

# **HIT THE ROAD**

**A Panah Panahi Film**



**International press recap**

**Director's Fortnight 2021**

# SCREEN INTERNATIONAL

## Hit The Road': Cannes Review

BY WENDY IDE 10 JULY 2021

Panah Panahi raises the roof with his Directors' Fortnight triumph

**SOURCE: PREMIER**

**'HIT THE ROAD'**

*Dir/scr: Panah Panahi. Iran. 2021. 93 mins*

Crackling with energy and outbreaks of exuberant lip syncing, riotously funny at times and quietly devastating at others, the phenomenal feature debut from Panah Panahi looks set to be one of the major discoveries of this year's Cannes. A road trip in a borrowed car: a father laid up with a leg in plaster, a mother laughing through tears, a young child rattling around the vehicle's interior like an errant firework. And an adult son who says nothing, his eyes fixed on the road ahead. From these basic ingredients, Panahi crafts a vibrantly humane and utterly relatable portrait of a family at a crossroads.

Thrillingly inventive, satisfyingly textured and infused with warmth and humanity, this is a triumph

The son of Jafar Panahi, Panah Panahi served as an editor and assistant director on his father's most recent films, but this remarkably assured picture leaves no question that he's a considerable talent in his own right. Further festival screenings are a given and the picture's winning combination of humour, first rate performances and pre-revolution Iranian pop music should ensure distributor interest. If the stars align for the picture as beautifully as they do in one heart-stoppingly lovely moment in the film, there's arthouse breakout potential here.

There's not a single moment in the storytelling which feels rote, not a directorial decision which resorts to cliché. The film's opening is a case in point. An insistent child's hand stabs at a crudely drawn piano keyboard in time with the music which accompanies the scene. It becomes evident that the keys have been Biro'd onto the plaster cast on the leg of the father (Hassan Madjooni), who half-heartedly swats his son away like a persistent mosquito. A single shot takes in the mother (Pantea Panahiha), and then, outside the car, some distance away and staring back at his family with shadows in his eyes, the older son (Amin Simiar). It introduces not only the key characters of the but also hints at the dynamics between them all.

The early scenes are dominated by the child, who is never named but is referred to as "monkey face number two" and other, less flattering, monikers by his father. Rayan Sarlak, who was six at the time of filming, is a delight in the role – it's a hyperactive onslaught of a performance which is reflected in the frazzled exhaustion

in the faces of his parents. “Just warn them that he’s an idiot,” cautions his father, when the kid pinballs out of the car and into a minibus for a ride. But the love that underpins their impatience is evident in the way the parents protect him and distract him from upsetting truths: the fact that the family dog, Jessie, is on his last legs; the real reason for the journey which takes them deep into the mountainous country where Iran borders with Turkey.

Panahi demonstrates a complete mastery of tricky tonal shifts: a very funny moment involving a cyclist is followed by a veiled heart to heart between the parents which gives some indication of the gravity of the journey; a breathtaking wide shot, in which the single most important and emotionally wrenching event of the film plays out, is followed by a wondrous moment of fantasy which combines an homage to 2001 with a comic riff about Batman’s bashed-up batmobile. Thrillingly inventive, satisfyingly textured and infused with warmth and humanity, this is a triumph.

# THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER

## ‘Hit the Road’ (‘Jadde Khaki’): Film Review | Cannes 2021

Panah Panahi, son of celebrated Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi ('The White Balloon', 'Taxi'), premiered his first feature in the Directors' Fortnight sidebar.

BY [JORDAN MINTZER](#)

JULY 12, 2021 2:06PM

Hit the Road CANNES DIRECTORS' FORTNIGHT

It can take time for certain filmmakers to make their first feature, and at 37 years old, Iranian writer-director Panah Panahi is not necessarily an early bloomer.

Then again, when you're the child of Jafar Panahi (*The White Balloon*, *Crimson Gold*, *Taxi*), one of the world's most respected auteurs, winner of top awards at the Berlin, Venice and Locarno festivals, and championed by the industry for a stance against the Iranian government that led to a six-year prison sentence and 20-year ban from filmmaking in his homeland, it makes sense to stop and consider things before trying to direct a movie yourself.

