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Circumstance

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Nikohl Boosheri and Sarah Kazemy star in *Circumstance* (Source: Marakesh Films)

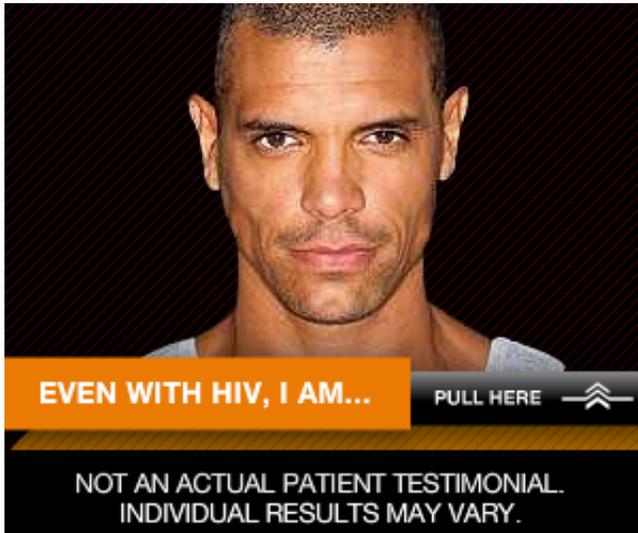
"Don't you want to change your circumstances?" implores Hossein (Sina Amedson), a gay cousin of one of **"Circumstance"**'s lead characters who is visiting from the U.S. "What they did to gays thirty years ago, they are doing to you now."

The circumstances he is referring to are the stifling strictures of Sharia law under which Iranian citizens live. His earnest indignation contrasts with the impetuous but apolitical waywardness of Atafeh (Nikohl Boosheri) and Shireen (Sarah Kazemy), the beautiful and privileged young women who cleverly claim their right to youthful rebellion despite the high risks involved.

Hossein's plea comes amidst a suggestion that a small group dub Milk into Farsi, hopefully inspiring Iranian viewers to take

action against their oppressors, but Atafeh and Shireen quip that government spies would simply turn Sean Penn into an anti-gay leader. This may be a minor moment in a film rich with intimacy, betrayal, and provocation, but it is telling of the mindset of these young lovers who are naturally vibrant yet tethered. They don't seem to harbor any hope for changing the system, but will do all that's within their agency to live freely.

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Central to this liberty is the illicit love affair that develops between them. Attending underground parties abuzz with defiant indulgence could be plenty to cause problems, but for Atafeh and Shireen a cataclysmic conflict threatens to erupt in the home. This is due to the return of Atafeh's brother, Mehran (Reza Sixo Safai). Once a drug-using classical musician, he is now a religious fundamentalist who has joined forces with the morality police. In this way, the once safe, progressive haven of Atafeh's home has transmogrified into a tense sphere in which no one is safe from the power-tripping, pious judgments of society.

The audacious Atafeh and somewhat more passive Shireen share a redemptive bond, but this is complicated by Mehran's surveillance and his romantic aspirations for Shireen, whom he wishes to shelter from his sister's corrupting influence.

Iranian-American director Maryam Keshavarz, who shot the film in Beirut so that she could show these women unveiled, among other things, crafts a film that is young in spirit (empowerment through partying, sexual assertiveness, and obstreperousness in the face of all authority) but mature in its execution. She allows her co-protagonists the potential pitfalls of youth such as recklessness and occasional ingratitude towards family while maintaining them as magnetic heroines of a resistance that is laudable despite being self-involved.

Atafeh's run ins with the police feel a bit repetitive at one point, but this fleeting moment of plot excess is easily overshadowed by the plenitude of moving scenes, some of which are well-written insights into the predicament and sentiments of her parents. At one point, her father tries to relate to her on a hike planned for bonding, but Atafeh is too much of a firebrand to take his efforts to heart or to accommodate his concerns; this scene is one of the ones in which the grief of the characters is most palpable despite the fact that the film clearly belongs to the young generation.

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