

the directors label



SUN CHILDREN

By Majid Majidi



PRESS REACTIONS

World Premiere – Venice Film Festival 2020

- IN COMPETITION -



MOSTRA INTERNAZIONALE
D'ARTE CINEMATOGRAFICA
LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA 2020
Official Selection

“A heart-rending story with **unexpected depth of emotion**... it has guts and heart and a grubby, street-smart charisma. **It’s one of the finest films playing in this year’s Venice competition...**”

“Energetic and heartfelt, tipping towards tragedy, Sun Children crawls through the mud and emerges all the stronger. The quest is a red herring; **the real treasure is the film.**”

- THE GUARDIAN

★ ★ ★ ★

“Quite the **thrill ride**, mixing a Dickensian, social-realist account of children in poverty in Tehran with a kinetic, far-fetched heist movie... a **crowdpleaser**...a **thrilling portrait of youth**...

(with) scene- stealing Shamila Shirzad turning in the best performance of the film.”

- INDIEWIRE

“Iranian director Majid Majidi has made some of the most **visually stunning** and **emotionally stirring** films in world cinema about the plight of under-privileged, exploited and abused young people, and **Sun Children is one of his very best.**”

- THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER

“I was **reminded of “The Florida Project”**, one of the best films about children of the 21st century... If one intention of “Sun Children” is to remind that all kids are created equal, deserving of education and encouragement, Majidi’s young ensemble makes the case loud and clear...**The kids compel and entertain.**”

- VARIETY

“Refreshing... **A film that has its heart firmly in the right place**”.

- SCREEN INTERNATIONAL

Sun Children review – Iranian street kids strike gold



Majid Majidi's cast of young toughs digging for treasure under a school deliver **a heart-rending story with unexpected depth of emotion.**

Sun Children, by the Iranian director Majid Majidi, gives us **a prison-break drama** that is escaping to nowhere, and a knockabout school comedy gone horribly wrong. The acting is broad, the plot gears often creak, but **it has guts and heart and a grubby, street-smart charisma. It's one of the finest films playing in this year's Venice competition.**

Dedicated to "the 152m children forced into child labour", this casts 12-year-old Roohollah Zamani as Ali, the pint-sized boss of a gang of thieves, a miniature wheel inside a much bigger machine, working for an unnamed local crime boss who skulks on the rooftop amid his pigeon coops. The boss wants Ali to retrieve a hoard of unspecified treasure, which is either buried in

the local graveyard or in the drainage pipe that runs beside it. And the only way he can do it is to go back to school.

The School of the Sun is a crowded, cacophonous hall of learning and hard knocks, propped up by donations and run by a pair of exhausted officials. Ali and his co-workers – Reza, Mamad and the tragic Abolfazl – line up outside the principal's office, furiously repelling all attempts to eject them. They look like Just William and his outlaws pleading for a detention.

Largely recruited from the streets of Tehran, **Majidi's non-professional players make for a sympathetic, heart-piercing crew**, with Ali's clenched features perfectly conveying the emotions of a child who is permanently on the brink of either fight or flight. The quartet, at least at first, are only posing as students. Their real aim is to dig a hole in the basement and get their mitts on the treasure. Ali's mother is tethered to her bed inside a psychiatric institution. He plans to use his share of the gold to provide them with a home.

Life, though, is complicated. There are wheels within wheels. Eventually we learn that the boys' race-against-time mission is not the only high-stakes game in town. The School of the Sun is behind on its rent and faces imminent closure. Kindly Mr Rafie (Javad Ezati) shoots a fundraising video but accepts the prognosis is bleak. Midway through *Sun Children*, I felt I had a pretty good idea of its direction of travel, but that wasn't quite it; Majidi tunnels deeper. In so doing, he exposes a subterranean world where there are no easy answers and few happy endings. **Energetic and heartfelt, tipping towards tragedy, *Sun Children* crawls through the mud and emerges all the stronger. The quest is a red herring; the real treasure is the film.**

‘Sun Children’ Review: Majid Majidi’s Latest Is a Dickensian **Crowdpleaser**

Venice: The Iranian "Children of Heaven" director covers a lot of ground in his new and often **thrilling portrait of youth.**



Majid Majidi begins his new film with a caption dedicating it to the 152 million children who have been forced into child labor. It's an important and sobering statistic, but not necessarily one that leads you to expect a rollicking hour-and-a-half's entertainment.

