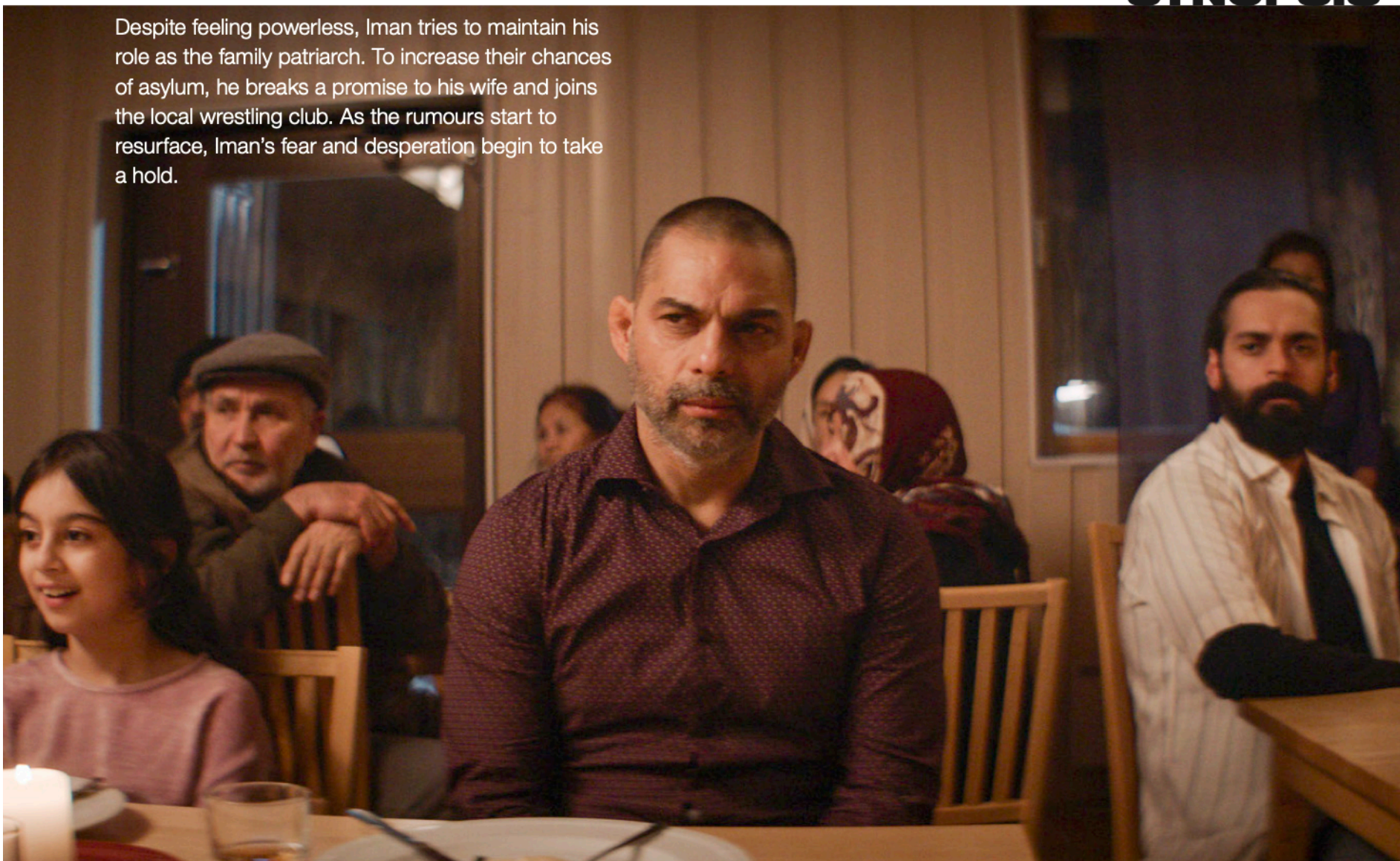


In the aftermath of a devastating rumor, Iman and his family have been forced to flee Iran. As refugees, they end up in a run-down hotel in northern Sweden.

Despite feeling powerless, Iman tries to maintain his role as the family patriarch. To increase their chances of asylum, he breaks a promise to his wife and joins the local wrestling club. As the rumours start to resurface, Iman's fear and desperation begin to take a hold.

