

Confessions of Miss Mischief

When Marjane Satrapi was a rebellious 14-year-old in Tehran, her parents sent her to Europe, afraid she'd fall foul of the Revolutionary Guard. Now she has turned her comic book memoir into an award-winning film. She talks to **Simon Hattenstone**



Simon Hattenstone

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Personal view ... Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis

Marjane Satrapi gusts into the room like a hurricane. She is a tiny woman propped up on huge white platform heels. She is dressed in black and is beautiful in a cubist way - Picasso could have sculpted her. Her hair is black, her mouth is a gash of red lipstick, she is talking 20 to the dozen, and smoke seems to be pouring out of every visible orifice. Everything about her is cartoon-like. Which is appropriate because she is best known as a cartoon character in her own comic books.

Persepolis

Release: 2007

Country: France

Cert (UK): 12A

Runtime: 95 mins

Directors: Marjane Satrapi, Vincent Paronnaud

Cast: Catherine Deneuve, Chiara Mastroianni, Chiara Mastroianni, Danielle Darrieux, Simon Abkarian

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Satrapi, 38, is the author of *Persepolis*, a graphic memoir recounting her childhood in Iran, the overthrow of the corrupt Shah, the terror of the Khomeini years, the war with Iraq, the refuge she sought in Europe, and her painful path to adulthood. *Persepolis*, the Greek name for Persia, is desperately moving and extremely funny - a little girl's sarcastic love letter to her family. Young Marjane is a stropky, piss-taking, veil-wearing Marxist-anarchist who embraces her many contradictions with self-absorbed relish. When she's not preaching communism, she's predicting her future as a religious prophet; when she's not pogoing down the streets as a young punk, she's listening to the turgid prog rock of Camel or the bubblegum pop of Kim Wilde.

Now she has turned the book into an equally brilliant animated film, co-directed with fellow comic book writer Vincent Paronnaud. The movie is as stark and simple as her own drawings (her family could be an Iranian Simpsons - only real), with the added bonus of an expressionist feel that recalls the films of Fritz Lang.

Persepolis has been dismissed by the Iranian authorities as Islamophobic, but Satrapi says this is ridiculous - she is not a political animal or a religious commentator, she is an artist. And while *Persepolis* is scathing about the hypocrisies and cruelties of Iran's theocracy, she is equally critical of George Bush's Christian fundamentalism. She accuses the west of cultural imperialism, saying it always reduces Iran to Hizbullah or 1001 Arabian Nights; the flying carpet or the flying rocket. What she wanted to do in *Persepolis* was tell her story and show what it means to be Iranian for her.

Satrapi was born in 1969 in Rasht, near the Caspian Sea, and grew up in Tehran, where her father was an engineer and her mother a dress designer. She is descended from Iranian aristocrats - her maternal great-grandfather was Nasser-al-Din Shah, Persian emperor from 1848 to 1896, and her grandfather was a prince. But she stresses this does not make her quite so privileged as it sounds - her great-grandfather had 100 wives. Go back far enough, and you'll find out most Iranian families are blue-blooded, she says.

Her parents were Marxist intellectuals who enjoyed the good life - they drove a Cadillac, drank alcohol, ate at the best places, were thoroughly westernised. They campaigned against the Shah, and looked forward to the Islamic revolution till it happened. In Persepolis she visits her beloved uncle in jail awaiting execution. After her neighbour's house is bombed, she finds her best friend's bracelet in the rubble "attached to something". The elliptical nature of the storytelling (life-changing events can start and finish in one panel) makes it all the more heartbreaking.

As a child, Satrapi was supremely gobby. Her parents always encouraged her to have her own opinion. She says there is something Hitleresque in her character that she has inherited from her father - she means in the power of her convictions rather than her politics. Satrapi was a sceptic from the off. "If the majority of people were right, we'd be living in paradise. But we are not living in paradise, we are living in hell. What does it mean? That means the majority of people are wrong. So I never believed what people told me."

There were no toys in the house, but more books than she could read. She was an only child and talked and played cards for entertainment. "I always used to win because I cheat." She smiles - a naughty-girl smile. "I mean playing without cheating, what is the point? The second I learned how to play, I learned how to cheat, too." Her parents were nice people, she says - they pretended they didn't know she was cheating.

But Marjane was a worry for them. When she wasn't cheating or asking precocious questions she would be out in Tehran buying contraband tapes, spreading the word of western pop and wearing Michael Jackson T-shirts under the veil. Her parents feared she would get into serious trouble with the Revolutionary Guard. Soon after their neighbours were bombed, they sent 14-year-old Marjane away to Austria to study. Part of the problem, she says, is that she was so intelligent, so easily bored by people and their ideas. I ask her whether she has met anybody as intelligent as herself? She shakes her head, and snorts: "No. Maybe Vincent, the guy with whom I made the movie."

