

MEET the PATELS

Monday, January 11, 7:30 pm

**Special Screening at the Ogden 6 Theatre
1227 East Ogden Avenue, Naperville, IL**

Reviewed by Kenneth Turan - LA Times *Rated PG* *88 Mins.*

"Meet The Patels" is the unlikeliest of success stories. It's a documentary that began as a home movie and ended up a warm and funny feature. It turned one man's culturally specific journey into a lively and engaging universal story made with an unmistakable sense of fun.

But "Meet The Patels" is more than just a hoot. Its candor and empathy allow it to make keen points about love, marriage, family and the unexpected complications that American freedoms can bring to immigrant lives.

Front and center in this endeavor is Ravi Patel, whose story this is and who co-directed the film with his sister Geeta (who is also the cinematographer) and costars in it with his parents Champa and Vasant. "Meet The Patels" is a family affair from beginning to end.

Before we meet the Patels in person, the film begins with a cartoon version of Ravi (animated by Jim Richardson) talking to the camera and bringing us up to date on the back story of his life.

A first-generation Indian American, Ravi reveals that just before filming began he broke up with his first serious girlfriend, the red-haired, non-Indian Audrey.

Ravi Patel went on a lot of dates while filming the documentary "Meet the Patels." Here he gives us his best dating tips. And his disclaimer: He's bad at dating.

Not only that, Ravi's immigrant parents, fixated on his marrying an Indian, were never told of Audrey's existence, so "in Mom and Dad's eyes, I've never had a girlfriend." To be approaching 30 without ever having had marriage prospects is a family crisis of the first water. As father Vasant tells him, "Not getting married is the biggest loser you can be."

In broad outline, of course, this story is not an unfamiliar one, but two things make it special, starting with Ravi's live-wire personality.

A working actor and comedian who has an antic presence and a fine deadpan face, Ravi's sharp and funny voiceover (heard both over the footage his sister shot and speaking to the audience in the animation) is a high-energy component that unifies the film.

Ravi's appealing comic charisma sets "Meet The Patels'" tone, leading to such elements as bright yellow arrows that point out amusing things on screen and lots of brief interviews with both Ravi's friends and his parents' friends about Adventures in Matchmaking, Indian Style.

The second factor that makes "Meet the Patels" so attractive is the detailed specificity of both Ravi's immediate family and the broader Indian cultural context everyone is rooted in.

Both Ravi's father Vasant, a self-made success whose favorite phrase is, "Look at me now," and his acerbic mother Champa, a celebrated matchmaker in her home village, are vivid characters.

The happy veterans of a 35-year arranged marriage that was agreed to after a single 10-minute meeting ("Some people date and get married; we did it the opposite" his father says), they are understandably high on that process and want Ravi to give it a try.

Adding to the complications is the unavoidable fact that Ravi is a Patel, which makes him "unconditionally part of the biggest family in the world." Ravi's parents expect him to marry another member of the Patel clan, which is based in a 50-square-mile radius in India's Gujarat province but now boasts Patels all over the world.

"Meet The Patels" begins with sequences that took place during a family visit to India, a visual record whose shaky cinematography (sister Geeta was just learning to use the camera) becomes one of the film's unexpectedly amusing aspects.

"You know that girl in 'Eat, Pray, Love?'" Ravi asks. "She goes through a breakup, goes on the existential journey to India to get over depression, finds what she really wanted in life. I was that girl. Except my family was with me the entire time."



Disheartened by his breakup with Audrey and genuinely attracted to the family nature of Indian culture, Ravi decides to embark on a grand experiment.

Pushing aside thoughts that "it's pathetic to have your mom and dad set you up," he agrees to wholeheartedly participate in the modern version of arranged marriage — which turns out to have several permutations, each more unusual than the last.

First comes immersion in a system called "Bio-dating," which involves the families of eligible parties exchanging detailed resumes before phone calls are made and dates (often filmed by Geeta) are arranged. Then there are Indian matrimonial websites, trips to India during the courtship-heavy wedding season, even participation in a Patel Matrimonial Convention where speed dating between eager-to-wed Patels is the order of the day.

Ravi's combination of sincere participation and amused disbelief at what he's gotten himself into gives "Meet the Patels" its winning personality. That and the film's unexpected moments of truth and clarity.

"What can I say, America is different," mother Champa says at a particularly low point as she tries to put into words the sadness she feels about a son who doesn't feel bound to follow the traditional ways. It's a sentiment about the confusions and expectations of cultural transitions that almost anyone can identify with, especially today.



Monday, January 25, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Manohla Dargis - NY Times Not Rated 75 Mins.