After attending film school in Tehran, shooting an award-winning short and assisting his father on a few of his movies (including as co-editor on 2018's *3 Faces*), Panahi finally makes his feature debut with *Hit the Road* (*Jadde Khaki*), a film in which he accomplishes two things: He proves that he's his father's son, channeling the slow-burn, self-reflective realism present in much of the best work of the Iranian New Wave; and perhaps more importantly, he moves beyond his father's oeuvre to discover a distinct new voice, in a movie that's very much about a son cutting ties with his family so he can find his own way.

Premiering in the Directors' Fortnight at Cannes, this impressively made and touching debut could probably have screened in the main competition — it demonstrates a skill and control of the medium that's rare for a first film. At the very least, the Croisette bow will allow *Hit the Road* to garner interest abroad, and hopefully allow Panahi *films* to make another movie.

From the very first scene — a long sequence-shot inside a car stopped beside the highway in the Iranian countryside — it's clear something special is happening. We hear classical piano music on the soundtrack, and then we see a little boy (6-year-old Rayan Sarlak) mimicking those notes on a hand-drawn keyboard that dons the massive leg cast of his father (Hassan Madjooi). The camera keeps exploring, panning to focus on the boy's mother (Pantea Panahiha), and afterwards on a man (Amin Simiar) we learn is his older brother.

Panahi expertly stages the action, breaking the fourth wall (or not) and suddenly shifting to comedy, with the boy snidely reacting, then having a small fit, after his parents take his phone away. The tone shifts back to drama when the older brother returns to the car looking lost and distressed, revealing how easily the director can alter moods and points-of-view, capturing a family dynamic that becomes increasingly complex as the story unfolds.

Nothing is left to chance: Even the act of seizing a bratty kid's phone will take on greater meaning later on, when we learn that the road trip is far more than a simple vacation, requiring the family to covertly arrive near a border in the north. Like the Iranian masters that preceded him, Panahi has a talent for leaving many things unsaid, allowing the viewer to draw their own conclusions about scenes that look natural but are filled with intent.

He also introduces his own kind of pop sensibility, with the characters singing and dancing along to Iranian music, bringing a fresh dose of energy into a cinema famous for its restraint. There are moments when things get so silly, it's as if we're watching a Persian *Little Miss Sunshine*, until the film suddenly veers in another, more somber and profound, direction.

As they head into the mountains, the relationship between the father, a moody man who views the world with a mix of sagacity and cynicism, and the son, who's desperately trying to take his future into his own hands, grows more tense, leading to a hushed confrontation that's shot by cinematographer Amin Jafari in one long, beautiful take on a riverbank.

Meanwhile the mother, movingly portrayed by the expressive Panahiha, reveals herself to be the person most deeply affected by the voyage. Oftentimes, the movie switches from laughs to tears in a single shot, such as a late sequence where the mom goes off to cry, only to encounter the family dog ridiculously dragging a plastic chair behind him.

Panahi fills *Hit the Road* with such playful diversions, many of them involving little Sarlak, a child so hyperactive he would probably be administered Ritalin in the U.S. His character serves as a comic foil during the film's heavier scenes, including one — captured in a long wide shot

reminiscent of the work of Abbas Kiarostami — in which he's left tied to a tree as the family suddenly faces the inevitable event they've been waiting for, until it's too late.

Such restraint shows how mature Panahi already is for a first-time director, although he's not afraid to let loose as well, whether it's in a scene of Sarlak lip-synching a song with unusual skill (someone really needs to get this kid an agent), or another toward the end where the director employs CGI, abandoning realism altogether for a moment of pure fantasy.

It's at such times that you can feel Panahi drifting away from his director forefathers, including his own father, testing out new ideas and methods to see if they suit him, trying to find a different way to express himself. Like the older son in *Hit the Road*, he's bravely venturing off into unknown territory for his first movie — although he also keeps one foot firmly planted in the past, creating the kind of quiet miracles Iranian cinema is known for.

# DEADLINE

## Cannes Review: Panah Panahi's 'Hit The Road'

By [Anna Smith](#)

### Hit The Road

A family goes on a road trip with a difference in *Hit The Road*, a promising first feature from [Panah Panahi](#), which showed in the [Cannes Film Festival's](#) Directors' Fortnight section. The son of Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi delivers a lean but affecting drama with a winning humorous streak.

we meet the unnamed mother (Pantea Panahiha) and father (Hassan Madjooi), they are traveling into rugged landscape with their two sons. Their eldest (Amin Simiar), a grown man, appears preoccupied. Their youngest is played by Rayan Sarlak, who was six at the time of filming and is a magnetic performer — *Hit The Road's* greatest comic weapon. A lively, borderline hyperactive kid with a precocious way with words, he indulges in witty banter with his parents, in particular his father, who uses humor to distract and protect him from mysterious adult matters.

