



Karlovy Vary  
International Film Festival

HAMID REZA ABBASI

SADAF ASGARI

# EMPTY NETS

## تورهای خالی

A FILM BY  
BEHROOZ KARAMIZADE

PLUTO FILM PRESENTS A BASIS BERLIN FILMPRODUKTION IN CO-PRODUCTION WITH LIVING PICTURES PRODUCTION, RAINY PICTURES AND ZDF / DAS KLEINE FERNSEHSPIEL IN COLLABORATION WITH ARTE  
FUNDED BY FEDERAL GOVERNMENT COMMISSIONER FOR CULTURE AND MEDIA, HESSEN FILM & MEDIEN, KURATORIUM JUNGER DEUTSCHER FILM, GERMAN FEDERAL FILM FUND (DFFF) "EMPTY NETS"  
WITH HAMID REZA ABBASI, SADAF ASGARI, KEYVAN MOHAMADI, PANTEA PANARIHA. DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY ASHKAN ASHKANI. FILM EDITOR ANNE JÜNEMANN (BFS). VFX SUPERVISOR FRANK KAMINSKI.  
PRODUCTION & COSTUME DESIGN SHAHRAM KARIMI. ART DIRECTOR LEILA NAGHDI-PARI. MAKEUP ARTIST ELHAM SALEHI. CASTING SANAZ GHOTB. ORIGINAL MUSIC JOHN GÜRTLER, JAN MISERRE. FEATURING SABAN ALIZADEH.  
SOUND MIXER BAHMAN ARDALAN. SOUND DESIGN SEBASTIAN TESCH. RE-RECORDING MIXER ANSGAR FRIERICH, FLORIAN BECK. COMMISSIONING EDITORS CHRISTIAN CLOOS (ZDF / DAS KLEINE FERNSEHSPIEL),  
MARTIN GERHARD, DORIS HEPP (ZDF / ARTE). LINE PRODUCER TOBIAS N. SIEBERT. CO-PRODUCERS JÖRN MÖLLENKAMP, MAJID BARZEGAR. PRODUCERS EVA KEMME,  
ANSGAR FRIERICH, USCHI FELDGES. DIRECTOR & SCREENWRITER BEHROOZ KARAMIZADE.







Karlovy Vary  
International Film Festival  
Crystal Globe Competition

# EMPTY NETS

a film by **Behrooz Karamizade**



**Germany/Iran - 2023 - 101 min - 1:2,39 - 5.1 - Farsi**

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## **SCREENINGS**

Sunday, July 2nd - 8:30 - Congress Hall [Press & Industry]  
Sunday, July 2nd - 17:00 - Grand Hall [Premiere]  
Monday, July 3rd - 10:00 - Pupp Cinema  
Tuesday, July 4th - 16:00 - Lazne III  
Wednesday, July 5th - 16:00 - Congress Hall



# EMPTY NETS

a film by **Behrooz Karamizade**



## LOGLINE

Amir loves Narges and Narges loves Amir. But their hopes and dreams for a life together collide head on with the web of tradition, corruption, and social hierarchy that continues to rule over the lives of a new generation in Iran.

## SYNOPSIS

Twenty somethings Amir and Narges have found what feels like true love in their hometown by the coast of the Caspian sea. But in today's Iran that's far from enough to build a life together, and they are forced to keep the relationship secret. To win over Narges' upper class family and pay an appropriate dowry, Amir needs money, and he needs it fast. With his back against the wall, Amir finds work at a local fishery, where he is drawn into the dangerous but lucrative business of black market caviar smuggling. As Amir's values are compromised by the illegal underworld, Narges stalls for time and tries to delay the arranged marriage her parents are planning for her. Can their love, hopes and dreams survive the tightly knit web of tradition, corruption, and social hierarchy that continues to rule over the lives of a new generation in Iran?



## IN CONVERSATION WITH Behrooz Karamizade

***What inspired you to tell this story of a new generation and their struggles in contemporary Iran?***

It was important for me to make a film about young people in Iran because, from my point of view, they are the social group confronting the biggest and deepest problems. And just as important as the problems themselves is the almost insurmountable lack of future perspectives they are faced with. Because what's worse than having no perspective, not being able to dream? Although the current protests have brought the younger generation into the international spotlight, it's important to acknowledge their problems are structural and multi-layered.

