

Opponent [15]

2023 Sweden / Norway 119 mins

UK released	12 April 2024
Director	Milad Alami
Screenplay	Milad Alami
Cinematography	Sebastian Winterø
Music	Carl-Johan Sevedag; Jan Ekstrand
Cast	Payman Maadi (Imam); Marall Nasiri (Maryam); Björn Elgerd (Thomas)

You can run but you can't hide in Opponent. The second feature from writer/director Milad Alami is a taut, timely tale of an Iranian refugee in Sweden which reflects much wider issues around freedom and tolerance. It's a film that grabs your attention from the first moments, as officials call at a Tehran sports centre seeking to interview professional wrestler Iman (Payman Maadi). Iman, however, has already slipped out of a back door and is running for his life. When stopped, he shows the violence that can be unleashed by a desperate man.

The film's thriller-like opening sequence is followed by a move to a remote corner of north Sweden, and a hotel that serves as a refugee centre. This is now home for Iman, his pregnant wife Maryam (Marall Nasiri) and their daughters Asal (Nicole Mehrbod) and Sahar (Diane Farzami) – Iman is delivering pizzas for a living and waiting for news of their asylum application. The film immerses itself in the daily details of life in a foreign country, from the reliance on a translator for communication to the sacrifices of Maryam, formerly a music student and piano teacher now a resourceful, careworn homemaker.

Secondary characters add little vignettes of suffering and frustration to the bigger picture, particularly the story of translator Abbas (Ardalan Esmali). Cinematographer Sebastian Winterø captures striking images of the bleak, snow-covered wastelands – the country looks like a blank canvas and

perhaps that is what Iman needs to start over. The cry of a wolf in the wild, however, suggests it is a landscape filled with dangers.

The fact that Iman and his family are outrunning a different danger is fairly obvious. He has been confronted by rumours and gossip. We see the abandoned family home, silent and empty with fruit rotting in bowls. Iman receives a series of phone calls. There is a sense of something unresolved in his haunted, agitated look.

More is revealed as Iman decides to support his asylum application by resuming his wrestling career, with a view to competing for Sweden. In the forced intimacy of the changing rooms and communal showers, Iman is a man fearful of betraying himself. Maadi's performance conveys a sense of a man divided, torn between his desires and the ties that bind him to his family.

Opponent gives us a sense of Iman as someone selfish, bringing unhappiness to those around him. Does he only need his family to keep up appearances? Yet it also provides a sense of balance in Maryam's perspective. Marall Nasiri plays her as someone only too aware of what is happening around her – Maryam has a similar dilemma of wanting the family to be together but knowing that Iman is not fully present in their lives.

To his credit, Alami doesn't provide easy solutions or happy endings. He offers something rather more complex, and leaves us to ponder whether things will be any different for the next generation.

Allan Hunter, *Screen Daily*, 18 February 2023 (abridged)

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