SYNOPSIS



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BIOGRAPHY - MILAD ALAMI

Born in Rasht, Iran. Milad Alami, a Swedish director, graduated from the National Film School of Denmark in 2011. Since then, he has made short features like Void and Mini among others. They were both nominated to the Danish Film Awards Robert Prize in 2015. Void premiered at Directors Fortnight in Cannes in 2014. Alami's first feature The Charmer, premiered at San Sebastian, and have won several prizes participating in festivals around the world, including Fedeora Award at San Sebastian, Silver Hugo Prize at Chicago, NDR Film Prize at Lübeck and Best Film at Warsaw. It was also nominated for the Dragon Award. Alami was the conceptualizing director for the series When the Dust Settles, released in February 2020. It was critically acclaimed and sold worldwide. His second feature is OPPONENT, premiering at the Berlin Film Festival 2023.

FILMOGRAPHY

Opponent, 2023, Feature film, premieres at Berlinale

Bullshit, 2023, Limited TV-series, 6x45 minutes, Creator and Director, release planned to the second half of 2023 in all major territories

When The Dust Settles, 2020. TV-series, Competed for Nordisk Film & TV Fond Prize 2019-Best Nordic Screenplay

The Charmer, 2018. Feature Film, premiered at San Sebastian and have won several prizes, among others the Fedeora Award at San Sebastian, Silver Hugo Prize at Chicago, NDR Film Prize at Lübeck, Best Film at Warsaw.

Void, 2014. Short film at Directors' Fortnight in Cannes

MOMMY, 2015. Winner of the Danish Film Awards Robert Prize, 2015

Mini, 2015. Nominated to the Danish Film Awards Robert Prize, 2015

Q&A WITH WRITER/DIRECTOR MILAD ALAMI

When did the idea for OPPONENT start?

I wrote the screenplay shortly after I made THE CHARMER. I was still interested in these themes of masculinity and intimacy and violence. But the world of OPPONENT felt much more immediate.

Was the film inspired by any real cases?

There wasn't just one case I was inspired by. It was more the whole idea of freedom on a deeper level, I think the film is a critique of societies like Iran that aren't free. And what this lack of freedom does to people.

I looked at different sports like wrestling where athletes have gone to the UK or US or Sweden and decided not to go back home. This offered the possibility of getting the type of freedom you don't get in Iran, or in Russia. Wrestling is such a big deal in Iran, it's the Iranian national sport. It's also a strong image of Iran as a fighter – and we can break that image apart.

Did you already know a lot about wrestling?

I knew about wrestling in Iran because it was a huge thing, but I had to do a lot of research, me and my producer Annika Rogell hung out with wrestlers at wrestling clubs. I wanted to understand how physically exhausting it is, and how much of a mind game it is. You're almost wrestling with yourself. It's very beautiful, it's almost like a dance. These men throwing each other around – that is very interesting visually.



PHOTO: JASON ALAMI



The scenes in the refugee center and the immigration offices feel very authentic. Was that from research, or could you remember anything of the time when you moved to Sweden when you were six years old?

I have really good memories of when I was young at the refugee centre, remembering a place that we used to play, and this sense of discovery. That's one reason I wanted a lot of kids in the film.

It was also important to me that the extras we had playing the refugees were actual refugees. Some of them have only been in Sweden for two months. That gave it an authenticity that was striking for me. And I heard their stories when we were shooting the film, I was so happy to have them be part of the film. A lot of them said, it's exactly like in the film, it's waiting and moving around and waiting and moving around.

You grew up in Sweden but you live in Denmark now and you made THE CHARMER in Denmark. So why did you want to set OPPONENT in Sweden?

There is no place in Denmark that looks like the north of Sweden. I really wanted to make it in a place where there is a lot of snow and not much light, surrounded by mountains. It gave it this neo-noir vibe I really liked, a weird darkness around these characters. And it was also natural for me to do this in Sweden because I have a lot of memories from being there. We filmed in Björkliden, which is a few hours from where I had lived as a child.

You mention noir, can you talk about how you wanted to think about genre with this film?

With a traditional film noir, you have a character that we are following a journey with who is trying to solve a riddle or find the guy who committed a crime. That's the mystery. But here I tried to do it in a way where the main character is the mystery. The audience is trying to solve questions like, 'Who is this guy, why is he acting like this? What is he not saying? What does his wife know or why aren't they talking to each other?'

How did you develop the visual language of the film?

