



## Parties and Promiscuity in a Police State

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By Natalie Pace

The film *Circumstance* is more than just a crowd-pleaser.

*Circumstance* won the Audience Award at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival and received a standing ovation from the sell-out crowd at the Landmark Theatre on Sunday, August 27, 2011, but this erotic story of sanctuary-seeking Iranian teens is more than just a salacious crowd-pleaser. It is a peak through the keyhole into the inner sanctum of an Iranian family trying to keep the police state from poisoning their sophisticated palates. It is a hidden camera (literally) into the bedrooms, raves and orgasms of curious, world-wise, "naughty" young adults who are drunk on dreams, but are constantly being sobered up by the Morality Police. And that is what makes the film so important.

Through her carefully crafted characters and cinematography, Iranian/American writer/director Maryam Keshavarz has created a masterpiece that is luscious, erotic and profoundly complicated. On the surface, *Circumstance* looks like an artistic rendering of lesbian porn, starring two talented newcomers, Nikohl Boosheri and Sarah Kazemy. However, beneath the skin deep delights lies a murky stream of lies, espionage and payoffs, as teens and adults alike purchase hall passes from an oppressive regime, where you have to fight for your *life* to party. As Iranian/American director/writer Maryam Keshavarz explains, "I am moved by the strength of young women in Iran -- by what they put themselves through for a moment of freedom."

In *Circumstance*, everyone is struggling with the duality of their desires, which are constantly under attack by school authorities, family members and even taxi drivers. As a seven-year-old who moved back to Iran from New York City, writer/director Keshavarz learned to lie about

her home life when authorities questioned her whether or not her parents smoked or drank or watched Western movies. In *Circumstance*, the father serves wine to his dinner guests, but quickly switches to juice when the Imam enters the room. Shireen and Atafeh wear traditional maghnaeh (head covering) to school, but strip down to tight jeans and stilettos at the disco. A reformed heroin addict forbids his beautiful and talented new wife from singing in public.

Is it the love of God, fear of the state or just an easy job that leads Mehran, the prodigal son of the movie, back to the Mosque to his evening prayers? Actor Reza Sixo Safai, who plays Mehran in *Circumstance*, understands the depth of his character's dilemma because he sees his own cousins in Iran "who have so much to offer, who are so talented and are super educated, but there are not many opportunities to do anything."

Safai believed in Director Keshavarz' depiction of the characters in *Circumstance* so much that he chose to make the film, even though doing so means he will probably never set foot in Iran again. Keshavarz also admits that she was initially afraid to write the film, knowing that if she did, she, too, could never go back and visit her relatives in Iran.

*Circumstance* is not a Michael Moore documentary. Keshavarz does not lead the filmgoer to any moral conclusion. Rather she unveils the complicated way that people create their own sanctuary, even under strict Islamist rule. As Keshavarz explained to me in an interview on August 28, 2011, "Iranians are not as religious as you imagine. The Islamists took power after the Revolution. Most of my cousins in Iran are atheists."

Go for the sex, drugs, beautiful women and rock 'n roll. Go for the buzz. Go to see America's next top director/writer, Maryam Keshavarz. Go to start a movement to nominate Reza Sixo Safai, who deserves to be a frontrunner for Best Supporting Actor, for an Oscar. No matter what gets you to the theater to see this limited release, independent film, and which scene makes you squirm in your seat, you will come away with a deeper awareness and appreciation for the men and women of Iran, who live far away from the camera's eye and far beyond the understanding of so many Americans.

Almost 70% of Iranians are under 35, and as we saw in the hotly contested presidential election in Iran of 2009, many of them want greater freedom. While no film can attempt to depict the evolving ethos of an entire country, *Circumstance* does introduce Westerners to a family of well-educated Iranian professionals who would feel more comfortable at a dinner party with President Obama than with President Ahmadinejad.

If after seeing the film, you wish to Take Part in giving other Westerners a peek into the private life of Iranians, which includes parties and promiscuity and educated women who can drive and become surgeons, but might be forbidden to sing in public, visit <http://www.takepart.com/circumstance>.