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tehran

AFTER DARK

After spending her childhood traveling back and forth between Iran and the U.S., writer-director **Maryam Keshavarz** examines the sexual rebellion of today's Iranian teens in her Sundance Audience Award-winning *CIRCUMSTANCE*.

By Jason Guerrasio

"Write what you know" has been a mantra that's defined Maryam Keshavarz's burgeoning film career. Spending much of her life pinballing back and forth between Iran and the U.S., she's grown up witnessing change in the Middle East — and the collateral damage caused by it — from two continents. Now at 36, she's compiling these memories to tell stories that are defining not just her own conflicts but her generation's.

Brooklyn-born Keshavarz has dual U.S. and Iranian citizenship and settled finally in the U.S. after her father left Iran for medical school in the states. She grew up with seven brothers, attended P.S. 13, and enjoyed everything the '80s had to offer a young girl in New York City. However, throughout her youth she traveled back to Iran to visit family, even attending the second grade there during the Iran-Iraq war. There she witnessed firsthand the changes that occurred following the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

A Middle East studies student during college, Keshavarz didn't become a filmmaker

until after 9/11, when she made several experimental shorts (*Sanctuary*, the Iran-shot *The Color of Love*, and *The Day I Died*) addressing the role of women in the region. She developed her debut feature, *Circumstance*, for years and with her producer, Karin Chien, pieced together financing from foreign distributors and granting organizations like Cinereach. Shot in Lebanon but set in Iran, the film premiered at this year's Sundance Film Festival, winning the Audience Award for its unabashed look at the life of two 16-year-old girls, Atafeh (Nikohl Boosheri) and Shireen (Sarah Kazemy), young lovers dealing with family, sexual taboos, religion, and the rebellious underground youth culture scene in Tehran.

Keshavarz talked to *Filmmaker* about her internal struggle to write *Circumstance*, finding her lead actresses, and choosing between her filmmaking and returning to Iran.

Roadside Attractions opens *Circumstance* in August.

When did you realize Iran wasn't like the U.S.? My first memories are of the Iranian Revolution. My parents and my uncles were taking part in the protest against the king. I think I was three or four years old. My next big memory is of the hostage crisis and being back in New York. The thing about going back and forth, especially in the early '80s, was that Iran hated the U.S. Everywhere you went there would be signs that said "Death to America" because of the U.S. involvement with the king and what they perceived as U.S. support of Saddam Hussein during the war. And then I would come back to the U.S. and get beat up in New York because of the hostage crisis! So there was a hatred on both sides. But I've always been this translator of the different worlds. There was a point where Iranians couldn't come to the U.S. anymore so then I was kind of this conduit of information when information was very much suppressed. The Internet and illegal DVD stores, at the time, weren't common, so my cousins would be like, "Could you



(LEFT-RIGHT) NIKOHL BOOSHERI AND SARAH KAZEMY IN *CIRCUMSTANCE*

please smuggle us some magazines? Could you smuggle us some music?" They wanted Michael Jackson or Boy George, but now all that stuff is black market trade.

Have you had experiences where you've been questioned or detained? Well, besides getting beat up? *[laughs]*

We can get into that. A little bit less so, because I am a girl and my name can be many different ethnicities. But it was odd because in this neighborhood we grew up in [in America] people were targeting us, and these were people who knew us. My brothers, who were older, got much more of the brunt of the racism in that period. But being detained? Since 9/11 it's happened. Multiple people in our family have been harassed on different levels, but you just get used to it. Air travel isn't as much fun as it used to be. *[laughs]*

Did these experiences build in you a sense of fear? Or rebellion? No, not fear. For me it was just trying to understand why people have a hatred or dislike of a nation. What are they seeing or think they know about

us or themselves? For me it was always interesting to try to understand why that is so. What do you think you know about me? Maybe it was because I was too young to understand fear. I spent my whole life visiting Tehran, even during the war. I moved back to Iran for a year, so I went to second grade there during the war. At that time I was a tiny bit scared because they used to bomb schools, but I was more scared of my head mistress. *[laughs]* You had to wear head coverings and I just didn't understand this concept. In Islam you're not supposed to cover your



CIRCUMSTANCE WRITER-DIRECTOR MARYAM KESHAVARZ.

head until you're nine, but all schools required head coverings. The whole world then changed when I was a child and I could just see the revolution happen, the war, and, later on, people vying for freedom. All that stuff unfolded in front of my eyes.

When did movies become prevalent in your life? I grew up in a very religiously conserva-

tive family in the U.S. My parents are both Muslim, and I always loved music and movies because it was such an escape from the world that my family prescribed. Imagination was the only place that couldn't be censored or repressed. Books were my first big escape — I would have a flashlight and read everything. I would sneak all these books. My parents were always asking, "What are you reading?" I had a good relationship with the local librarian.