It was in some sense predictable that this pressure and discontent among young people in Iran would eventually be unleashed. That tragic inevitability of this generation's situation was a reason for me to shoot *EMPTY NETS*. I wanted to say something about the unfulfilled dreams and wishes of an entire generation. But I didn't want to talk about the big and unattainable dreams, but rather about tangible and universal dreams, the ones that young people everywhere have. I wanted to show how young people in Iran are faced with failure, even when it comes to these more "simple" dreams.

In my eyes, this is a great tragedy. This tragedy is what *EMPTY NETS* is about.

***EMPTY NETS is also a love story - of love challenged and tested by other, greater forces. How do you see the connection between the personal and the political in the film?***

Like I said, the film is about young people's dreams. And one of the biggest, most

important dreams for young people is love. The universal driving force that can be understood and empathized with by people anywhere in the world. I wanted the audience to perceive the film, and thus life in Iran, not just as "neutral observers." I wanted to draw the audience in close to our protagonist.

The story begins with love. But as it progresses, that moves into the background and other elements come into greater focus. I tried to bring out the daily struggles for the main character Amir, the many setbacks he must overcome and how they lead him to drift into the criminal world. Although Amir does everything to win over his great love Narges, at the same time he is distancing himself from her and their common dream. Because of the social structures and how they inspire Amir's own choices, own actions. In the end, Amir becomes a different person. A person Narges can no longer love.

This contrasting development is the core of the story. A young, naive and honest young man who compromises his moral values because of the harsh and brutal world he lives in. He is increasingly influenced by the codes of a male-dominated society, where the strongest survive and might makes right.

The world of the fishery is something I see as a parable for the weak being oppressed - an unjust and exploitative parallel system where the criminal poachers ruthlessly hunt the endangered sturgeon, disregarding any ethics so they can trade in the precious caviar.

Amir joins the poachers out of necessity, then he becomes one of the criminals. A henchman whose actions also, directly or indirectly, help uphold this parallel system.

***Discontent with the system has been in the news recently, of course. How did you want to take the audience beyond the perspective we get from the daily media coverage?***

Iran is a country with a long history, with traditions and customs that have developed over centuries. It is a religious society where religion establishes many rules and regulates many areas of everyday life. Most people outside Iran understand it only from what they see in the news and the media. And I would say this view is mostly characterized by oversimplified "black and white" thinking.

Both in the script and in how I directed, it was important to me to make a film that could capture the zeitgeist in Iran in its true complexity and address the many layers that define the big social issues – more than we get from the typical reports and coverage. My goal was to address problems such as class differences, corruption, the weight of traditions and other factors without drifting into any of the common clichés.

I wanted to get at the following questions: What is it like to live in a society where you have to fight for the "simplest" things? What does this daily struggle do to people? How does it change their character? How does it change their view of morality?

The current protests have brought young people more into the international spotlight, but their problems also remain structural and very complex: immense unemployment, which goes hand in hand with disastrous economic development. An ever-widening gap between rich and poor and restrictions that can drive women in particular, and lovers like Amir and Narges, to break the law.

Amir himself soon realizes that he won't get far with values like honesty, solidarity and diligence alone. And Narges is a new kind of young, modern and self-confident Iranian

woman. But nevertheless, she is still trapped in a tight corset of family and social norms.

That's when the idea of the nets and the fish came to me. I see in the nets and the fish wriggling in them a figurative metaphor for the lives of people - especially the younger generation: the daily problems, restrictions and hopelessness all wrap themselves around young people like a fine-meshed net. All they can do is wriggle in it, like trapped fish, gasping for air.

Still, even though *EMPTY NETS* focuses on poverty, pollution, crime and lack of perspective, it is important to me to at the same time share a glimpse of a loving, sensitive society. A young, strong love story and a vibrant Iranian culture. Because I also carry this within me.

***How do the film's different settings, the city and the Caspian sea, also crystallise various aspects of the characters' reality?***

The sea is the third main protagonist in the film alongside Amir and Narges. The sea also shows very different faces in the course of the film: cheerful and inviting, calm, effervescent, stormy and life-threatening. The sea stands for fate. The fate of Amir and all the other young people in Iran. The sea gives and the sea takes. And in the sea lie many people who have perished in its throes.