In fact, though, "Khorshid" (or "Sun Children") is **quite the thrill ride**, mixing a Dickensian, social-realist account of children in poverty in Tehran with a kinetic, far-fetched heist movie and a well-meaning drama about a kindly teacher who would, in a 1980s American film, have been played by Robin Williams. Majidi's "Children of Heaven" was the first Iranian film to be nominated for a Best Foreign Language Film Oscar, back in 1999 (Roberto Benigni's "Life is Beautiful" won). "Sun Children," which was the top prize-winner at Tehran's Fajr International Film Festival in February, could have a similar crossover appeal.

Its hero is 12-year-old Ali (Rouhollah Zamani), an Artful Dodger who runs around the bustling city streets with his three best friends. The young actors all come from a background as tough as their characters', and while they are more notable for their furious energy than their acting chops, that's more than enough. The boys are first seen flipping the covers off various luxury cars in a shopping mall's car park, checking out badge after gleaming badge until they find the make they're looking for: one of their many hustles is to steal wheels to order for a tire yard. Some Bourne-worthy scrambles across rooftops and chases around the subway system follow, but the boys are only doing what they have to to survive. Their parents are either dead, in prison, or otherwise "absent." Ali's mother (Tannaz Tabatgaei, an Iranian star whose entire role consists of lying unconscious in a bed) has been hospitalized, and he can't bring her home when he doesn't have a home for her.

His only hope is a pigeon-fancying gangster, Hashem (the coolly menacing Ali Nassirian), a wizened kingpin who promises to find Ali somewhere to live in return for a small favour. There is a treasure trove hidden beneath a cemetery, Hashem says, but the only way to reach it is via a maintenance tunnel under an inner-city school. All Ali and his buddies have to do is enroll in the school, and they can sneak down to the basement, nip along the tunnel and retrieve the treasure. The tragic part is that Ali sees this as a wonderfully generous deal.

Majidi has fun with the irony of a gang of boys begging a head teacher (Ali Ghabeshi) for education, and the head teacher shooing them away. Luckily for them, a handsome, noble and altogether movie star-ish teacher, Mr. Rafie (Javad Ezzati), is so pleased by their enthusiasm that he gives them a chance. His faith is justified. One of the boys stuns his classmates with his footballing skills (and Ali collects money from betting on him), another uses his experience of cutting tiles to work out fractions. But, alongside these fish-out-of-water hijinks, Ali himself keeps sneaking away from classes to go on his nerve-racking treasure hunt, a task which turns out to require not just strolling along a tunnel, but digging through meters of earth and rock. No one claustrophobic should dream of watching this film.

Majidi and his co-writer, Nima Javidi, keep weaving in new plot strands. One of the boys is an Afghan immigrant who will be sent to a refugee camp if he gets into trouble. His bright, hard-nosed sister (**scene-stealing Shamila Shirzad, turning in the best performance in the film**) knows that she will suffer most if the boys' perilous scheme is discovered. And then there is the fate of the "Sun School" for street kids and child laborers, an overcrowded, underfunded institution that has provided hundreds of boys with their first taste of care and stability, but could close at any moment if its head teacher can't persuade its benefactors to pay the rent.

There are plenty more subplots where those came from, all of them crammed into 99 minutes. The ambition to cover so many related issues is admirable, and, overall, Majidi does so with **tremendous, crowd-pleasing skill**. But certain incidents are dispensed with so abruptly that viewers won't be sure what happened, so the film can feel over-edited. And certain characters aren't given time to develop past sentimental stereotypes. **What is always powerfully clear, though, is Majidi's conviction that too many children are in a desperate plight due to the neglect or the active exploitation of adults. And what is unforgettable is the sight of the exhausted, tearful Ali, hacking away at the mud in increasingly dark, damp dangerous conditions, all to reach treasure which is never likely going to buy him the life he deserves.**



'Sun Children' Review: Iranian Master Majid Majidi's Latest Empathizes With His Country's Exploited Kids

