

The Hollywood Reporter



SUNDANCE REVIEW: *Circumstance*

6:34 PM 1/23/2011 by James Greenberg

PARK CITY -- (U.S. Dramatic Competition) "*Circumstance*" is an amazingly accomplished and complex first feature from Iranian-American writer-director Maryam Keshavarz.

Drawing on some of her own experiences, she has created an insiders look at a world few of us will ever get to see. The political, sexual and religious labyrinth of Iran today feels at once contemporary and utterly foreign. Told with a modern rhythm and propulsive soundtrack, it's a compelling story that should attract both a young and older audience of culturally curious moviegoers.

Keshavarz's looking glass is a liberal, well-to-do family in Teheran, and in particular 16-year-old Atafeh (**Nikohl Boosheri**) and her less privileged friend Shireen (**Sarah Kazemy**), whose parents were likely executed as dissidents. As any girls their age, they are testing the bonds of friendship and their sexual attraction for each other, made even more complicated by a repressive society that has little regard for women. They act out their rebellion by taking drugs and partying in hip-looking underground clubs, but their only real escape is

through their imagination. Life is so stifling in Iran that they picture themselves running off to the relative freedom of Dubai.

All of Atafeh's family has been affected by the totalitarian regime. Her once progressive, Berkeley-educated father Firouz (**Soheil Parsa**) is nostalgic for his glory days while compromising in the present. Her mother Azar (**Nasrin Pakkho**) is a successful surgeon but nonetheless reminds her daughter that we have to accept the reality we live in. Most damaged of all is her brother Mehran (**Reza Sixo Safai**). A crack addict recently released from jail, he is desperately looking for a way to fit in to society and not surprisingly turns to religion.

His twisted sense of holiness leads him to become a member of the morality police and from his lofty perch puts his whole family under surveillance. Atafeh's vitality and especially her life-affirming relationship with Shireen is more than he can stand, and he sets out to crush it in a series of actions that irrevocably alters the close and loving ties that once bound the family members as allies, not adversaries. It's within these crushing circumstances that people like Atafeh and Shireen do their best to find a modicum of peace and hope, but it doesn't work for all of them.

For obvious reasons, Keshavarz shot the film in Lebanon, and even there she had to stretch the bounds of what was acceptable. Having grown up in the U.S. and Iran, she is able to look at the culture from the inside and has a keen eye for the telling image or subtle gesture, ably assisted by cinematographer Brian **Rigney Hubbard**. In one striking scene at the seaside, she frames a group of men lounging in bathing suits seated next to women in their black hijabs. On the other hand, scenes of the girls buoyantly bounding down the street and partying in the clubs are shot in saturated colors, contrasting with the drabness of everyday life.

Drawing on relatives from her extended family, Keshavarz clearly knows these people well and has managed to create distinct and individual characters on both sides of the political spectrum. In this she is aided by fine performances from relative newcomers Boosheri and Kazemy as the teenage girls, and the sympathetic grace of Iranian stage veterans Parsa and Pakkho as the parents. Together the director and her cast have managed to give the film a sense of complete authenticity.

At times, however, Keshavarz may have been too close too to these people and occasionally it feels like she is trying to squeeze in too much detail. Particularly in the early going, the film seems like it's simmering rather than gaining momentum. Some judicious trims would help that. But overall this is an impressive debut from a filmmaker with something to say and the talent to say it.