It becomes clear to the audience that the trip has a serious, possibly dangerous purpose involving the elder brother. This is something that visibly concerns the mother, who often looks pensive and also gently chides her son about his smoking habit, perhaps channeling her anxiety into more controllable matters than the one facing them.

As they approach a border, the unspoken tension rises, but it's frequently punctuated by winning observational humor as well as heart. This is a portrait of a loving family who care deeply about each other. Panahi captures every little detail that demonstrates this, from the mother's protectiveness to the father's distraction tactics. Rather unusually for a realist drama, both parents engage in conversations about genre films with their sons. The mother is curious to know which movie is her elder's favorite — it's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which he says calms him down. His brother goes for the opposite effect — stimulating superhero movies.

When a man approaches the car with his head covered in a sack, he's quick to reference the Scarecrow from *The Dark Knight* films. His father runs with this, and makes soothing promises related to his love of *Batman*. Later, the pair share a beautiful scene that recalls the mood of *2001*; the father lying on the ground staring at the stars in what looks like a space suit. Pop music references also pepper the film, as the family sing and dance to

Iranian music. These aren't just here to perk up the pace: the director says they were sung by artists who had to flee abroad after the revolution.

Another star of the film is a small dog called Jessy, who has also injured his leg. Unlike his owner, this isn't a condition he will be able to live with for long, but Dad has given him a stay of execution so that his young son can spend time with his pet on the road. This lends the scenes between boy and dog a heartbreaking quality, and it's easy to make parallels with another impending loss the family is facing. *Hit The Road* is a small but beautiful film, and a terrific calling card for Panahi Jr.

# SIGHT AND SOUND

## Hit the Road packs humour and heartbreak into an oddball Iranian family's SUV

Panah Panahi's debut feature is a stunningly assured road movie which balances emotional nuance with a bubbling undercurrent of political critique.

11 July 2021

By **Leigh Singer**

Hit the Road (2021)

If modern Iranian cinema already has one family filmmaking dynasty established in the Makhmalbafs (father Mohsen, followed by daughters Samira and Hana), step forward a second second-generation talent. Panah Panahi, son of the infamously banned director Jafar (The White Balloon, 1995, Crimson Gold, 2003), studied cinema, worked on several of his father's later projects and here makes his own stunning debut feature.

As the title suggests, this is a road movie, a family trip by Mom, Dad with his leg in a cast, the eerily taciturn young adult son who drives their packed SUV, his hyperactive little brother and an ailing dog in the back. We're never explicitly told their names, where they're going or even why, though the older brother's marriage arrangements are vaguely cited. At first, when his parents realise their youngest has smuggled a cell phone along to play music, it seems like a mere cheeky prank – until the mother cuts up the SIM card and promptly hides the handset off-road.

There's genuine anxiety when they think they're being followed, though it turns out to be a motorist concerned at their vehicle leaking oil, rather than state surveillance. For all the good-natured insults and feisty bickering – the film is consistently very funny – suddenly Panahi will hold a little longer than expected on a pensive close-up, imperceptibly darkening the mood. The route gets more and more rural, mountainous, misty. Disguised bikers appear urging clandestine meetings further ahead and the mysterious purchase of a sheepskin.

To reveal more would rob the film of its narrative surprises. What does need to be shared is the expert balance of knockabout humour and slowly

tightening tension, intimate cramped car sequences and extended long takes against wide vistas. Impromptu karaoke scenes to Iranian pop tunes can switch from hilarious to heartbreaking in an instant.

Eventually what comes into focus is a tale of family flight and survival, sudden loss and stoic perseverance. That Panahi Jr is able to weave together slice-of-life realism with a 2001: A Space Odyssey-inspired, floating-among-the-stars fantasy sequence is testament to not just his range of influences (the delicate humanism of his father is highly evident) but his ambition. He's aided by the superb performances of his central cast, stage actors Hassan Madjoooni and Pantea Panahiha as the parents and long-lashed natural Rayan Sarlak as the firecracker kid.

