

SCREEN DAILY

Circumstance

1 February, 2011 | By David D'Arcy



Dir: Maryam Keshavarz. US-Iran-Lebanon. 2011. 105mins

***Circumstance* is a family drama set against the strict rules that govern public and private life in Iran. Watching it, you lose count of the taboos that its Iranian-American director is violating.**

It's an auspicious beginning for a young director. Watch for the fireworks once *Circumstance* reaches Iran.

Maryam Keshavarz's debut dramatic feature, supported by the Sundance Institute, is not the first narrative film to explore personal passion that's at odds with Islamic rectitude. But its profile is already high, and threatens to become even more prominent, ensuring an audience wherever Iranians have emigrated (and one in Iran, where pirate DVDs may already be circulating).

The political stories in *Circumstance* should benefit from the attention given the current ferment in Arab Islamic countries, and the forbidden lesbian plot should lure in the curious.

Winning Sundance's audience award suggests that Americans might take to

this film in a way that they have failed to with other Iranian cinema by such greats as Abbas Kiarostami and the now-imprisoned Jafar Panahi.

Filmed in Lebanon with a cast of Iranian actors drawn from all over the world, *Circumstance* looks at Iran through the experience of a liberal family living under an intolerant regime. Mehran, the musician son, has returned from drug rehab and is inching toward Islamic sobriety. Atafeh, 16, his sister, is exploring the Tehran underworld with her friend, Shireen. As the two girls become closer, Mehran's resentment grows, to the point that he sets up cameras in the family home to observe them.

Keshavarz, who wrote the script based on events that she saw and experienced in Iran, situates the family's turmoil in the broader context of other educated Iranians trying to survive in the worst of circumstances under a regime rooting out evil where it's thought to be hiding.

Her scenes, shot all over Lebanon in lush Super 16mm, show the haven that family life provides, and the catharsis of secret bacchanals that defy the regime's ban on alcohol and male/female dancing.

In the role of Atafeh, Iranian-Canadian Nikohl Boosheri plays a young woman willing to rebel against any rules. French-born Sarah Kazemy, as Shireen, is elegant as the more restrained half of the couple that yearns for "free" Dubai. As Mehran, Reza Sixo Safai, who grew up in Palo Alto, California, is eerily threatening as the drug addict brother who has seen the error of his ways and who's determined to safeguard purity.

Keshavarz has succeeded in getting a consistency acting style from a cast that she drew from different continents. Cinematographer Brian Rigney Hubbard and production designer Natacha Kalfayan (with haunting music from Gingger Shankar) give the same consistency to the look of the story shot outside Iran.

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