Peter Debruge



Watching Iranian director Majid Majidi's "[Sun Children](#)," I was reminded of "The Florida Project." One of the best films about children of the 21st century, "The Florida Project" takes place within a stone's throw of Walt Disney World, where it seems a dream too much for its neglected kid characters to visit, until, in the film's last scene, they enter the park. "Sun Children" presents this scenario in reverse. It opens with two boys, 12-year-old Ali (Rouhollah Zamani) and young Afghan friend/accomplice Abolfazl (Abolfazl Shirzad), running through the poshest place they can think of: a Tehran shopping mall where they've been stealing tires from the luxury cars in the parking garage.

Majidi, as some may recall, directed one of the best films about children of the 20th century: "Children of Heaven," about a boy who loses his sister's shoes and the trouble that causes for them both. Few films can rival that one for sheer simplicity, and yet audiences could hardly look away because they connect so directly to the children's situation from scene to scene. In "Sun Children," the plot is considerably more complicated, but still quite relatable, as Majidi

stays focused on a small group of youngsters whose challenges, while minor, loom large as mountains in their minds.

Even before that semi-enchanted shopping mall scene, in which the kids marvel at a kind of opulence inaccessible to them, the movie announces a dedication “to 152 million children forced into child labor and all those who fight for their rights.” So right off the bat, we know the director wants to make a political statement. His principal cast had all been child laborers themselves and could thus draw from that experience to play Iranian and immigrant kids forced to work in order to help provide for their families.

When Ali isn’t stealing tires, he’s typically running some kind of scam for Heshem (Ali Nasirian), a neighborhood crime boss. Ali’s a tough kid, like one of the teenage gangsters in Luis Buñuel’s landmark “Los Olvidados,” an early Mexico-set example of the earnest, morality-driven Neorealism to which Majidi has dedicated his entire career. “Sun Children” is more polished than the director’s early work, and yet, a certain scrappiness remains, shot largely on location, with a mix of experienced but unmannered adults and nonprofessional child actors.

Nearly all of “Sun Children” takes place at — or in the tunnels below (re-created on stages) — a local community organization called the Sun School, made up of volunteers determined to educating the street kids and child laborers ignored by Iran’s public education system. These are “those who fight for their rights,” embodied by an impressive character named Mr. Rafie (Javad Ezzati) who would be right at home in an American inspirational-teacher story, à la “Stand and Deliver” or “Lean on Me.”

Rafie’s tough and relatively streetwise himself, a bull-in-a-china-shop kind of life coach with a soft spot for underdogs. When Ali and his three young friends show up at the Sun School begging the principal (Ali Ghabeshi) to enroll them, it is Rafie who earnestly asks the administrator to make an exception on their behalf. “What’s the difference between us!? Aren’t we all equals?” Ali howls in the school’s courtyard, and watching from a window, the man is touched by the boy’s determination to learn.

What Rafie doesn’t realize is something Majidi has already revealed to the audience: Ali isn’t really seeking an education. His enrollment is a cover story for Heshem’s latest scheme. In addition to having the neighborhood drug trade cornered, this Artful Dodger-like godfather trains homing pigeons in his spare time — a metaphor for the way Heshem “feeds” these kids, keeping them loyal to him through illicit tasks. He feeds Ali a tale of buried treasure, which can only be reached via water tunnels that run back to the school, instructing Ali and his friends to sign up for classes so they might gain access to these aqueducts. Sure enough, once accepted, they set about executing their heist, sneaking down to the basement between classes to tunnel away, like pint-sized versions of the small-time crooks in movies like “Lucky Luke” and “The Ladykillers.”

Majidi has never been one for particularly complicated plotting, and so audiences will likely be a few steps ahead of these gullible kids, wincing as they risk expulsion, arrest and even their lives to retrieve a treasure that may exist only in their imaginations. Still, the movie packs some nice surprises along the way, including scenes in which the director dramatizes other unexpected obstacles that impact an organization like the Sun School. In one, the teachers show up one day to find themselves locked out. They are eight months behind on rent, but

rather than let this setback impede their cause, the principal orders the kids to climb the fences. “Sun Children” shows the kids tossing their backpacks over the walls, and then, in a powerful moment one can hardly imagine witnessing in an American movie (where the risk of injury and lawsuits would loom), they swarm the walls, determined to be educated.