Satrapi could easily be obnoxious, but she's not - saved by her self-awareness, and her humour. She says that she painted her most accurate self-portrait in her last book, *Chicken With Plums*, about her great-uncle Nasser Ali Khan, a musician who played the tar, a long-necked lute. When his wife breaks his instrument, the despairing musician starves himself and takes to his bed to die, which he does eight days later. "He is completely unbearable, narcissistic, egocentric but also lovely and charming. That's actually how I see myself. You have to be narcissistic to be an artist. You have to think you are the centre of the whole thing otherwise why do you create? The only thing is to recognise it, and then you make the best of it."

We meet in London. She can't stand Britain because of the smoking ban. She suggests that we talk in her hotel room because at least she will be able to smoke there. She lives for her cigs, and is quite happy to die for them, she says. "For me smoking is like looking at your soul," she says in a rasping hybrid accent. "There is something extraordinarily poetic about smoking - from the gesture of holding a cigarette, turning it on, smoking it, the taste of it, the smell of it, I love everything about smoking." She has no truck with the kill-joys who want to stop us doing all the things that we enjoy - simply because it might prolong our life. "Anything that has a relationship with pleasure we reject it. Eating, they talk about cholesterol; making love, they talk about Aids; you talk about smoking, they talk about cancer. It's a very sick society that rejects pleasure." She's working herself up into a climax of disgust. "Why should we live like sick people just to give some fresh meat to the ground? I hope my meat is so rotten no worm in the whole universe will want to come and eat it. I want to be rotten to accept the idea of dying. Every day you live you get one day closer to death. If you are never born you will never die. Giving birth is also giving death." She smiles, having hit on the solution to combating death.

It's not surprising that the teenage Satrapi lost her way in Europe. She expected to find herself in a secular paradise looked after by Zozo, her mother's best friend. In Persepolis, she imagines how it will be: "It's going to be cool to go to school with a veil, to not have to beat oneself every day for the war martyrs." In fact, Zozo leaves her in a boarding house run by nuns and Marjane is thrown out for calling the mother superior a prostitute when she says Iranians are "uneducated". "In every religion you find the same extremists," young Marjane concludes.

Satrapi discovered boys and booze. At her nadir she was peddling drugs, homeless, and she almost died from bronchitis. After four years in Vienna, she admitted defeat, put on her veil and returned home.

Back in Iran, she became even more depressed. She was 19 years old, her friends had rejected her as a western decadent, and she belonged nowhere - a westerner in Iran, an Iranian in the west. She tried to slit her wrists, but failed miserably - a fruit knife was never going to do the trick. She took an overdose of antidepressants, but they just made her sleep for three days.

"This is past, and it really comes from a very dark moment of my life. Dying is..." For once, she fails to complete a sentence. "When people say there is no alternative, there is always an alternative - to die, for example. It's a choice. You always have this choice."

Her work, like her life, seems to segue from the ecstatic to the depressive. "Well depressive, I don't know. If you have a little sensibility or a heart you have all the reason to be depressed once in a while. But the depression is like a motor for creation. I need a little bit of depression, a bit of acid in my stomach, to be able to create. When I'm happy I just want to dance."

She studied graphic arts in Iran and at 21 married a young artist who turned out to be her polar opposite. He allowed her to do what she wanted, but she still felt imprisoned. A month later they were in separate beds, three years later they were divorced.

As a young woman, she says, she got things so wrong. "I was so stupid when I was 20. I could do mathematics extremely quickly so I had this kind of intelligence, but the intelligence of life I didn't have. I was too aggressive, making all the bad choices, believing I was a nice person and I was not, believing I was a mean person and I wasn't. Everything I thought was wrong. With age things become better and better."

At 24, she returned to Europe, and did a second art degree in Strasbourg. She supported herself by teaching aerobics and languages. When she finished studying she expected to be feted, but no one was interested. "When you go to art school you think you are the centre of the universe, the next Pablo Picasso, you'll come out of the art school and everyone will say, 'Pablo where were you? We were all waiting for you.' But nobody is waiting for you. Not only are they not waiting for you, they make you that." She gives me the finger. "That is the way it was. They were right to reject me. I reworked the projects they rejected and they became better."

I tell her she's still got something of the young punk about her today. No, she protests, she is every inch the bourgeoisie. "I'm a lady." She likes the sound of lady so much that she repeats it, running it off her tongue with lascivious delight. "I'm a lady." She likes to mislead people, she says. "It is better not to look like what you are; it is better to look like a bourgeois woman because then all the doors are open for you and then you can just go and make hell. That is much more exciting." She despairs at the lack of ambition in today's youth. "Their dream is to become Paris Hilton."