[laughs]

So was it in college that you got interested in making movies?

I didn't consider doing film until 9/11. I was doing my doctorate on Middle Eastern studies at Michigan and was on sabbatical at Berkley when 9/11 happened. I was stuck in San Francisco, and my whole family was in New York. All the rhetoric, especially the few weeks after 9/11, was very reminiscent of the hostage crisis and the monolithic images and hatred [I remembered]. I was frustrated, so I went and made a bunch of experimental films. Those were the black and white 16mm films I sent to NYU on a lark, and I got a fellowship to go there. I hadn't intended to go into film but I thought media was the way to go after 9/11 — mostly just out of anger.

It seems the stories you were telling in these shorts were all glances at the bigger story you wanted to tell in *Circumstance*. Yeah. Those themes are close to me. I come from a big family, and the love triangles are never-ending. [laughs] I have a twin brother and we were always dating each other's friends. There were always rivalries.

When did *Circumstance* begin to develop in your mind? It didn't develop until I was in film school. It's not autobiographical in any way but it is based on my family being this huge theater. [It came out of] just looking at them and imagining what their different lives were like and putting them in different circumstances. And it's also based on people I knew and my own experiences. I always knew it was going to be about these two girls and a brother. And I guess I began explor-



(LEFT-RIGHT) SARAH KAZEMY, NIKÓHL BOÓSHÉRI AND MARYAM KESHIMVÁRZ ON THE SET OF *CIRCUMSTANCE*

"I couldn't stop wanting to tell this story... even though I know it's going to change my life forever and bar me from a country I love."

HOW THEY DID IT

PRODUCTION FORMAT Super 16mm.

CAMERA Arri 416. Arri Ultra Primes.

FILM STOCK Vision2 500T, Vision 250D, Vision 200T.

EDITING SYSTEM Film Cut Pro.

COLOR CORRECTION Luster System with Siggý Ferstl at CO3 in L.A.

ing that first in *The Day I Died*.

Were you worried about how honest you could be in your screenplay? Oh yeah. I dealt with a lot of issues of self-censorship. The longest part of the process for me was the writing process. My very first drafts were symbolic, obscure, and very veiled because I was afraid to develop these characters and relationships. Also, because so much of my family lives in Iran, I didn't want to do something that would get me banned. But when you start telling a story, the characters start to dictate what that story is so it would feel false. I felt like I was suffocating these people by not expressing them more realistically. At the Sundance Screenwriter's Lab I talked to the mentors about my fears, and [started to] strip away these layers of censorship. I couldn't stop wanting to tell this story, and I felt compelled to do so even though I know it's going to change my life forever and bar me from a country I love.

Why a love story between two girls? I always had the idea of this being a story about young girls because that's my perspective, and sexuality is something that's glossed over in terms of our culture. But on a larger, thematic scale, so much of the film is about not being able to express the person you truly are. This duality is prevalent in Iranian society. There's the public space we have in the Islamic Republic — which is what we're forced to say, that we have our head covered and no alcohol, being forced into being a model citizen — and then there's the reality of the home that you see in the film, with people who love art and music, who don't cover their hair, who dance and sing. All these things, they're real. When I was a small child in Iran after the revolution, they would ask you, "Do your parents pray? Do your parents drink? Do you watch illegal movies?" They would ask you as a kid, just to see what people were doing in their private homes. What was fascinating to me in writing this film is that you have to teach your

kids to lie, and that's very much against what I learned growing up in the states. [These experiences] created this sense of never being able to express who you are, and so for me [the girls' relationship] was another way to explore that theme. Here they are in this underground world where they can express who they are and yet there's another layer to their duality, this sexual relationship that they can't talk about to other people.

Was it a challenge to find two actresses who were comfortable in taking on these roles? Oh my lord. [laughs] I think for all the parts we auditioned around 2,000 people. They had to be bilingual, though we did give them dialogue training for a year to get the perfect accent, and we had an Iranian dialogue coach on set. They had to be over 18 but look under 18, because to do nude scenes you have to be over 18. They have to be okay with nudity and sexuality and queer sexuality. Oh, and they had to be good actors. [laughs] So I cast all over the world. We were in eight or 10 countries, and we also took video and Skype auditions.