Observing this, we sense there’s a fragility to such well-meaning institutions as the Sun School. At times, we can imagine a more conventional version of this story, in which Rafie gets through to Ali — whose tunneling exploits actively endanger the organization — inspiring him to donate the “treasure” to the school and thereby saving it from financial ruin. **But Majidi’s movie is more realistic than that, as reflected via both individual performances (as Ali, Zamani is entirely convincing as the sort of wild stallion he plays) and energetic group scenes.**

If one of the intentions of “Sun Children” is to remind that all kids are created equal, deserving of education and encouragement, Majidi’s young ensemble makes the case loud and clear. The director’s work with child actors was a direct inspiration on Saudi Arabian director Haifaa al-Mansour’s wonderful “Wadjda” and Lebanese actor-director Nadine Labaki’s more overtly manipulative “Capernaum.” Here, his kids compel and entertain as the girls in “The Florida Project” did, and while a simpler story might have done the trick, this one seems more likely to capture the public’s attention

'Sun Children' ('Khorshid'): Film Review | Venice 2020

12:41 PM PDT 9/6/2020 by Deborah Young



A gang of street boys enrolls in a school to dig for hidden treasure below its grounds in Majid Majidi's Iranian drama condemning child labor.

Iranian director Majid Majidi has made some of the most visually stunning and emotionally stirring films in world cinema about the plight of under-privileged, exploited and abused young people, and **Sun Children (Khorshid) is one of his very best.** The story of street boys commissioned by a local boss to dig for a treasure unfolds around an urban schoolyard and the clever, freckled face of 12-year-old Ali (Roohollah Zamani), a stereotype-buster of non-stop courage. The movie won best film, best screenplay and best production design kudos at this year's Fajr Film Festival and should be a frontrunner in Venice competition.

Majidi's *Children of Heaven* (1998) was the first Iranian film to be nominated for an Academy Award in the foreign language category. Though *Sun Children* lacks the visual lushness and poetry that made *Children of Heaven* so seductive, its condemnation of child labor and the inaccessibility of basic education to the poor comes across with great force. It quotes the statistic that there are 152 million children in Iran obliged to work to support their families. Here they are represented by non-professional actors who really live on the streets, **a compulsively watchable cast whose weary stoicism leaves room for moments of humor and tenderness.**

Post-revolutionary Iranian films have often drawn from the well of children's problems to outflank the censors and score their social critiques. **The screenplay written by Majidi and co-scripter Nima Javidi (*Melbourne*) pins its outrage to a swift-moving, high-stakes plot that undercuts sentimentality and the conventions of the exploited-child genre.** Events are seen through the uncomplaining eyes of young Ali, a tireless mini-boss who directs his gang — Reza, Maman and the small Afghan boy Abolfazi — in petty crimes at the behest of a neighborhood don. The story opens on their breathless escape from an underground parking lot, where they are stealing tires from a new Mercedes. Later, Ali attempts another perilous escape over the rooftops, but is caught and delivered to the elderly boss.

Instead of a beating, Ali is instructed to take his boys and enroll in the Sun School, a charitable institution for working kids whose teachers hope to get them off the streets and send the most talented ones on to high school or a football club. The school is so poor and underfunded, Ali has to plead and fight to get them in. Yet unlike most officials in Iranian films, the teachers here aren't cold-hearted bureaucrats but idealistic educators, and one of them in particular (the fine Javad Ezati) keeps protective watch over Ali and his friends. In a lovely scene of right-thinking action, he accompanies Ali and Abolfazi to rescue the latter's sister Zahra when she's arrested for selling trinkets in the subway. When the teacher sees what they have done to her, he's so outraged he head-butts the jailer. When he drives the girl home, the camera lingers on a chilling slum where Afghan families live on top of each other around a concrete courtyard.