Satrapi, who has lived in Paris for 12 years, says there is so much to fear in today's world - the potential for nuclear weapons in Iran, the actuality of nuclear weapons in the US; the blind faith of both Bush and Iran's president Ahmadinejad, who trust more in God than political process. Even the French are voting for the politics of fear and loathing, she says with contempt.

She thinks the world is headed for disaster now there is no counter to capitalism. "Now China has become capitalist, we are all going in the same direction. I am not defending communism, but when you have a power that goes in one direction, you need a power that goes in the other direction. Another thing is that for 10 years we have been naming the evil - pointing to 'the axis of evil'. Naming the evil is the most dangerous thing to do; that is the beginning of fascism. If the evil is the people of one place or one country, well, let's go and exterminate all of them... I am just an artist and my duty is to ask questions."

Her identity as an artist was shaped in 1995 when she was given Art Spiegelman's classic Holocaust comic book, *Maus*, as a birthday present. She had no idea art could tell stories in such a way. Satrapi decided the comic book would be her chosen form. She was rejected time and again. She went to see the art director of one prominent French publisher who hated her work so much he became angry. "He said you don't have any style, it goes in all different directions, and I came home depressed and cried for a whole week. Then two years after *Persepolis* was published and I got some prizes and I had a name, the secretary of this guy called me and he says, this guy wants to see you. So I went with the same book as I had been to see him with before, and he was like, 'What courage! You have tried all these different styles.' I said that's not what you told me three years ago. And he said, 'Did I see you three years ago?' And I said, 'You don't have a very good memory, but I do." She laughs. "We ended up working together. I'm not a revenger kind of

person."

She started writing *Persepolis* when she was 29 in 1999, and it was published the following year. If she had written it 10 years earlier it would have been rubbish, she says, because it would have been too angry. Back then, her world was simply divided into goodies and baddies. Whereas the extremists of her youth took the shape of mullahs, now she sees them everywhere. "I am against fundamentalism. I am not against any religion, Islam, Judaism, Christianity etc. It is the use of an ideology to kill people that I am against." She is not critical of the veil per se, she is critical of its imposition. "I really believe in a society where if someone wants to walk in the street completely naked they will be able to, and if someone wants to wear a veil they will also be able to."

Is she religious? "Religion is a very personal affair. It's between someone and what he considers the god, or the supreme spirit or whatever, and it's very good while it remains personal. The second it becomes public, it's no good. And that's why I don't make it public either."

When *Persepolis* was published she thought 300 people would buy it "to help this poor Iranian girl living in Paris". So far it has sold well over a million copies and has been translated into 24 languages. (Satrapi herself speaks six languages - Farsi, French, German, English, Swedish, Italian.) What has delighted her is the story's universal appeal - it's not just about Iran, it's about growing up in any place with problems.

There is still something rootless about Satrapi. Now that the French have banned smoking in public places, she is looking to move again - perhaps to Greece. She has not returned to Iran, where her parents still live, for eight years. She does not know how safe she would be in Iran, where her books are available in samizdat form. She fears she might be thrown into jail - not a risk she is prepared to take.

For now, perhaps her main contact with Iran is through her work. The film of *Persepolis*, which was nominated for the best animated feature Oscar, features the voice of her all-time hero Iggy Pop, and those of Catherine Deneuve, Gena Rowlands and Chiara Mastroianni, as young Marjane. "For me Iggy Pop is a crooner, but he's a desperate, angry crooner." A similar marriage of the tender and the spiky, the humane and the misanthropic, is what makes her work so memorable. Her greatest creations are representations of the family members she most loves; the sexy grandmother who would bathe her breasts in milk to keep them firm; the charismatic father who adored his life of luxury every bit as much as his Marxist-Leninist ideology; the thoroughly modern mother who wept when her daughter married so young.

She is amazed how life has worked out. In France, she married a man about whom she will say nothing other than that he is Swedish. They have no children. "I don't understand when people say it is so natural to make children... I want to devote my life to my art. And I know if I'm a man and I say that I would be this great artist who sacrifices life for his talent, but since I am a woman I become this ambitious bitch who doesn't want to have kids. Some people think like that, but I don't care."

Now she has sufficient distance from the past, she can see that things are probably as good as they get. "I'm this woman coming from Iran, I've succeeded in what I wanted, I live in the city I want, I live with the man I want, I make the work I want, and they pay me for it, which is incredible. How many people in the world have this luck?"

· The film *Persepolis* will be released on April 25.

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