

Killer Movie Reviews

CIRCUMSTANCE

Andrea Chase | September 9, 2011

CIRCUMSTANCE begins in a perfect world before being brought back to the reality with a thud. The perfect world involves the freedom of living an authentic life. The real world, modern day Iran, is a place where lies are the common currency of life, and to behave otherwise is to risk everything, even one's life.

Maryam Keshavarz's debut feature film is a painfully acute study of the desperation of a country, using as the focus a wealthy family that has until now considered itself beyond the reach of the law. The parents Firouz (Soheil Parsa) and Aza (Nasrin Pakkho) marched in the streets to bring down the Shah and bring on the Islamic Revolution. Their children are not afforded the same opportunity to rebel in the open. Son Mehran (Resa Sixo Safai) turned to drugs. Daughter Atafeh (Nikohl Boosheri) and her best friend Shireen (Sarah Kazemy) wear the hajib in public, but secretly sneak off to parties where sex, drugs, and rock & roll are enjoyed in bulk, and with the heady excitement of being forbidden.

The careful order of family life begins to disintegrate when Mehran returns home to a loving family, but a father's grave suspicions. Mehran begins to channel his frustrations; both with his father's disappointment and his growing attraction for Shireen, into religion fanaticism, becoming a fundamentalist who refuses accept food from the hand of his sister because he considers her a loose woman. Loose, in this case, meaning one who is too Western. Shireen, for her part, has her problems with being the daughter of parents executed for their political crimes, and finds her consolation in her emotional intimacy with Atafeh. When their relationship turns physical, they daydream of that perfect world where they can be openly together, and plot with growing desperation their escape.

There are intercuts the closed-circuit footage of the girls going about their lives, underscoring that in this society, the female of the species is always under the watchful eyes of men who have absolute power over them. The men, too, must conform, or be seen to, at least. The strain of living two lives, one public, one private, becomes intolerable when Mehran's fanaticism intrudes on that private life, and everyone must engage in deceptions and subterfuge, even when dealing with those they love most. The emotional gutting at work builds with the intensity of a thriller, and the impact of a horror film, consuming even the watchers tasked with enforcing the moral code. Keshavarz's view is unflinching. It is also one full of compassion for people who had a dream turn sour on them, and a new generation unable to find their own dream, all of whom live in a climate of suspicion and paranoia that no one must ever acknowledge openly, but must live with until the pressure becomes too much and the spirit cracks beyond repair. Moving between the silences of fear to explosions of violent emotion, the raw performances are anything but undisciplined, catching in nuances and bursts of emotion the way repression triggers extremism in a vicious circle that feeds on itself.

CIRCUMSTANCE is a beautifully constructed film that is as gritty as the subject matter, and as lyrical as the redemption and the peace its characters all seek.