Near the end of her dreamy, drifty and altogether lovely movie “Heart of a Dog,” Laurie Anderson does what she is so great at doing: She tells a story. This one is too powerful to ruin here, but the story and its placement speak to how she makes meaning. Speaking in voice-over, as she does throughout, with her perfect phrasing and warm, gently wry tone, she recounts a harrowing episode from her childhood. It’s one that she had described before, she says. But one day she realized that she had been omitting some horrifying details. She had “cleaned it up,” as she puts it, because that’s what we do: “You get your story and you hold onto it, and every time you tell it, you forget it more.”

“Heart of a Dog” is about telling and remembering and forgetting, and how we put together the fragments that make up our lives — their flotsam and jetsam, highs and lows, meaningful and slight details, shrieking and weeping headline news. This purposefully fissured quality extends to the movie itself, which is by turns narratively straightforward and playfully experimental, light and heavy (it’s a fast 75 minutes), accessible and opaque, concrete and abstract. And while it’s drizzled in sadness — one of its recurrent images is of rain splattered across glass — it joyfully embraces silliness, as when a blind dog named Lolabelle plays the piano. It’s a home movie of a type, if one that, like a stone skipped across a still lake, leaves expanding rings in its path.

Ms. Anderson shot much of “Heart of a Dog” herself, which gives it a distinct personal quality that dovetails with her intimate, sometimes confessional narration. Like many filmmakers, she offers you a kind of interpretive key to the movie in its opening moments, starting with close-ups that move across an artwork washed in sepia and embellished with dark squiggles and words. The closeness of these shots makes it initially difficult to grasp the literal big picture, though there are readable words (“hot tin roofs” upside down) and then human figures. Suddenly, an illustration of Ms. Anderson’s face materializes and begins speaking. “This is my dream body,” she says, “the one I use to walk around in my dreams.” It’s her version, I think, of “Once upon a time.”



What follows is partly a meditation on loss and love that begins with the death of her mother and moves on to include the deaths of Ms. Anderson’s talented and tuneful rat terrier, Lolabelle; her friend, the

brilliant artist Gordon Matta-Clark (1943-1978); and her husband, Lou Reed. Mr. Reed, who died in 2013, hovers over “Heart of a Dog,” his face surfacing intermittently and fleetingly, wavering into visibility like an image that’s caught behind glass or reflected in a mirror, a distancing that suggests that he is present and not present at the same time. (One of his most moving appearances occurs during the final credits.) “Every love story is a ghost story,” Ms. Anderson says at one point, quoting David Foster Wallace, yet another lingering spirit.

Her ghosts can materialize in unexpected fashion. In addition to her more private reveries, Ms. Anderson ventures, as she has throughout her career, into overtly political terrain, as when she introduces Sept. 11. Her entry into this fraught subject is characteristically disarming. She begins by talking about her home in the West Village, which overlooks the West Side Highway, and how, after Sept. 11, with her neighborhood smothered in ash, she escaped to the mountains of Northern California with Lolabelle. The idea was to see if she could talk to Lolabelle — rat terriers, Ms. Anderson says, can understand about 500 words. It’s a whimsical objective that turns serious when, amid the brightly lighted nature shots of her and Lolabelle, she connects the threat of soaring hawks to that of airplanes.



It’s hard to think of many artists who could pull off that kind of connection. Ms. Anderson’s lulling voice smooths the way, as does the movie’s associative form. Although “Heart of a Dog” can seem somewhat shapeless at first glance, as if Ms. Anderson were just aimlessly floating from topic to topic (from her mother to the surveillance state and how dogs see color), she is recurrently circling back rather than simply moving forward. Much like a philosopher, she advances, loops back, deepens the argument — with a tender image of Lolabelle, a reference to Tibetan Buddhism, a shot of trees, a nod to Wittgenstein — and then she advances again and circles back once more. At times, it feels as if she too were haunting her movie even as, with every image and word, she fills it with life.

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JAFAR PANAHI'S TAXI

Monday, February 8, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by A.O. Scott - NY Times Not Rated 82 Mins.

A section of "Taxi" is devoted to an encounter between two Iranian filmmakers. One of them is Jafar Panahi, the director of this movie and one of the most internationally celebrated figures in contemporary Iranian cinema. The other is his niece Hana, a sharp-tongued tween who must make a short movie as part of a school assignment. The teacher has handed out a set of guidelines that are more or less consistent with the government's censorship rules.

Mr. Panahi is a longstanding expert in such matters, with extensive firsthand knowledge of how Iranian authorities deal with filmmakers who displease them. In 2010, he was officially barred from pursuing his profession, and "Taxi" is the third feature he has made in defiance of — and also, cleverly, in compliance with — that prohibition.

