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## MOVIE REVIEW

Circumstance (2010)



Nikohl Boosheri, front, and Sarah Kazemy in “Circumstance,” directed by Maryam Keshavarz.

## Where the Personal Is the Intensely Political

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At one point in “Circumstance,” [Maryam Keshavarz](#)’s swirling and sensuous melodrama of forbidden love in modern Tehran, four young Iranians slip into a clandestine video club in the back of a store. The walls are lined with Hollywood DVDs, and the friends discuss the possibility of dubbing two recent American movies into Persian: “[Milk](#)” and “[Sex and the City](#).”

Like the underground raves and secret house parties they attend — events full of liquor, dancing and the possibility of sex — watching those films carries the risk of harassment, arrest by the dreaded morality police or worse. And while the four friends share a determination to keep breaking the rules, they disagree about the meaning of their disobedience. One young man insists that, with “[Milk](#)” in particular, they need to emphasize a message of human rights and popular protest. But his friends argue that the simple fact of defiance, the pursuit of pleasure in the face of repression, is in itself inherently and sufficiently political.

The implications of this debate ripple through the story Ms. Keshavarz tells, informing both its flights of emotion and its occasional forays into didacticism. A product of the Iranian diaspora — the director and most of the cast make their homes in the West — “[Circumstance](#)” [tries to capture](#) aspects of life in Iran that lie beyond the reach of that country’s filmmakers, who must work within censorship codes or in secret.

Though it lacks the artful, headlong immediacy of [“The Circle”](#) and [“Offside,”](#) Jafar Panahi’s films about women in Tehran — and the breakneck exuberance of Bahman Ghobadi’s [“No One Knows About Persian Cats,”](#) about Tehran’s underground music scene — [“Circumstance”](#) ripples with the indignant energy of youthful rebellion. Coming two years after [the protests that convulsed Iran](#) following the 2009 presidential elections and amid regional revolutionary turmoil, it has undeniable topical resonance. But Ms. Keshavarz is less interested in the public manifestations of political engagement than in the ways power, and particularly religious authority, affect the intimacies of families, lovers and friends.

Atafeh (Nikohl Boosheri) and Shireen (Sarah Kazemy) are schoolmates whose affection grows into erotic passion. Shireen, stigmatized by the dissident status of her deceased parents, lives on the edge of poverty, while Atafeh is cushioned by her family’s wealth and privilege. Her parents, a doctor and a businessman, balance a taste for luxury with a habit of discretion. At home, they drink wine, listen to Western classical music and speak their minds. But they also acquiesce to restrictions that their daughter finds intolerable. “Someday we will all be able to swim together,” says Atafeh’s father, Firouz (Soheil Parsa), during a trip to the seaside, but he does not seem able to do more than wish for a time when women can go in the water. Shireen and Atafeh, in contrast, are inclined, however recklessly, to take matters into their own hands, stripping to their underwear and splashing in the waves on an empty beach at dawn.

This is Ms. Keshavarz’s feature directorial debut, and she revels in her own sense of freedom, constructing scenes that pulse with sexual energy and a few — notably a fantasy sequence complete with heels and lingerie — that lean toward soft-core prurience. But she effectively communicates Shireen and Atafeh’s mutual intoxication, savoring and sharing their appreciation of each other’s beauty and lingering on Ms. Kazemy’s [Monica Bellucci](#)-like features.

The serpent in their garden of delights is Mehran (Reza Sixo Safai), Atafeh’s brother, a former musician and recovering drug addict whose embrace of stern Muslim morality threatens the easy, hypocritical harmony that has protected the family. His interest in Shireen, mildly creepy at first, grows less mild and more sinister as the film progresses toward its final crisis. He embodies, perhaps too schematically, one of Ms. Keshavarz’s main themes, which is that religious authoritarianism is rooted in and devoted to the patriarchal control of women.

“Circumstance” makes this point with undeniable power and conviction, and also with a dramatic extravagance that comes close to soap opera. Seething passions boil over, and the results are messy. But if excess and unruliness can be counted among the film’s flaws, they also represent the very principles it is determined to defend. One slogan of an earlier era of student revolt was “be realistic: demand the impossible,” and Ms. Keshavarz’s indifference to some of the sober conventions of realism is very much in this spirit. “Circumstance” sometimes feels like too much, but as a response to dogmatism and denial that can feel just right.