I work with Sebastian Winterø, who is an amazing cinematographer. With this, we wanted to do some sequences that were really long takes. I wanted to be with the character and feel his feelings in real time. At the same time, we wanted to pick up the feeling of waiting all the time, the camera doesn't move.

Technically we really love the kind of old lenses that are from the 35mm era. We use those on digital to create as filmic a look as possible. That gives it a texture, especially when you're close to a character.

Also, I like to find the rhythm together with the actors and the camera, and not necessarily to find it in editing. I love films where you are surprised by the pacing.

Did the actors like working with those long takes?

Actors go deep into the scene because it never cuts, maybe it's four or five minutes long. If you're on take nine, the actor is almost forgetting that it's a scene, it's just a situation and they are trying to react in the moment.

I like to come in on the day, talk to the actors about the scene and then not do too many technical rehearsals, more feeling where the scene is taking us. A cinematographer like Sebastian is so good because he is almost like an actor himself behind the camera. It's a more organic way of working.

How did you work with your lead actor Payman Maadi?

He'd been in some of my favourite films but I had never worked with him – we had Holy Spider's Zar Amir-Ebrahimi as our casting director. Payman had never wrestled before, he started to train like crazy, we found a wrestling coach for him so he did a lot of physical work and he also gained a lot of muscle.

It felt like he and Marall Nasiri were an old couple quickly – the way they worked together was so good.

With Payman, it's impossible for him to not be natural. He was really into the long takes and the way we worked.

How did you find the kids and work with them?

Zar found them. With kids, I don't send them the scripts, I'd give them a bit of dialogue the night before and ask them to learn a few lines but also know we might change it on the day. I direct the kids through talking to the actors who play the parents. I'd say to Marall or Payman, go in this direction. When I look for kids who can act, I try to see how much they are in the moment and can they forget all the noise and just be there with us.

Most of my memories being in the refugee shelter are very happy because as a kid you just want to find somewhere to play or hide with your friends. It was important to me that the child characters weren't super impacted by what was going on with their parents. I love what Koreeda does with crafting situations with children, like he did in Shoplifters.

The dynamic between the husband and wife is fascinating, what do they want from each other?

I wanted to create this feeling that they hadn't really talked to each other. It was like a super dramatic backstory that they have to leave Iran quickly - it was important for me that she was the one that says, 'okay, let's leave. We have to escape.' This whole trauma of what really happened, they never sat down and discussed it. There are walls between them that created this feeling of not being able to talk to each other properly. That's a big thing in Iran.

What was the biggest logistical challenge of the shoot?

Making a film about wrestlers in constant physical contact during COVID! Every morning I'd wake up feeling paranoid that nobody got sick or nobody got hurt doing action scenes. Also, shooting in northern Sweden with a lot of snow and sometimes it was -35 degrees. The whole situation was difficult. When the film was done, I thought, 'It's really crazy that we actually did this!'

What do you think about Iranian diaspora cinema right now?

I think the diaspora of Iranian films have become much more political.

I think these films are becoming extremely important because earlier you saw films by Iranian-born directors made in different countries that weren't that much about Iran, maybe it was an Iranian character living in the States.

I now hear more about Iranians making films outside of Iran that are looking on a deeper level. Like what Ali Abbasi did with Holy Spider.

I like films that don't answer everything and instead just asks a question. With this film, the question is about freedom. I hope it gives a feeling of how it is to live in Iran, where you aren't completely free. When you come to another country, when freedom is there, how difficult it is to take it?





MAIN CAST

Payman Maadi
 Marall Nasiri
 Björn Elgerd
 Ardalan Esmaili

FACTS

Original title Motståndaren
 English title Opponent
 Writer and director Milad Alami
 Producer Annika Rogell
 Co-producers Ruben Thorkildsen, Sandra Warg,
 Peter Possne, Anna Croneman
 Cinematographer Sebastian Winterø
 Composer Jon Ekstrand & Carl-Johan Sevedag
 Production year 2022
 Country of origin Sweden / Norway
 Language Swedish and Farsi
 Running time 119 min
 Screen ratio 2.39:1
 Sound 5.1

OPPONENT is produced by Tangy in co-production with Filmpool Nord, Film i Väst, Sveriges Television and Ape & Bjørn in collaboration with Film i Västerbotten and Danmarks Radio with support from the Swedish Film Institute, the Norwegian Film Institute and Nordisk Film och TV Fond Les Arcs - Work in Progress 2021