The first, shot largely on a mobile-phone camera when Mr. Panahi was under intense legal pressure from the government in 2011, was "This Is Not a Film," a meditation on cinema and freedom as nuanced as its title is blunt. It was followed by "Closed Curtain" (2014), a through-the-looking-glass hybrid of documentary and melodrama that explores the porous boundary between cinema and reality.

"Taxi," which won the top prize at the Berlin Film Festival in February, takes up some of the same themes. It's playful and thoughtful, informed by the director's affable, patient, slightly worried demeanor. His kind face is almost always on screen, but he's not a self-conscious presence like, say, Woody Allen (whose name is dropped) or Nanni Moretti. He's a regular guy going about his day. What does it take to be a filmmaker? Maybe just curiosity, compassion and open eyes.

A camera, too, of course. Which hardly counts as special equipment these days. In "Taxi," everybody has one, and the conceit of the movie is that its auteur is a humble cabdriver with a camera mounted on the dashboard of his car. He's not really trying to fool anyone. Mr. Panahi is well known enough to be recognized by some of his passengers, most of whom may not really be passengers at all, but people he has cajoled into playing versions of themselves. A lot of what we see seems contrived. But then again, a lot of it seems spontaneous. It's almost impossible to tell the difference until the brilliant final shot. But can you even call it a "shot" when the camera has been left running by accident?

This kind of ambiguity is part of the fun: "Taxi" is full of wry jokes, surprising incidents and allusions to Mr. Panahi's earlier work. He is a pretty bad taxi driver, unsure of the routes to well-known Tehran landmarks and less than diligent about collecting fares and delivering customers to their destinations. "I'll let you out here and you can get another cab," he says more than once. This creates a lot of turnover, and a series of "chance" encounters with fellow citizens, including a dealer in pirated DVDs (Mr. Panahi used to be one of his customers) and two older women carrying goldfish in an open glass bowl.

Those women may remind Mr. Panahi's fans of "The White Balloon," his first feature, which also involved a goldfish. "Taxi" abounds with similar reminders: anecdotes that recall episodes in "The Circle" and "Offside"; a glimpse of a man delivering pizza brings to mind "Crimson Gold"; Hana's wait for her uncle to pick her up at school is an echo of "The Mirror." This may sound like artistic vanity, but it's actually a kind of humility. Mr. Panahi pulled those stories from the life that surrounded him, and that life — the bustle and contention of Tehran; the cruelty and hypocrisy of Iranian society; the kindness and tenacity of ordinary people — remains an inexhaustible reservoir of narrative possibilities.

And also a fertile breeding ground for cinema. Hana's school project is just one of several movies tucked inside of "Taxi." An old friend of Mr. Panahi's shares a security video recording a crime committed against him. A man who has been in a motorbike accident, his bleeding head cradled in the lap of his anguished wife, asks Mr. Panahi to make a cellphone video of his last testament. Even the simplest, most unmediated records of human behavior are shaped, edited and manipulated. Everyone is a filmmaker.

"Taxi," though, happens to be the work of a great one, one of the most humane and imaginative practitioners of the art currently working. "The Circle" was an unsparing look at the condition of women under the thumb of traditional patriarchy and religious dictatorship. "Crimson Gold" cast a harsh light on Iran's economic inequalities and on its neglect of its military veterans. These films are powerful pieces of social criticism, but it is their combination of structural elegance with tough naturalism that places them among the essential movies of our time.

The same can be said about "Taxi," which offers, in its unassuming way, one of the most captivating cinematic experiences of this year. Though it is gentle and meditative rather than confrontational, the film nonetheless bristles with topical concerns. It begins with a tense back-seat argument about the death penalty and eventually turns its gaze on poverty, violence, sexism and censorship. Like Mr. Panahi's cab, his film is equipped with both windows and mirrors. It's reflective and revealing, intimate and wide-ranging, compact and moving. In Farsi with English subtitles.

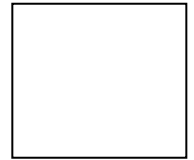
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"Charming... and hilarious.... It's rare to come across documentaries that are authentic and laugh-out-loud funny. 'Meet the Patels' is such a gem."

The Examiner

Monday, January 11 at 7:30 pm at the Ogden 6

"Wildly inventive...Philosophically astute, emotionally charged..."

A. O. Scott - *New York Times*

Monday, January 25 at 7:30 pm



"One of the most captivating cinematic experiences of 2015."

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Monday, February 8 at 7:30 pm