sustenance being transported into other worlds.

Given how much the brothers share, candidly and obliquely, and given their ages, it never feels as if Ms. Moselle is exploiting them; she never prods them, at least on camera, to reveal more than they seem to want to. Documentary has a tradition of trafficking in the misery of other people’s lives, so it’s a relief that “The Wolfpack” doesn’t drag you down or offer packaged uplift, but instead tells a strange tale with heart and generosity. You’re left with the sense that something went wrong for this family, but that whatever did (no laws seem to have been broken) is none of our business. “The Wolfpack” is a reminder that documentary cinema isn’t a license to snoop into other lives (sometimes, all you need is a cordial visit) and that while movies can save lives, that works only if there is also as much love as there is here.

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## Monday, August 10, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Manohla Dargis - NYT Rated PG-13 80 Mins.

There are few better ways right now to spend 80 movie minutes than to see "Iris," a delightful eye-opener about life, love, statement eyeglasses, bracelets the size of tricycle tires and the art of making the grandest of entrances. Directed by Albert Maysles — one half of the legendary documentary team that made "Grey Gardens" — this is a documentary about a very different kind of woman who holds your imagination from the moment she appears. You can't take your eyes off Iris Apfel (she wouldn't have it any other way), but, then, why would you want to?



You may have seen her before, peering out of a luxury magazine in a gaudy fur cloud in a jewelry advertisement or, in another campaign, cozily perched on a park bench alongside the model Karlie Kloss. Ms. Kloss wears all white; Ms. Apfel, her customary bold palette muted, wears blue socks with white polka dots, tee-ready green slacks and a dusky rose coat, a large white bow tied around her neck. The bow makes her look like a gift, which, in a way, she is. As you discover, she would prefer you look at the bow than try to untie it to see what lies beneath. You get the bullet-point versions of her life both in talking-head interviews and while she's on the somewhat slow, but persistent run: She was born in Queens, in 1921, and married a charmer named Carl Apfel, with whom she ran a textile company and engaged in extreme globe-trotting. They never had children; they had each other. They also had the obvious means to collect an astonishment of luxury items and cut-rate stuff, some of which she wears, some of which she lives with, like the oversized replica of the RCA dog, plush toys, statuary, ornate vases and gilt mirrors.

You could furnish a couple of flats with all the furniture and tchotchkes that adorn the Apfels' homes, including one apartment on Park Avenue and another in Palm Beach. (She appears to be the family shopper, at least these days.) You could fill an exhibition with all of her outfits, which is, on a modest level, what the Metropolitan Museum of Art did with "Rara Avis: Selections From the Iris Apfel Collection," which opened in September 2005. In the movie, Harold Koda, the curator in charge of the museum's Costume Institute, discusses the pragmatic reasons and artistic rationale for highlighting objects from Ms. Apfel's voluminous holdings. A smash, the exhibition dazzled fashion insiders and traveled to other museums. It also turned Ms. Apfel into a star.

She prefers the descriptor "geriatric starlet" — her turns of phrase are as vibrantly ornamented as her body — a celebrity that led to swarming fans, interviews, magazine spreads and of course this documentary. She clearly enjoys the attention, even if it sometimes seems to carry the sour whiff of condescension. Every so often in the documentary, you can hear someone who isn't part of the movie team talk to Ms. Apfel in the patronizing tones that some reserve for old folks, children, foreigners and "the help," as if they were speaking to someone stupid when it's the reverse. Mr. Maysles, working with a small crew, doesn't comment on these moments, but his point of view is evident in every camera angle and edit in this exactly constructed documentary.

A few years ago, Architectural Digest described Ms. Apfel's Park Avenue apartment as looking "a little as if the Collyer brothers had moved in with Madame de Pompadour." That's a clever bit of journalistic acid, but the documentary paints a vividly contrary picture. A radical individualist, Ms. Apfel embodies a profoundly alternative reality and another kind of truth, one that may be threatening to some. Writers tend to deploy words like kooky, eccentric and so forth when describing her style, when, mostly, I think, they mean "does not compute." There's an uneasiness to even some of this praise, a disquiet that, in the movie, you see and hear in certain words and looks. Are these people admiring or threatened? It's hard to know, just as it's tough to tell if the patronizing tones are because of her age, looks or both. What is clear is that while there are several stories folded into "Iris" — a marriage tale, an ode to multiculturalism and a fashion spectacular — it is also about the insistent rejection of monocultural conformity.

"Iris" is the second-to-last documentary from Mr. Maysles, who died on March 5. (His final is "In Transit.") Mr. Maysles, with his brother, David (who died in 1987), directed a number of genre-defining documentaries, including "Salesman," "Gimme Shelter" and, of course, "Grey Gardens." In that film, the brothers defy direct-cinema conventions by inserting themselves into the picture, a potential transgression that personalizes the movie all the more. In some documentaries, the director prefers to stay out of sight and perhaps out of mind. Here, though, Mr. Maysles pops up again, both on camera and as an out-of-frame presence that Ms. Apfel addresses. These moments pierce the heart because he's now gone and because, you sense, that this portrait of a glorious rebel is also and unmistakably a self-portrait.

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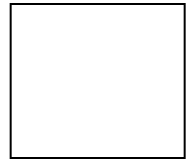
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"Outstanding! A subtle psychological thriller"

*Phillip French, The Guardian*

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"Sensational. It is doubtful you'll see a better documentary this year."

*Dennis Dermody - Paper*

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