So where did you find them? In my second to last city on my world tour, I was in Paris and I was so frustrated I couldn't find anyone. I asked a photographer friend of mine, "Do you know anyone? She doesn't have to be an actor." And he said, "I know this girl, she's an international law student at the

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GO BACK & WATCH

NO ONE KNOWS ABOUT PERSIAN CATS

Bahman Ghobadi's look at the underground music scene in Iran follows a pair of musicians as they search for band members to join them for a London gig, and the illusive visa that will get them out of Tehran.

THE LIVES OF OTHERS Set in 1984 East Berlin, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's Oscar-winning film follows a dedicated agent of the secret police who becomes absorbed in the lives of a writer and his lover who he's doing surveillance on.

KIDS Mixing Larry Clark's vérité style with Harmony Korine's unapologetic script, this look at a group of New York City teens highlights the rebellious (and often irresponsible) lifestyle of many youths in the HIV-conscious mid '90s.

do arrive at ideas at the same time. We came from a complete fiction, narrative, storytelling perspective, and Brian came from deep physics, but we arrived at the same feeling, which is the desire to know yourself more deeply, to connect somehow through a duplicate you. ▼

TEHRAN AFTER DARK

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university." I said, "I have to meet her tonight because I'm leaving tomorrow." I go into this bar and I was like, it can't be this girl — she looks like a model. I hoped it wasn't her because I knew she'd be a bad actor. And then she goes "Maryam" and I'm like, oh shit. We started chatting and I was amazed by how much we had in common. She has spent her life going back and forth from Iran, and she comes from a very religious family too. I gave her the scenes and she came the next morning to audition before my flight. She was so prepared and she was amazing. That was Sarah Kazemy.

Then we had the final callbacks in Toronto, and I had the three finalists for the father, the brother, and the sister, and best friend. I thought I knew who I was going to cast and then a day or two before the final callback my producer said, "I just got this video audition from Vancouver from this girl who just graduated high school. You should look at it." So I looked at the tape and she *was* Atafeh. For the first time I saw the character. I was blown away. So I called Nikohl and asked if she could come to Toronto, and she said she'd never been on a plane. But she was actually on a plane at six months — her mom was a political activist and she escaped Iran while pregnant and gave birth to her in the mountains of Pakistan. She came with her mom because she was so scared to fly. She was okay playing the role, but she was scared to fly.

How did you come up with the film's lush visual style? Brian Hubbard, who shot my project at the lab, was my d.p. for the film. He was in Chile during the dictatorship and saw a lot of parallels between Iran and what was happening there. We would talk about [how these themes could be developed] in the visual language as much as the writing of the script. Even before we went to Sundance we met in New York and talked about how in the beginning of the film it's very wide and open and welcoming and as the film progresses it gets very oppressive and handheld and dark, and the frame becomes more crowded. We talked also about the juxtaposition between reality and fantasy, with the fantasy being almost like

what you would see in a commercial. You have space in your imagination, so in [the girls'] imaginations there are no men, just women. But when they're doing things sexually together in real time, it's very crowded and tight shots. We talked about all those things before we went to the lab.

You shot in Lebanon, but was there ever a possibility to shoot in Iran? No. Never. Absolutely not. You would have [needed] two passports to work on the film, because if anything happened, you have to be able to get out. A lot of actors who live in Iran wanted to be in the film, and I just couldn't do it because they would get in trouble and I couldn't have that on my conscience. Even crew members would have to have had double passports.

Iranian films have been in the news for the last year or so with Jafar Panahi's jailing. Do you consider yourself part of the Iranian film community? I really admire Panahi's work because I think he really speaks to urban and women's issues. Also, Asghar Farhadi, whose film won the Golden Bear this year. But a lot of directors shy away from that. I've grown up watching every Iranian film possible, but I've worked outside those restrictions. I have the inside-out perspective, so I have a totally different take on Iran. I think a local filmmaker would not see the things I've seen because there are a lot of things people take for granted.

Will Circumstance be seen in Iran? Every other day I get e-mails from kids [in Iran] saying, "I want to see this movie, where can I download it?" And I'm like, that's not how it works here. [laughs] It will be shown through illegal DVD and then it will go on satellite, because even *The Color of Love* couldn't be shown in Iran, and I shot it there. But the subjects saw it on BBC through satellite two to three years later.

So you haven't been back to Iran since the premiere of your film at Sundance? No way. There was an article written against the film, 24 or 36 hours after the film [premiered]. And I've had some interesting e-mails sent to me. When I was in prep the Green Wave was happening in Iran, with all my friends marching the streets and being killed. In relation to that, this movie is nothing. That's truly people standing up politically and putting their lives at risk. The actors and I felt we had a duty to make this film but those people are taking much bigger risks than we are. But to answer your question, I won't be going back during this regime. It's very dangerous and unpredictable right now, and that's what makes it scary.