Criticism of his country's authoritarian regime and the psychological toll it takes on ordinary people is implicit in every stage of the journey but achieved with the lightest of touches. For ultimately, as with much of the enduring work of his father and other recent Iranian cinema icons, from Abbas Kiarostami to Asghar Farhadi to the Makhmalbafs, these are stories both culturally specific and able to evoke universal experiences that connect beyond borders. To achieve something of comparable stature to these greats in his late-twenties, with a first film, bodes well for, one hopes, Panah Panahi's long, rewarding, unrestricted career. In which case, it's well worth hitching a ride right from the start.

## THE PLAYLIST

# ‘Hit The Road’: Panah Panahi’s Directorial Debut Is Thrilling Cinema & A Breath Of Fresh Air [Cannes Review]

[Elena Lazic](#)

July 14, 2021 11:36 am

It would be disingenuous not to begin this review by mentioning that, yes, **Panah Panahi** is indeed related to the titan of Iranian cinema, **Jafar Panahi**. Panah is the acclaimed filmmaker’s son, and besides going to film school, he has also worked on his father’s films, most recently co-editing his latest feature, “**3 Faces**.” The most cynical among us may not be surprised to learn that the opening sequence of his feature debut “**Hit the Road**,” playing in Directors’ Fortnight, alone contains more thrilling cinema than most other films at this year’s **Festival de Cannes** put together. But a new effortless, clear-eyed talent is always worth celebrating.

A long take shot from inside a car parked by an Iranian highway, the sequence in question beautifully encapsulates all of the film’s qualities: the sophistication of its multi-layered structure, its mixture of contrasting yet complementary tones, its understated but meaningful visual language, the truthful performances from its small cast and its well-timed breaks from this realism. The camera turns on its axis to show, in the back seat, a small child (**Rayan Sarlak**) hitting the piano keys penciled into his father’s (**Hassan Madjooi**) leg plaster in time with the notes heard over the score — an intriguing fourth-wall break which could feel like an ostentatious flourish if it wasn’t such a compelling way to welcome the audience into the microcosm of this family. Outside behind the car is the mother (**Pantea Panahiha**), while in front, a young man (**Amin Simiar**) mournfully looks at the horizon then back at the others.

Panahi only gives us more information about the nature of this trip in snatches throughout the film, creating a feeling of apprehension while also communicating the family’s own fear about what they’re doing and the danger they’re putting themselves into. It doesn’t take very long to understand that their journey is taking them all to the Turkish border, where the eldest son is set to meet a man who will take him out of the country towards hopefully greener pastures. These fragments of straightforward

information — about all they have sold to pay the smuggler for the trip, about the dangers of carrying a mobile phone, about whether they will be able to say goodbye to their son before he leaves — pierce through the otherwise exuberant atmosphere of the trip like so many bone-chilling reality checks.

Panahi is indeed careful to avoid solemn austerity at every turn, preferring to look at the simultaneous overlap of contradictory tones and realities that make up even the most momentous episodes of one's life. Over a long and tedious car journey, even the heart-wrenching nature of such a trip is bound to come in and out of the consciousness of its characters. The meat of the action in "Hit the Road" is thus made of everyday conversation and standard family bickering, all energized and raised to the level of genuine comedy by the youngest son. This eminently likable force of nature constantly bouncing within the confines of the car makes a wonderful pair with his father, who handles his questions, frustrations, and demands with a kind of deadpan humor that is both amusing and touching, in the way it serves to protect the young child from some painful truths.

During this raucous journey, the eldest son, the designated driver, is understandably much less able than the others to conceal his sadness from his younger brother. Through his outbursts of frustration at their charade, Panahi offers glimpses at the existing dynamics between him and his parents. Pantea Panahiha in the role of the mother is especially striking, overcoming clichés to make the profound sadness of her very emotional and worried character seem genuine and raw. A scene of strained (non-)dialogue between father and eldest son feels a little more artificial, but it's a small hitch in a work that otherwise maintains a firm, confident hold on its audience through even the most unexpectedly surreal fantasy sequences. Panahi manages to keep an impressive amount of plates spinning all at once in "Hit the Road," a breath of fresh air and a truly original work that marks him as a talent to watch and raises the bar for all the other films playing in Directors' Fortnight but also across the whole Festival de Cannes this year. [A]

VARIETY

## ‘Hit the Road’ Review: Several Stars Are Born in an Irresistible Iranian Road-Movie Debut

Director Panah Panahi and a superb cast burst onto the scene in a debut honoring its Iranian forbears while thrumming with its own energy.