In some key scenes we see Amir talking to the sea: He considers it a friend, asks the sea for advice, fears it, or hates it for taking away his friend Omid.

The Caspian Sea and the environment there is made up of poetic and mysterious landscapes that have fascinated me since my childhood. Especially the sea, to which I have a strong personal connection. People in this region are also typically very melancholic and introverted. There is a different rhythm and attitude to life there than in the rest of Iran.

For this story, it was important to use a combination of cheerful, melancholic and dramatic images to manifest the inner state of the young people in Iran in a tangible and visual way. This is an emotional state that constantly swings back and forth like a pendulum moving between hope and disillusionment. But unfortunately the pendulum is swinging more and more towards hopelessness. The color scheme and the mood of the film also change as we follow this movement.

Another important visual aspect was the interplay between narrow and wide images. In the city, where society dominates with all its rules, the images are mostly tightly framed. The sky and nature are almost completely excluded. It's the opposite when we get to the world by the sea and fishing. Here, wide shots dominate - nature has an effect on the viewers and the protagonist.

One potent symbol that emerged for me was the garbage that makes its way into the sea through human activity. The way we deal with it stands for me as a symbol of Amir's character change. While researching the film, I was observing that some fishermen had to remove large amounts of garbage from their nets after each trip out. Afterwards, they would throw the garbage carelessly right back into the sea. They said the garbage would end up back in the nets anyway, because the sea is full of it. It is a deeply pessimistic attitude that is prevalent not only in Iran. It has again to do with a lack of perspective and people's disinterest in the world.

I was deeply affected by this and decided to make it part of the film and try to deal with

it critically. Because if all of us in the world reproduce this attitude, our world as we know it will soon no longer exist.

What I also found fascinating about the garbage metaphor was the invisibility of it. When you look at the ocean, it is breathtakingly beautiful, but its depths are actually polluted and "broken." Like a soul that has lost its values. Just as the garbage pollutes the sea, Amir is also spoiled by his choices. The prospect of money and his own happy future changes him for the worse, but he believes he must accept this change if he wants a chance for love and a life together with Narges.

***Can you tell us in more detail about the milieu of the fishery and illegal poaching, as you say a parallel society with its specific codes and rituals?***

Like the sea, the world of fishermen has always held a great fascination for me. Be it the world of the fishermen in northern Iran, the fishermen in Italy or the fishermen in northern Germany. They all have a common core. They are mostly men who do the most difficult physical work in a harsh environment. The hard work and the isolation from their families makes them harden too.

I was fascinated by this rough world of men. I wanted to dive into it and investigate it. I wanted to look for the roots of certain social problems in this collection of men.

So I went to live in a fishery for several weeks and did a photo series. I slept with the fishermen in their dormitories, I ate with them, and I went to sea with them. As the time passed, I grew closer to the fishermen. I got to know men who, despite their roughness, had a soft core. Men who had families and didn't know how to provide for them. Men who were honest workers and men who were criminals and did illegal business. I learned more about the illegal sturgeon fishing that fascinated me and made me angry at the same time. I couldn't help but think that these men were ruthlessly hunting an animal and destroying its population. And these are fish that date back to the time of the dinosaurs.

I also got to know these criminals from their softer side. I learned a lot about their weaknesses and dependencies. A portfolio of different characters and a microcosm of society gradually developed. In the process of writing the screenplay, it became easier for me to create these characters because I had already met them all.

Since I was familiar with this world, I was very concerned about making it authentic. So we decided to shoot in a real fishery, which we remodeled to suit our needs. The actors in the fishery are a mixture of normal people and real actors. The most important roles were filled with professional and established actors. The other roles were cast with non-professionals, most of whom are fishermen themselves. This allowed us to recreate the fishing processes in great detail. Some of these men were also real poachers. They advised us on the procedures for poaching and gutting the sturgeon.

I do want to note that although authenticity was so important in the film, no fish were killed specifically just for the movie. The fish and sturgeon seen in the film were all farmed fish that were processed after shooting and went on to the legitimate market as intended.

