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State of Affairs

With *Circumstance*, her Sundance award-winning debut feature, Maryam Keshavarz exposes a suspense-filled love story between two Iranian girls that culminates in unexpected ways.

By **Jeremy Kinser**

“I’m not really a political activist,” Maryam Keshavarz says. “I’m an artist at heart.” Maybe, but the 35-year-old Iranian-American director effectively combines the two passions in the bold, sensuous new drama *Circumstance*, which opens in theaters August 26. The director’s first narrative feature is set in contemporary Tehran. It focuses on two teenage girls, Atafeh (Nikohl Boosheri), a privileged daughter of a liberal family, and the orphaned Shireen (Sarah Kazemy), who must face the consequences of their burgeoning love for each other. Yet far from being another dour tale of doomed romance, *Circumstance* crackles with energy as it exposes a rarely seen secret world full of defiant young people who experiment with drugs and sex at illicit parties.



After receiving her undergraduate degree at Northwestern University, Keshavarz began making experimental films “out of anger,” she says, and as a response to 9/11. She applied to New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts and received a scholarship to study there. Perhaps the anger has subsided, because the most surprising aspect of Keshavarz is the sly humor she injects into both her new film and the conversation in general. Raised predominantly in the U.S., Keshavarz jokes that she developed a really great jump shot and three-pointers she describes as “killer” due to growing up in a family with seven basketball-playing brothers. As a girl she made frequent summer trips from America to Iran, where she remembers being captivated by the vivid stories she heard from female friends and relatives who would sneak out of their homes at night to attend underground parties. The young people would often put themselves at risk in search of a few moments of liberation and self-expression.

However, Keshavarz insists the film is not strictly based on herself or her friends. “I always knew that I wanted to make a film about youth culture and focus on two girls,” says the filmmaker, who identifies as bisexual. “I’m fascinated by people who are similar to me yet who are extreme opposites from myself — and evaluating those differences.”

Obviously, filming such provocative material in the Middle East requires creative strategic planning, and Keshavarz realized early on that *Circumstance* could not be shot in Iran. The filmmakers selected Beirut, Lebanon, as an appropriate substitute for Tehran, but as a precaution, Keshavarz peppered her crew with other LGBT people as well as several straight women.