

Women on the verge

Hannah Patterson talks to Kim Longinotto, whose films celebrate the everyday heroics of women around the world

Divorce Iranian Style/Runaway

Kim Longinotto; UK 1998/2001; Second Run/Region 0; 76/85 minutes; Certificate E; Aspect Ratio 1.33:1/1.79:1; Features: optional Arabic subtitles, interview with Kim Longinotto, booklet essays by Mark Cousins and co-director Ziba Mir-Hosseini

With its observational approach and deceptively simple camera style, the work of British documentary-maker Kim Longinotto is a world away from the muscular, headline-grabbing films of Michael Moore and his imitators. Devoid of talking-head interviews or contextualising facts, figures and dates, her films opt for a naturalistic rhythm, favouring long scenes that unfold undisturbed in real time. Free from sentimentality yet full of compassion and admiration for her subjects, Longinotto's documentaries are inquisitive, respectful, insightful, brave even, shocking on many occasions and often very funny.

Despite an admiration in her formative film-school years for early Nick Broomfield (she cites his 1981 film *Soldier Girls* as a particular favourite), Longinotto's influences tend to be from fiction. "I want the experience of watching the documentary to be like watching a fiction film," she tells me. "You're not thinking of the mechanics of it and how it's set up."

In the mid-1970s Longinotto studied camera and directing at the UK's National Film and Television School, where she made her first documentaries, *Pride of Place* (1976), a critical look at her own boarding school, and *Theatre Girls* (1978), set in a homeless women's hostel. Work as a cameraperson on television documentaries followed until 1986, when she set up her own production company Vixen Films.

The focus of her career has been on women – spirited, often desperate women who are on the brink of independence, hopeful of change within their diverse societies. In Japan she filmed cross-dressing women (*Dream Girls*, 1994), women who live as men (*Shinjuku Boys*, 1995) and female wrestlers (*Gaea Girls*, 2000); in Africa, Kenyan girls who refuse to be subjected to female circumcision (*The Day I Will Never Forget*, 2002), women judges who mete out justice to abusers in Cameroon (*Sisters in Law*, 2005) and, most recently, a group of black and white women fighting the horrors of child rape in Durban in *Rough Aunties*, which screens at the Sundance festival this January. "So many films are about men," she attests. "In most films you see, the heroes are men. And I love the fact that we can



Brave face: 'Divorce Iranian Style'

'The only films I'm interested in making are about hope and change,' Longinotto explains. 'In Iran I feel that women are the hope'

have women heroes. I love celebrating women. So-called ordinary women who end up being extraordinary."

Longinotto's interest in Iran was born out of the disparity she noticed between the more poetic fiction films coming out of the country from the likes of Abbas Kiarostami, and TV documentaries peddling 'fanatic' Muslim stereotypes. A fortuitous meeting with Ziba Mir-Hosseini, an Iranian expert on the Tehran family courts who was living in England and who shared Longinotto's frustrations with western media representations, led them to collaborate on *Divorce Iranian Style*. (After several rejections, the film finally got off the



Inquisitive, insightful: Kim Longinotto

ground with the permission of the Ministry of Islamic Guidance following the installation of reformist president Mohammad Khatami in August 1997.)

Divorce Iranian Style focuses on women in the Imam Khomeini Judicial Complex in Tehran who are trying to divorce their husbands. There's Massi, who publicly denounces her husband for his sexual problems and tries to coax and cajole Mr Jamshidi, in charge of the filing system, to find her mislaid file now rather than in his vague "a week or ten days' time"; Ziba, married at 14, who wants to go back to school and questions when women should be seen as old enough to marry; Jamileh, who says she loves her husband who beats her but just wants his respect; and Maryam, who loses her children because of her decision to remarry. All come up against Judge Deldar, who does what he can to be fair within the bounds of Sharia law, even if his advice is often incongruous: "You must make yourself pretty at home to stop the divorce from taking effect. You must do something to win him back." The film's funniest moment sees Paniz, the young daughter of the clerk, having declared her distaste for the "rubbish men" around her, hilariously impersonate the judge, holding court to imaginary subjects and doling out advice about their lack of respect for women.

"The only films I'm really interested in making are about hope and change," Longinotto explains. "In Iran I feel that women are the hope. The hope of change coming to Iran."

Having established a successful way of filming together during *Divorce* (since Longinotto is unable to speak Farsi,

Mir-Hosseini simply touches her arm once when she thinks a character is saying something interesting, then once again to signal that a potential scene has finished), the two decided to collaborate as co-directors once again on *Runaway* (2001). A darker view of contemporary Iran, *Runaway* details the experiences of five young girls who arrive in a women's refuge in Tehran, each seeking respite from unhappy domestic situations. In most cases it's the brothers, fathers or stepfathers who are the problem, beating or raping them, although the mothers too can be abusive. On the brink of womanhood, the girls are defiant. They sense their treatment isn't right and desire freedom, but in most cases they also desperately want to be with their family. Although one social worker suggests to Atena (18, and already married twice) that she stay away from the family home until she has greater independence, she's more inclined to listen to another who encourages her to go back home. Even her mother says incredulously: "I beat her half to death and still she wants to come back."

Then there's Parisa, who's run away from her abusive, drug-addict father yet ultimately decides to return. Brightening considerably when her family promise to behave, she beams, "I never knew they cared so much about me. My dad hugged me when he saw me. He's never been like that with me. I never felt my father's love for me before. It seems I'm moving towards the happiness of my dreams." Parisa is adamant that the abuse won't continue if she goes back, though we, the viewer, suspect a rather more ambiguous outcome.