By [Jessica Kiang](#)



Courtesy of Directors' Fortnight

With a touch on the pedal so light you don't even feel the woosh, [Panah Panahi](#), son of Iranian auteur Jafar Panahi, goes instantaneously from zero to 60 with his debut feature, "[Hit the Road](#)." Doubly surprising, he does it repeatedly within the film too, from scene to scene — and within scenes, from moment to moment — accelerating and decelerating so abruptly, switching moods like gears, like radio stations, that by the end we should be rattling around inside, carsick, dying to get out. Instead, its 93 minutes whip by so airily, it's possible not to realize how much you've learned to love the family whose road trip you've shared in, until the credits roll and you immediately start to miss them.

"Hit the Road," again like its director, works from a standing start. The car — which we learn is a borrowed vehicle — has pulled in by the side of the road while its occupants rest and its driver stretches. We can't know it yet, but there is subtle foreshadowing in who is inside the car, dozing or drowsing, and who is outside, looking in, drumming fingers on the rear window at the family dog, watching the others with an unreadable but notably tender expression. Arranged and observed like this, it feels like the kind of nothing moment that springs to mind in times of homesickness, as opposed to any more considered or rehearsed farewell, such as the one in which, as we presently learn, this journey is meant to end.

We don't get to know these characters by name so much as by their relative positions within the family constellation, and within the car. Up front, we have Mom (Pantea Panahi), perhaps the clan's pole star, though also the most demonstrative and expressive character, with moods that pass across her lovely face like changing landscapes. Beside her sits her elder son (Amin Simiar), pensive and quiet, except in one beautifully observed conversation with his shaggy, bearlike Dad (Hassan Madjooi), who sits in the back with his right leg in a tatty cast sticking through the gap between the front seats. Ostensibly beside him, but really ping-ponging around the car like a pinball is the younger son (instant superstar Rayan Sarlak), nicknamed "Monkey the Second" by Dad, whose irrepressible, bendy, explosive energy gives the film its anarchic spirit. And right in the back, there's Jessy, the family dog, whose late-stage illness is one of the secrets being kept from the little boy.

Another secret, only ever partially revealed, is the actual reason for the journey, which is a melancholy and perhaps even dangerous one, that justifies Mom's fear at one point that they are being followed — paranoia further borne out when the messenger they've arranged to meet turns out to be a horror-movie-style motorcyclist wearing a crudely fashioned burlap sack as a mask. But the younger boy punctures the fearfulness of the encounter by cheerily observing how he looks like The Scarecrow from the Batman films, just as later, at a moment of maximal potential sorrow, he will look up at us directly and with absurdly perfect rhythm, lip sync to the crooning strains of an old Iranian pop song.

Movie and pop love is evident throughout "Hit the Road." Dad is reduced to helpless gales of laughter imagining the drop in resale value on a scratched Batmobile. "2001: A Space Odyssey" crops up directly and then obliquely, in a lovely surreal flourish when, wrapped in a foil sleeping bag while tinkling music plays stars into being on the grass all around, suddenly Dad and child are not father and son but astronaut and star-child, lashed together but lost in space. It's an overtly magical moment, but Amin Jafari's unobtrusively gorgeous camerawork can find wonder in much more prosaic scenes too.

But then, there is lovely concert here between all the departments, orchestrated by Panahi so that editors Ashkan Mehri and Amir Etminan are sometimes expressively restrained, as when one of Jafari's long takes curls around the interior space taking in several of those spectacular hairpin shifts in Panahi's performance, as Mom goes from laughter to tears to shouts of exultation to grimaces of pain, a bravura actor's exercise that never feels like one. And the editing can also be bold, as when a long, grief-stricken glance between Mom and Dad snaps like the end of a hypnosis spell into an unbelievably joyous shot of Monkey the Second with his head out of the sun roof as the car speeds across a cracked desert.

Shades of Panahi Sr. exist in the film's loopy humor. Abbas Kiarostami, for whom Panahi *films* worked as assistant, hovers fondly in the dazzling, often heartbreaking use of extreme wide shots. Both these Iranian elders are known for their car-based filmmaking. And yet, like this extraordinary, ordinary family, latticed together by love yet supremely alive in their own individual hearts, Panah Panahi is not just part of a tradition, but his own filmmaker, finding new resonances in territory so familiar its power to surprise should have been thoroughly exhausted by now, but that here feels like a whole new universe.