***Your cinematographer Ashkan Ashkani works with the renowned director Mohammad Rasoulof, and thematically EMPTY NETS might remind us of his recent work. Are there any important reference points or inspirations for you, from Iranian cinema or beyond?***



I have been strongly influenced by Iranian cinema since my childhood through my parents, but also through my own interest. Film culture has a high status in Iran. People are very involved with the characters, actors, directors and the content of their films. Film is a part of everyday culture in Iran. Films like *THE COW* by Dariush Mehrjui, *TASTE OF CHERRY* by Abbas Kiarostami and *STILL LIFE* by Sohrab Shahid Saless have all greatly influenced my view of cinema.

Nevertheless, despite my strong influences from Iranian cinema, it is important for me to look for my own signature and style. Personally, I see my cinematic role models in Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Andrei Zvyagintsev and also Jacques Audiard. In my eyes, these are directors and authors whose films make an impression on the audience primarily through their images and atmospheres.

My goal as a filmmaker is to tell socially relevant stories that are conveyed through the power of images. For me, the plot and everything else serve to move the story forward, but the greatest impact on the viewer should come from the images.

Therefore, the choice of cinematographer is one of the most important decisions you have to make as a director, in my opinion. For the shooting of *EMPTY NETS*, I got the chance to work for the first time with the renowned cinematographer Ashkan Ashkani. In Ashkan Ashkani, I found a strong partner at my side who carries the same love for cinema as I do. For me, he is first and foremost a thinker and poet who thinks in images. He is also a courageous person and director who is not afraid to make critical and socially relevant films.

***Behrooz, you're based in Germany, but the film was fully shot in Iran with an Iranian cast and crew. How do you manage working within and between the two systems, creatively and practically?***

I moved to Germany at the age of 7, together with my parents. Then I didn't travel back to Iran until I was 28 years old. At that time, I was in the early stages of my film studies. I decided to take a small digital camera and shoot something there. Immediately I was captivated by the country, the landscapes and the people. The result was a number of short films and documentaries that were shown at many festivals and won some awards. It was immediately clear to me that Iran was not only my home, but also my film home.

Over my many trips to Iran, friendships developed that I still maintain today. One of my most important friends is filmmaker Majid Barzegar. Majid is an acclaimed director, writer, but also a producer. With his tireless help we managed to get an official filming permit for *EMPTY NETS*.

Majid acted as co-producer on the project and worked very closely with Eva Kemme and BASIS BERLIN, the main producer. The biggest challenge here was to make two completely different working systems – Iran and Germany – into one. This required many conversations, but also a lot of patience and understanding. The result is an international collaboration that always took place in a spirit of full respect and transparency.

I am also very happy that we shot the film exclusively with Iranian actors, with an Iranian team and at the real locations, where my story takes place. I am extremely grateful to my entire team and everyone who participated to have been able to realize this project, with so much beautiful support. I am already looking forward to shooting in Iran again, I hope soon.





## **BEHROOZ KARAMIZADE – Director**

Behrooz Karamizade was born in 1978 in Ahwaz, Iran. In 1984 he immigrated together with his family via the former Soviet Union through the former GDR to West-Germany. He has lived in Germany since 1985. From 2005 to 2013 he studied film directing at the Kunsthochschule in Kassel. With his first short films he won several awards and participated in over 200 international film festivals, among others at the International Film Festival Rotterdam, the Short Film Festival Oberhausen and the Montreal World Film Festival. With his graduation film **BAHAR IM WUNDERLAND**, Karamizade participated in over 150 film festivals and won 20 awards, including the German Human Rights Film Award 2014. In 2016 **BAHAR IM WUNDERLAND** was broadcast on ARTE. He shot both his short films **KINDSEIN IM IRAN** and **PACKING** in Iran. Karamizade received the Golden Lola 2021 / the German Screenplay Award for his screenplay **EMPTY NETS**.

