

OFFSIDE: WHERE SPORTS TRANSCEND POLITICS

BY FLORENCE NGUYEN

It is May 2006 and a bus is making its way to the Tehran stadium for the final soccer match, pitting Iran against the Kingdom of Bahrain. The bus is filled with fans waving the Iranian flag, already intoxicated by their idols' victory. Yet, not far away, a child of about 10 is standing apart from the virile shouts, face decked out in the colours of Iran, a black cap barely concealing the delicate feminine features.

In Iran, under Islamic law, women do not have the right to enter the soccer stadium, a huge enclosure that can hold some 80,000 fans of the most popular sport on the planet. Yet an increasing number of female soccer fans in Iran aspire to see their team in the flesh and cheer on their national heroes. To defy the ban, the young girl accepts a bribe from a ticket vendor to brave the guards. But she ends up being discovered and confined to a holding area near the stadium with other disguised girls. Far from being discouraged, the young prisoners have many ingenious ways of trying to win over their guards and eventually, attend the game.

Screened at the Berlin Festival in 2006, where it won the Silver Bear, *Offside*, the fifth film from Iranian filmmaker

Jafar Panahi, makes a strong impression. Shot in real time during the match that qualified his country for the 2006 World Cup, *Offside* delivers a subtle criticism of social inequalities in the country of the ayatollahs, using an air of false levity and making forays into comedic tragedy. The director hits the bull's eye by questioning the validity of the restrictions on women in his country. He is careful not to name any of his protagonists. With minimalist staging and its pseudo-documentary look, the film is part of the new movement in Iranian cinema that aims to be political while dissociating itself from politics.

Though banned in Iran, DVD copies of the film have nevertheless been widely distributed in the country. Here, *Offside* has been available on DVD for a few months and deserves to be seen, if only to gain a better understanding of a culture in turmoil that the West still knows too little about.

Flo Nguyen joined DFAIT on Dec. 3, 2007, from the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada, for a two-year assignment as a communications strategist. She has also worked as a journalist, covering national issues and movies.

FIVE RECENT MUST READS

1. *Ambassador Assignments: Canadian Diplomats Reflect on Our Place in the World* / Edited by David Reece (MAIN FC 242 .A64 2007)



This essay collection presents the candid reflections of nineteen Canadian ambassadors and high commissioners on the role of the Canadian Foreign Service in the present era.

2. *Canada's international policies: agendas, alternatives, and politics* / Brian W. Tomlin, Norman Hillmer and Fen Osler Hampson (MAIN FC 242 .T64 2007)

This book provides an overview of Canada's international policies as they relate to trade, investment, development, defence and human security. Background information on how and why policies are developed is also covered by the authors.

3. *Le Proche-Orient éclaté 1956-2007 (The Fragmented Near East, 1956-2007)* / Georges Corm (MAIN DS 63.1 .C67 2007)

Continually updated work recounting the historic events that have shaped the Near East and which help us to both better understand the current context of this region and

anticipate its future.

4. *The Sun Climbs Slow: Justice in the Age of Imperial America* / Erna Paris (MAIN KZ 6314 .P37 2008)

In *The Sun Climbs Slow*, Erna Paris traces the progression of the International Criminal Court from its inception up to the present day and offers a detailed account of the Court's slow progression from an "ineffective" institution to one of great potential and importance to the international community.

5. *The Unexpected War: Canada in Kandahar* / Janice Gross Stein and Eugene Lang (MAIN DS 371.412 .S74 2007)

Janice Stein and Eugene Lang probe into Canada's governmental policy role in Afghanistan and the challenges that it faces attempting to unify different government departments by working together.

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