



Iran's Controversial New Lesbian Film

By David Ansen | Aug 25, 2011

Banned in Iran, a winner at Sundance, Maryam Keshavarz's film 'Circumstance' stunningly captures the love affair of two 16-year-old Iranian girls. She details the film's troubled gestation to David Ansen.

Maryam Keshavarz's stunning, sensual *Circumstance* has already been denounced, sight unseen, by the Iranian government, which got wind of it after the movie won the Audience Award at [this year's Sundance film festival](#). The film, set in contemporary Tehran (though shot in Lebanon), will never be released in Iran, though you can be sure pirated DVDs will be a hot item on the black market. The [Iranian-American writer and director, 36](#), who spent her childhood shuttling back and forth between the U.S. and the country of her parent's birth, knew even as she was writing it that making this movie would mean she could never return to Iran. Actually, that's not quite true, she explains with a laugh. "I can go back. I just can't leave."

The first but certainly not the only thing about *Circumstance* that the Islamic regime objects to is the love story at the center of the movie, between two beautiful, Westernized 16-year-old schoolgirls. Iran is a country, as we all know, where homosexuality doesn't exist—President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad [said so himself](#)—so to depict a frankly erotic lesbian *amour fou* is a treasonable fantasy in itself.

Then again, it doesn't take much [to break the law in Iran](#). Listening to pop music will do the trick. *Circumstance* shows us how anyone who goes against the fundamentalist grain is forced to lead a double life. In public, in the daytime, at school, Atafeh (Nikohl Boosheri) and Shireen (Sarah Kazemy) cover their hair in scarves and their bodies in drab clothes, rendering them indistinguishable from the other schoolgirls. At night, with their friends, the girls avail themselves of Tehran's many secret underground clubs. With the right password, you go behind a nondescript storefront and enter the city's youthful, strobe-lit counterculture. The girls shed their robes to reveal sparkling minidresses, the coke flows, the dance floor fills, and the party goes deep into the night—if it isn't raided by [the self-appointed morality police](#).



Atafeh comes from a liberal, wealthy family that must keep its secular sentiments and love of Western culture behind closed doors. She was raised with the confidence of privilege. The orphaned Shireen, less sure of herself, lives with her aunt and uncle: her dissenter parents were killed for publishing antigovernment tracts. She's a great beauty, but lacks Atafeh's boldness. They can only fantasize about living openly as lovers

in another land, and Keshavarz shows us those fantasies—erotic encounters in a chic hotel room in an imaginary Dubai, where no curtains need be drawn.

The greatest threat to their friendship, however, comes not from the theocratic thugs who regularly pull kids off the road for playing Iranian hip-hop in their cars, but from within Atafeh's family. Her "prodigal son" brother, Mehran (Reza Sixo Safari), a former classical musician, returns home from a stint in drug rehab. Lost, bitter, and estranged from his disappointed father, he turns to Islam, falling under the paternal wing of a morality police

bigwig. It's not uncommon for former junkies to turn to fundamentalism, but is Mehran's newfound faith genuine, or a desperate assertion of power? Mehran becomes a monster of betrayal and manipulation—he sets up a surveillance system to spy on his sister and Shireen, whom he covets for himself. He becomes an informer, setting up an arrest that will alter the lives of both his sister and Shireen. But Keshavarz allows us to see the humanity even in this villain. In his own way, he too is a victim of a system that boxes everyone into a corner.

Circumstance is, unavoidably, a political film, but it owes as much to the steamy family melodramas of Douglas Sirk as it does to the social realism of the incarcerated [Jafar Panahi](#). From the opening sequence set in a nightclub (which you don't realize until later is a fantasy), you feel you're in the hands of a natural-born filmmaker. Her life experience has given Keshavarz something to say, but she has no need of soapboxes to convey her message. It's embedded in the performances of her marvelous cast (you'd never know the two girls had never been in front of a camera before), in the fluid editing and the beautifully composed images. The personal is political has perhaps a deeper resonance in Iran than in most places. Keshavarz's emotionally urgent film, deeply in touch with all its characters, sticks to the personal, and in doing so, illuminates an entire society.

The director knew that it would be impossible to shoot *Circumstance* in Iran, and too dangerous for any of the cast and crew to live there. She found her two leads in Canada and France, and chose Beirut to double as Tehran. But filming there had its hazards too. Because the film features nudity, the rumor got around that she was making a porno. Keshavarz waited until the last day to shoot one of her most difficult scenes—the Dubai erotic fantasy between Atafeh and Shireen—and it was on that day that the police paid a visit. "It was incredibly tense. We had 10 days of film on the set," and she feared it might be confiscated before she could get it out of the country to be developed. The officials had been told they were making an American romantic comedy, so the actors were forced to improvise, in English, a scene where they were talking about their boyfriends.

"Fortunately, filmmaking is such a tedious process that they left after the second take," she explains. She was able to complete the scene and fly the unexposed film out of Lebanon in the nick of time.

Circumstance, an American movie shot in Farsi, gives us a perspective that could only come from someone who straddles two worlds: the details are authentically Iranian, while the style is heavily indebted to Hollywood. Growing up with dual citizenship, Keshavarz is intimately acquainted with cultural schizophrenia. Her parents came to the U.S in 1967 to practice medicine, setting up a clinic for the poor in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of New York City. She was a 6-year-old on Staten Island when the hostage crises broke out, and she and her family were subjected to taunts and beatings from her Italian-American neighbors. And she found herself in second grade in Tehran "at the height of the Islamization of the school system." Every summer she would return to Iran. She remembers, in the days before the Internet, the fear she felt passing through customs with hidden Michael Jackson tapes and copies of *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* for her friends. "I was a smuggler of cultural goods." That would have been enough to get her arrested then. Now she has the honor, as the creator of *Circumstance*, of being a bona fide enemy of the state.