### **Director's Filmography**

**BAHAR IN WONDERLAND (BAHAR IM WUNDERLAND)** – short film – 16 min – HD – 2013  
(Over 150 festival participations and 20 prizes, selection: Montreal World Film Festival, TIFF – Toronto International Filmfestival\_Tiff.kids )

**SALAM ALEIKUM ALLEMAGNE** – Documentary – 45 min – HD – 2011  
(Selection of festivals: Berlinale (EFM), International Festival of Ethnological Film Belgrad)

**TO BE A CHILD IN IRAN (KINDSEIN IM IRAN)** – short film – 10 min – PAL – 2009  
(Selection of festivals: FF Int. Filmfestival Rotterdam, Duisburger Filmwoche doxs!)

**PACKING** – short film – 4 min – PAL – 2009  
(Selection of festivals: IFFR International Filmfestival Rotterdam, Internationalen Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen)

**MURCHE (PERSIAN: ANTS)** – short film – 20 min – HD – 2007  
(Selection of festivals: IFFR International Filmfestival Rotterdam KAZAN International Festival of Muslimes cinema, Linea dÓmbro Festival Culture Giovani)

# ASHKAN ASHKANI – DOP

Askhan Askhani (Abbas Fathiashgani) is an Iranian filmmaker. Born in Tehran in 1979, he graduated from the Association of Iranian Short Films in 1998. In addition to the Iranian Short Film Academy, he was in the membership exchange of the Iranian Short Film Association from 2010 to 2018. In 2010 and 2018, Askhani was a member of the jury of the Iranian Film Festival. A permanent member of the Iranian Short Film Association and the Iranian Cinematographers Association (House of Cinema), the multi-award winning cinematographer has been the director of photography for more than 20 feature films, 40 documentaries and 60 short films.

## Selected Filmography

2023	<b>EMPTY NETS</b>	Director: <b>Behrooz Karamizade</b>
2022	<b>THERE IS NO EVIL</b>	Director: <b>Mohammad Rasoulof</b>
2019	<b>SON, MOTHER</b>	Director: <b>Mahnaz Mohammdi</b>
2018	<b>HENDI &amp; HORMOZ</b>	Director: <b>Abbas Amini</b>
2017	<b>A MAN OF INTEGRITY</b>	Director: <b>Mohammad Rasoulof</b>
2016	<b>VALDERRAMA</b>	Director: <b>Abbas Amini</b>
2013	<b>MANUSCRIPTS DON'T BURN</b>	Director: <b>Mohammad Rasoulof</b>



# MAIN CAST



## HAMID REZA ABBASI – Amir

Hamid Reza Abbasi was born on March 19, 2002 and graduated from the "8 mm" acting institute under the direction of Houman Seyedi.

### Selected Filmography

2023	<b>EMPTY NETS</b>	Director: <b>Behrooz Karamizade</b>
2022	<b>THE ORANGE FOREST</b>	Director: <b>Arman Khansarian</b>
2022	<b>SOBER DIRECTED</b> (Short Film)	Director: <b>Alireza Abbasi</b>
2020	<b>PINOCCHIO</b> (Short Film)	Director: <b>Amir Abbas Hojabr</b>
2018	<b>THE BOX MAN</b> (Short Film)	Director: <b>Manouchehr Teimoorzade</b>
2018	<b>THE LESSON</b> (Short Film)	Director: <b>Mahmood Rafiee</b>
2017	<b>MR. M</b> (Short Film)	Director: <b>Sahar Roostae &amp; Ali Paknia</b>

## SADAF ASGARI – Narges

Sadaf Asgari was born in Tehran on November 21, 1997. Her acting career began at the age of eighteen with a role in the film DISAPPEARANCE. Since then, she has taken on a variety of roles in Iranian and international films.

### Selected Filmography

2023	<b>TERRESTRIAL VERSES</b>	Director: <b>Ali Asgari &amp; Alireza Khatami</b>
2023	<b>EMPTY NETS</b>	Director: <b>Behrooz Karamizade</b>
2023	<b>RABBIT SLEEP</b>	Director: <b>Mona Moradi (Post-Prod.)</b>
2022	<b>UNTIL TOMORROW (TA FARDA)</b>	Director: <b>Ali Asgari</b>
2022	<b>SQUAD OF GIRLS</b>	Director: <b>Monire Gheidi</b>
2021	<b>NO.3 AZAR SHAHR STREET</b>	Director: <b>Kambiz Safari</b>
2020	<b>180° RULE</b>	Director: <b>Ranoosh Samadi</b>
2019	<b>YALDA, A NIGHT FOR FORGIVENESS</b>	Director: <b>Massoud Bakhshi</b>

