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## Living and Loving Underground in Iran



Brian Rigney Hubbard  
Sarah Kazemy, left, and Nikohl Boosheri in "Circumstance."

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SHORTLY before she began shooting the film "Circumstance," her first experience in front of a camera, the law student and soon-to-be actress Sarah Kazemy flew from her home in France to visit relatives in Iran. She anticipated that the movie, which focuses on the lesbian romance of two Tehran teenagers rebelling against a puritanical Islamic theocracy, would make it difficult for her to return there for the foreseeable future, and she wanted to say her farewells to people and a country that she loves.

"I'm proud that this movie shows a bit of the underground life there," even if it offends the mullahs, "because people have no idea that such a thing even exists, and it's bigger than what you can imagine," Ms. Kazemy said during a recent interview in Manhattan. "I used to go to Iran every summer until I was 17," she added, "so I had to go there one last time."

In "[Circumstance](#)," which opens in New York, Los Angeles on Friday, Ms. Kazemy, 22, plays Shireen, whose friendship with her privileged classmate Atafeh, (Nikohl Boosheri), turns erotic as they navigate a circuit of illicit parties offering drink, drugs, dancing, loud Western music and banned films. The situation becomes even more complicated when Atafeh's troubled older brother, Mehran (Reza Sixo Safai), also falls in love with Shireen.

That baroque story line, which led the film's production team to scour the Middle East for a place where they could film in safety, may seem more like something out of Jean Genet or Tennessee Williams than [contemporary Iran](#). But that's precisely one of the points that [Maryam Keshavarz](#), who wrote and directed "Circumstance" on a budget of less than \$1 million, was trying to make. As an Iranian-American she has always had to confront stereotypes, one of the most pernicious of which, she said, was the notion that nothing goes on behind closed doors in Iranian society in the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic revolution in which the Ayatollah Khomeini's supporters overthrew Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi.

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“I wanted to make this film because I’ve always seen myself as a translator of culture between Iran and the United States, and my whole life has been about going back and forth,” Ms. Keshavarz, 36, said. “With any family in Iran there is this duality, their true face and what’s under the surface, and so a kind of schizophrenia is created. There’s a whole underground world that happens in Iranian society, and that’s what I wanted to explore.”

Some elements of the film draw on Ms. Keshavarz’s own experience and observations.

Though she grew up in Brooklyn, Staten Island and New Jersey, she spent summers with cousins in Shiraz, a city of 1.5 million in southern Iran. The party sequences are based on things she witnessed as a teenager, as are some of the scenes showing harsh treatment by the morality police, she said, mentioning one cousin who was subjected to a lashing after he was caught playing music on his car stereo.



Nikohl Boosheri, left; Sarah Kazemy, Reza Sixo Safai. The director, Maryam Keshavarz, foreground.

For the film’s three main roles Ms. Keshavarz turned to other members of the Iranian diaspora. Ms. Boosheri grew up in Vancouver, Ms. Kazemy in Paris and Mr. Safai in California, but all are children of parents who left the country around the time of the Iranian revolution, and all still have family in Iran. Only Ms. Boosheri, 23, whose parents were military officers who fled to Pakistan, has not spent time visiting relatives there.

Except for a few phrases in English, “Circumstance,” which is Ms. Keshavarz’s first feature-length fictional film, is in Persian. Ms. Keshavarz said that she wanted to reach the vast group of exiles created by the Iranian revolution, and that even inside Iran, where the film will probably be banned, citizens are likely to see smuggled copies. Therefore, “authenticity is important,” she said, “and that begins with language.”

But for her cast, that was something of a challenge. Though the main actors are all fluent in Persian, it is of a variety “frozen in time,” as Ms. Kazemy put it, from the era of the shah, and so a dialogue coach was brought in.

To update her vocabulary, “I would hang out with Iranians in my town, many of whom are recent immigrants,” Ms. Boosheri recalled, “and I couldn’t keep up with them. They call each other ‘bro,’ and they would laugh when I talked. They would say, ‘You speak so by the book,’ or ‘You speak like an old person.’ ”

Ms. Keshavarz said that she did not set out to make a movie that was political, at least in any overt or conventional sense. Yet as one of her characters remarks during a droll scene in which four young people dub an episode of “Sex and the City” and Sean Penn’s performance in “Milk” for clandestine distribution, “in this place, everything that’s illegal is subversive.” That reality gives “Circumstance,” which won the audience award at the [Sundance Film Festival](#) in January, an especially seditious tone, Ms. Keshavarz acknowledged.

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“When the state controls every part of your personal life, your personal life is political,” she said, “down to what you dress, who you love, or how you interact with the same sex or different sexes.”

With filming in Iran obviously out of the question, Ms. Keshavarz and the film’s producers scouted other locations in the Middle East and ended up choosing Beirut. Lebanon, of course, has its own troubled history, including civil war and religious strife, but Ms. Keshavarz thought, correctly, that Beirut’s physical resemblance to Tehran and its high level of energy would inspire her cast.

“It was the right Middle Eastern feeling, it had the essence,” Ms. Boosheri said. “And in Iran we wouldn’t have had the freedom to do what we did.”

At times, though, that verisimilitude proved to be a liability. Hezbollah, the powerful Shia armed force and political party that the United States classifies as a terrorist group, is based in Lebanon and receives support from the theocracy in Iran, so the filmmakers feared that word of the nature of their project might leak out and bring retribution.

“It was so hard, probably the most challenging shoot in my career, and for multiple reasons,” said Karin Chien, one of the film’s producers. “The political terrain was constantly shifting while we were there. We didn’t know who was in charge, and there were all these competing factions, of which Hezbollah was one. We went in thinking that explicit sexuality was the thing we were going to have to work around most, but it was the Iranian content, the fact that this was set in Iran, that we had to downplay.”

As a result a modified script was submitted to the Lebanese authorities, who were also told that the project was merely Ms. Keshavarz’s thesis film, not a commercial feature. “The word Iran was never mentioned, and the script was in English,” Ms. Keshavarz said. In addition, cast members and the hand-picked crew members were told not to talk about the film in public or mention it on their Facebook pages.

Even so, the filming led to several uncomfortable brushes with the authorities. On the last day of production the police nearly shut down the shoot, under the impression that the cast was making a pornographic film. Several earlier scenes were shot in an apartment building across the street from a military command post, which led to regular visits from the authorities.

“They thought we were turning the cameras on them, spying on them, so they came on the set” one day as a birthday party scene was being filmed, Mr. Safai, 38, recalled. “I was in makeup, and someone came in and said, ‘Reza, forget about the lines, we’re doing it in English.’ It was one more thing we always had to be concerned about.”

In the end, Mr. Safai and other cast members agreed, that sense of constant anxiety and dread actually helped strengthen their performances. And they also recognize that they are beneficiaries of “Circumstance” and circumstance, that their own experience making the film pales beside the harsh reality that Iranians living under the mullahs must confront daily.

“The struggle of any family in that kind of repressive atmosphere, where both the family and the individual are always under siege, is to create a safe space and sanctuary,” Ms. Keshavarz said. “To me that is what this film is evaluating. It celebrates love, but a love that is tragic, because on every level every kind of love is under assault and ultimately compromised.”