



Forbidden Love

A SUNDANCE FAVORITE, MARYAM KESHAVARZ'S *CIRCUMSTANCE* TACKLES IRANIAN TABOOS.

“Gay identity requires the ability to say you’re gay without the repercussions of being killed,” says director Maryam Keshavarz. She’s elaborating on Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s infamous 2007 speech at Columbia University, in which he denied the existence of homosexuality in his country. In this way, homosexuality does not exist—at least not publicly—in Iran, where Keshavarz’s feature-length debut, *Circumstance* (in theaters August 19), takes place. The film, which won the U.S. Dramatic Competition Audience Award at Sundance this past winter, depicts the clandestine relationship between two young women, Shireen and Atafeh. Their romance unfolds amid Atafeh’s wealthy, liberal family and, in particular, under the suspicions of her brother, who seeks to redeem himself for his former drug addiction with religious zealotry.

“Families create sanctuaries and utopias within oppressive environments,” says Keshavarz. “What I wanted to explore in the film was the vulnerability of those utopias.” Though underscored by tension, much of the first half of her film, which details the girls’ burgeoning affair, is dreamlike and beautiful, flourishing in the

sunny, well-appointed family estate and exploding with vibrant underground party scenes. Quickly, though, the idyllic facade of Atafeh and Shireen’s courtship begins to crumble as the impossibility of their personal and sexual freedom—under both government and familial scrutiny—becomes apparent.

“The film has a lot to do with duality—not being able to be the person you truly are,” says Keshavarz. She hopes this message will be universally relatable and that *Circumstance* can reach the culture it depicts, like films before it have: “I was really shocked when *Brokeback Mountain* came out in Iran. It was a popular black-market DVD because they really understood the idea of that kind of love as something you can’t have.” **MIKE BERLIN**