

j.b. spins

Jazz, film, and improvised culture.

about me

Name:

[J.B.](#)

Location:

New York, New York, United States

J.B. (Joe Bendel) works in the book publishing industry, and also teaches jazz survey courses at NYU's School of Continuing and Professional Studies. He has written jazz articles for publications which would be appalled by his political affiliation. He also coordinated instrument donations for displaced musicians on a volunteer basis for the Jazz Foundation of America during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Send e-mail to: [jb.feedback "at" yahoo "dot" com](mailto:jb.feedback@dot.com).

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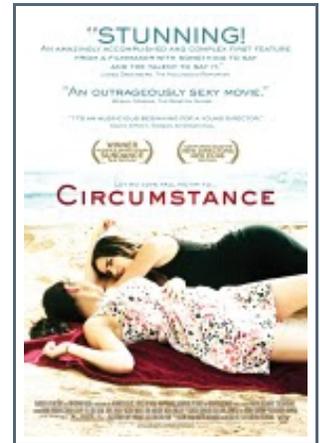
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monday, august 22, 2011

Circumstance: Islamist Homophobia in Iran

Trading one addiction for another is a peril of rehab. This seems to have happened with Atafeh Hakimi's brother. Drug-free but now a virulent Islamist, Meyran Hakimi's return destabilizes his affluent formerly secular Iranian family in Maryam Keshavarz's *Circumstance* (trailer [here](#)), which opens this Friday in New York.

Mehran was once the most promising musician in the musical Hakimi family. Much to their regret, the newly radicalized prodigal son has forsaken such pursuits. Unbeknownst to his family, Mehran's career path now involves Iran's secret police. This will directly complicate his sister's life when they both fall in love with her best friend, the free-spirited Shireen Arshadi.



Needless to say, neither lesbian relations nor free-spiritedness in general cut much ice with Mehran. Having wired the family flat for surveillance, the jealous brother understands exactly what is going on between the young women. As Hakimi and Arshadi press their luck in Tehran's underground party scene, brother Mehran bides his time, not about to let the inevitable crisis go to waste (as our current administration would counsel).

While the Sundance press kit descriptions of the Iranian-born, American-educated Keshavarz's previous works sound like a somewhat mixed ideological bag, *Circumstance* is a legitimately bold, unequivocal critique of the institutionalized mistreatment of both women and homosexual Iranians living under fundamentalist misrule. Indeed, the film leaves no question regarding the nature and extent of the risk represented Hakimi and Arshadi's relationship.

At times, Keshavarz also captures the absurd situations fostered by the Iranian system, as when the two young women help their gay Iranian-American friend Hossein dub *Sex in the City* into Farsi to hook people into watching Gus Van Zandt's *Milk* strategically placed on the same bootleg disk. However, the extent to which the mullahs have evidently co-opted the supposedly atheistic Che Guevara as a symbol of their revolution is hardly surprising. After all, Che shared their zealous commitment to statism through terror.

Circumstance is an intriguing film on multiple levels, examining not just

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gender and sexual orientation, but also class disparity in contemporary Iran. The Hakimis are the sort of privileged family that are assumed not to exist in Iran, but their father's early support for the Islamic Revolution during his student days preserves their position, despite their relative moderation. Yet, those allowances only extend so far.

Nikohl Boosheri and Sarah Kazemy are undeniably charismatic as Hakimi and Arshadi, respectably, which makes their dire straits all the more disturbing. Though a comparatively small part, Sina Amedson also makes a strong impression as Hossein, deftly serving as the film's conscious when he directly challenges Hakimi and Arshadi to strive to "change their circumstances," (thereby supplying the film's title as well).



Though *Circumstance* is somewhat frank depicting the women's romantic dealings, it is not meant as titillation. Indeed, it is a revealing look at life lived under oppressive conditions. A real standout at this year's Sundance Film Festival, it is an important film that demands

serious attention. Highly recommended, *Circumstance* opens this Friday (8/26) in New York at the Landmark Sunshine.

Labels: [Iran](#), [Iranian Cinema](#)

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