

Feminéma

feminism, movies, pop culture

To be young, gifted, & living under patriarchy: "Circumstance" (2011) 18 October 2011

Here's my first question: is Maryam Keshavarz, the Iranian-American female writer-director of **Circumstance**, living in hiding? Because this film is so lush and sensuous, broaching so many Iranian public taboos about same-sex sexuality and teenage rebellion all under the noses of the Iranian Morality Police that I felt an unbelievably narcotic rush of danger and excitement and fear that she'd be whisked back to Iran and thrown in jail. The tale of two 16-yr-old girls who fall in love with each other, this film throbs with music, dancing, and all the pleasures of teenage life — except that everything they do is illegal. I can't think of another film that captures so viscerally the meaning of dancing, music, and love for young people — all the more effective because the stakes are so high.



Bedecked with headscarves and modest long coats, the two schoolgirls Atafeh (Nikohl Boosheri, left above) and Shireen (Sarah Kazemy, right) ring the buzzer of an apartment. "We're here for the sewing group," they say into the intercom. But when they get in, they strip down to slinky sequined dresses, let

their hair fly loose, and dance to the pulsing beat of Arabic rap. They flirt with boys, even make out a little, and hitchhike home. All of this teenaged activity feels familiar, except what it is they're rebelling from: a state that watches their every move and ensures that not only do such parties get shut down, but the women who attend them *in particular* be shamed into more compliant and modest feminine behavior.

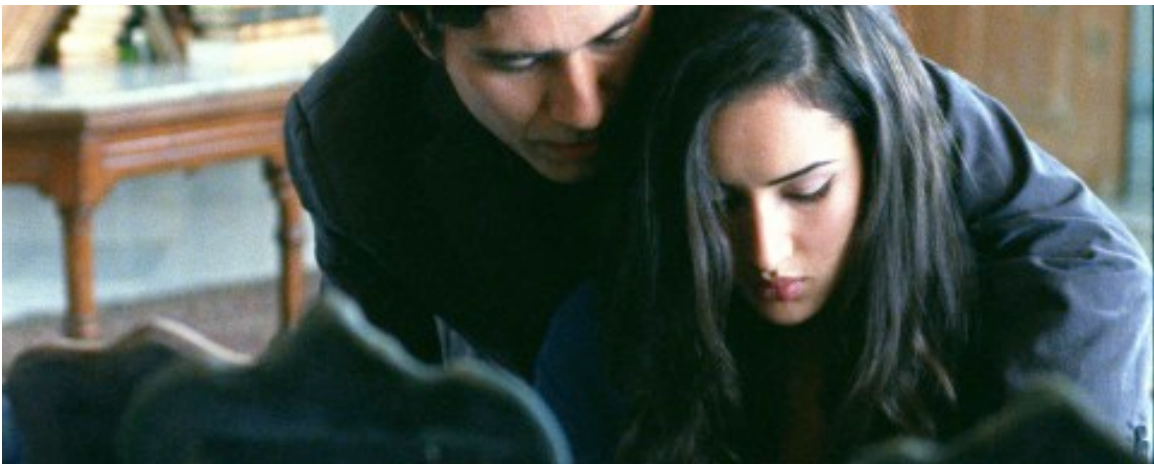
Shireen's especially susceptible to skepticism by those in charge. Her now-dead parents were professors, and their outspokenness still tars her



with a brush of dissidence. She's lucky, then, to have Atie as her best friend: with a wealthy, respectable family, Atie moves through Tehran with a greater confidence in their rebellious schemes, protected by that wall of affluence and privilege. Until Atie's brother Mehran (Reza Sixo Safai) returns, anyway. Why was he away? Rehab seems the most likely answer, for he still sneaks a smoke of something from a piece of tin foil; but he's so dark now, so thin, and newly prone to a heightened religiosity that one wonders whether he'd been jailed.



Don't be fooled: that religiosity isn't just a personal choice. Mehran seethes with demons, and maybe because he's still recovering, he isn't sure where all his excess energy will go — but it certainly won't go back into music, his primary love before disappearing into the Iranian system for a while. Then he notices Shireen while on a family trip to the beach. Ironically, it's on that very trip when Shireen and Atie confess their love for one another and fantasize about leaving the country for a more permissive one — *perhaps we can change our circumstance*, they imagine. In public, the family adheres to all the rules, even full headscarf dress while playing volleyball at the beach (an ungainly activity if there ever was one). But the girls sneak out at dawn to the seaside, strip down to their bras and panties, and go in for a delicious swim. This is about the time you begin to feel genuine panic, and you know they aren't afraid enough.



Director Keshavarz opts for beautiful visuals and bold scenes— Mehran's flirtation with Shireen at the piano, his sex dream about her later, all those shots featuring rich red

carpets and textiles and elegant scarves — such that the film sometimes leaps over linear plot points. Only the most literal of viewers will mind, though. This is a bold directorial vision and seems perfectly in keeping with the the experiential moodiness of the story and the contrast between Mehran’s ominous watchfulness and his collaboration with the Morality Police, and Atie’s and Shireen’s to live free lives and express their love for one another. It’s also funny, as when they team up with a couple of male friends to dub the American film **Milk** into Persian, with the girls doing the voices for Harvey Milk’s male lovers. The girls aren’t the only ones eager to change Iran. And when you see full-fledged clubs full of Iranian youth, drinking and dancing and kissing and popping party drugs, you feel how vital is that need to rebel.



But with the newly ideological Mehran fixated on both Shireen and social purity, it’s only a matter of time before they get caught and dragged before the police. All the while we watch the girls’ relationship — two women so powerfully in love such that they are nearly sisters, born of the same flesh; yet also bound together by their youth, their pansexual desires, their mutual need for secrecy — it seems simplistic to term this a *lesbian* film. Rather, it’s a *radical* film, spectacularly beautiful, and one that makes the best use of the wide range of music I’ve seen in a film since the jarring **Winter’s Bone** (2010). Ricocheting between hip-hop, beautiful tunes sung at cocktail parties, guitar-driven punk, cheesy pop songs, lullabies — all this music, unknown to me previously, washed over me the way music does to the young. You can’t help but feel, again, what it feels like to have drunk too much at a club, with pounding music and sweaty bodies and a suspension of your sense of consequences. Atie and Shireen’s circumstances have made their love for each other as risky as possible, yet also delicious in its secrecy. Welcome, Maryam Keshavarz, to what I hope is a long career as a spectacular director with a bold vision. (And please, for my sake, can you stay out of Iran for a while??)