# KEYVAN MOHAMADI – Omid

## Selected Filmography

2023	<b>EMPTY NETS</b>	Director: <b>Behrooz Karamizade</b>
2023	<b>AND ME, I'M DANCING TOO</b> (Short Film)	Director: <b>Mohammad Valizadegan</b>
2022	<b>TO BE...</b> (Theater)	Director: <b>Morteza Jalil Doost</b>
2021	<b>MOTHER</b> (Kurzfilm)	Director: <b>Sina Nazari &amp; Soheil Nazari</b>
2019	<b>DOMINO</b>	Director: <b>Lale Barzegar</b>
2017	<b>GOLDEN TIME</b>	Director: <b>Poorya Kakavand</b>

# PANTEA PANAHIHA – Amir's Mother

## Selected Filmography

2023	<b>EMPTY NETS</b>	Director: <b>Behrooz Karamizade</b>
2022	<b>KAPITAN</b>	Director: <b>Mohammad Hammzei</b>
2021	<b>HIT THE ROAD</b>	Director: <b>Panah Panahi</b>
2019	<b>DARKHONGAH</b>	Director: <b>Siavash As'adi</b>
2016	<b>BREATH</b>	Director: <b>Narges Abyar</b>

# International Sales – Pluto Film

Pluto Film is a world sales, festival distribution devoted to bringing quality feature films to the international market and audiences. Our focus is arthouse and cross-over films, especially by emerging talents. We are passionate about engaging global cinema.

Pluto Film takes an innovative and individual approach to production and distribution by developing tailored strategies for each title by working together with our partners around the globe right from the start. With emphasis on film festival distribution, Pluto Film navigates the world beyond the windows system by combining theatrical, online and TV. With a boutique approach, only 8-10 titles are added to our distribution line-up per year.

Pluto Film's objective is to make films circulate and to be seen around the globe and across all possible distribution channels. We are a small team with good knowledge of the market. Each of us brings an inside of a different part of the business - production, distribution, festivals, audience design and marketing - as well as a strong international network of contacts built over the years.



# CAST & CREW

## CAST

**Amir**  
**Narges**  
**Omid**  
**Amir's Mother**  
**Rahim**  
**Ghasem**  
**Majid**  
**Masoud**  
**Ahmad**

Hamid Reza Abbasi  
Sadaf Asgari  
Keyvan Mohamadi  
Pantea Panahiha  
Ali Bagheri  
Behzad Dorani  
Mehrdad Bakhshi  
Mojtaba Bahmani  
Ali Mohseni

## CREW

Director & Screenwriter  
Director of Photography  
Film Editor  
VFX Supervisor  
Production & Costume Design  
Art Director  
Makeup Artist  
Casting  
Original Music  
featuring  
Sound Mixer  
Sound Design  
Re-Recording Mixer  
Commissioning Editors

Line Producer  
Co-Producers

Producers

a production by  
in co-production with

in collaboration with  
funded by

Original Title

Behrooz Karamizade  
Ashkan Ashkani  
Anne Jünemann (BFS)  
Frank Kaminski  
Shahram Karimi  
Leila Naghdi-Pari  
Elham Salehi  
Sanaz Ghotb  
John Gürtler & Jan Miserre  
Sabah Alizadeh  
Bahman Ardalan  
Sebastian Tesch  
Ansgar Frerich & Florian Beck  
Christian Cloos (ZDF / Das kleine Fernsehspiel)  
Martin Gerhard & Doris Hepp (ZDF/ARTE)  
Tobias N. Siebert  
Jörn Möllenkamp  
Majid Barzegar  
Eva Kemme  
Ansgar Frerich  
Uschi Feldges  
BASIS BERLIN Filmproduktion  
Living Pictures Production  
Rainy Pictures  
ZDF / Das kleine Fernsehspiel  
ARTE  
Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and  
Media  
Hessen Film & Medien  
Kuratorium junger deutscher Film  
German Federal Film Fund (DFFF)

Toorhaye khali