Ali, whose mobile face is lined with a permanent worried expression, is concerned about Zahra but also about his mother, who has been committed to a psychiatric institution after a severe trauma. His desire to get her out of the hospital motivates his desperate work. His brief is to find an underground tunnel that leads under the cemetery next door, where he is to look for a lost but unspecified treasure. Excusing himself from class with a stomachache, he slips away and bravely descends a staircase leading to a cobwebby storage space in the foundations of the building. Ignoring his fear, he resolutely starts digging in the dark sub-basement with a simple pickaxe.

These action scenes are filmed like a classic prison-break movie, and the excitement and danger mount as the boys excavate a long narrow tunnel that only they can fit into. Never giving in to exhaustion or defeat, Ali cleverly overcomes the obstacles that arise underground, even borrowing an electric drill from the boss to push through rock and mortar until the ceiling starts shaking. When he finally breaks through to an underground waterway, he sees his goal within reach. **The sheer joy and expectation on Zamani's young face is heartbreaking.**

SCREEN DAILY

'Sun Children': Venice Review

By Lee Marshall / 6 September 2020

A Dickensian tale with a Disney feel set in Iran's bustling metropolis



Iranian filmmaker Majid Majidi crafts yet another empathetic film about poor but resourceful city kids in *Sun Children*. This rousing, old-fashioned, somewhat didactic tale set in a school established to give street kids an education is an unusual choice for a competition berth at Venice, but in today's abnormal times its naïve brand of 21st century neo-realism feels **strangely refreshing**, like a nostalgia trip back to some imagined past when Disney made live-action children's movies in Iran.

Post Venice, *Sun Children* will aim for the global outreach of Majidi's best-known film to date, *Children Of Heaven*, which was beaten to the 1998 Foreign Language Oscar by another sentimental family ticket, Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful*. However its old-school charm

shades into tired plotting more than once, and the moral lesson concealed in the film's central story about a gang of tykes' search for buried treasure can feel a little preachy.

An opening caption dedicates the film to "the 152 million children forced to do manual labour, and those who fight for their rights". The fast-paced intro shows young teen Ali (Rouhollah Zamani) and his three best friends and junior gang members attempting to steal car wheels on commission in the underground car park of an upscale shopping mall in Tehran. A cute freckled boy who is constantly on the lookout for sudden danger or sudden opportunity, Ali is the unofficial leader of this band of four, and has no trouble persuading them to enrol at the 'Sun' school when a neighbourhood crime boss sends him on a mission: to retrieve a treasure buried under a cemetery by digging a tunnel from the school basement.

It's the thinnest of premises, but it serves to get the four buddies into a school that becomes the story's central focus and main location. Majidi is good at distracting us from the clunkiness of the plot by filling scenes with life and incident. The crime boss turns out to be a clock-repairing Fagin whose office is on a rooftop filled with racing pigeon cages, while Ali's tentative romance with little Zahra (Shamila Shirzad), the sister of his Afghan friend Abofazl (Abofazl Shirzad) is set mostly on the gender-segregated metro carriages where Zahra sells trinkets. Life is tough and the frenetic city pace seems to have been internalised by these kids who are in perpetual motion, so much so that when we see him finally sitting down behind a desk at school, Ali has the uneasy look of a cornered animal.

Apparently based on a school set up in 2014 by an Iranian NGO, the Sun School is no idealised do-gooder refuge. It's a place staffed by stressed yet earnest teachers that has set itself the modest goals of channelling the energies of its young charges into sport or learning, keeping them off the streets and preventing them from knifing each other. In between tunnel digging, Ali bonds with sympathetic vice-principal Mr Refie (Javad Ezzati), even teaching him the correct way to headbutt an opponent when the teacher expresses an interest. The tunnel scenes, meanwhile, introduce a note of jeopardy as the four friends attempt to evade detection and hit the usual obstacles.

Warmly shot and scored by Ramin Kousha's lush orchestral soundtrack, *Sun Children* is not afraid to take on social issues such as the plight of Iran's large underclass of Afghan refugees (the main focus of Majidi's 2001 feature *Baran*), heavy-handed police treatment of underage street vendors and the lack of state support for schools like this that survive on private donations. If in the end the lesson dealt by its 'surprise' ending feels like it comes from the pulpit, that doesn't dismantle or entirely devalue the appeal of **a film that has its heart firmly in the right place.**