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- October 2, 2011, 11:00 am - [Mehregan celebration, Irvine](#)
- October 2, 2011, 4:00 pm - [Aliakbar Moradi in Concert: Sacred Songs of Kurdistan, LA](#)
- October 2, 2011, 7:00 pm - [Rana Farhan live at Yoshi's, San Fran](#)
- October 2, 2011, 8:00 pm - [Simorq Orchestra concert, Netherlands](#)
- October 8, 2011, 6:00 pm - [Mahal Annual Fundraiser Gala, Irvine](#)

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# Let no love fall victim to Circumstance

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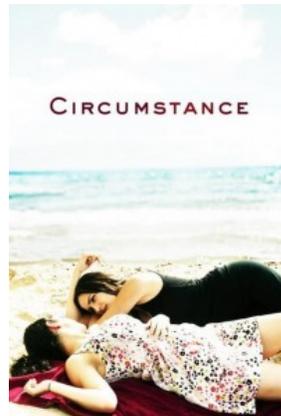
I first heard about the film [Circumstance](#) (also see [IMDB](#) and [this](#)) during its world premier at the [Sundance Film Festival](#) in January 2011. It was one of the 16 films out of more than 1,100 submissions that was selected for the Sundance film competition, and it went on to win the "[Audience Award: Dramatic](#)".

Luckily I had the chance to see it at the [San Francisco International Film Festival](#) this week. Both screenings were sold out early on but I managed to get a ticket from a friend. I loved it. It is a beautiful, luscious, sensual and sexually charged drama, done artfully and tastefully. It is a visual film with solid cinematography, but it is also blessed with witty dialogs and good music. It deals with common and real youth and family issues in Iran, and potentially in other countries. It is an honest and daring look at life in the middle and upper class modern Iran. I suppose certain scenes might make some conservative audiences uncomfortable and may raise a few eyebrows. But that is how a powerful film should be.

I have a bias towards Iranian cinema, because I am Iranian, and good new Persian films are somewhat of a novelty here and even in Iran. But *Circumstance* is an excellent film regardless of its origin. And it is not just me who thinks so. In addition to winning the Audience Award at Sundance, it has gotten a number of rave [reviews](#). For example, Dan Mecca from The Film Stage [writes](#), "*Circumstance* walks the line of a revolution for two hours, never once tripping over its feet." Michelle Orange from SBS Films [calls it](#) an "exceedingly well-crafted film".



Vancouver), and the beautiful and more reserved Shireen (played by Sarah Kazemy, French-Iranian born and raised in Paris). They are best of friends and seem together all the time. They go to underground Tehran parties, flirt with boys, experiment with sex and drugs, ... and often get in trouble. And they



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Eghbali (and Faramarz Aslani) tonight in San Fran, Herbst Theater, Oct 1.  
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daydream of a better life away from Iran together.

Atafeh and Shireen are more than just friends; they have developed a special and strong romantic interest for each other and are sexually involved! It is not clear if they are lesbians or simply going through a phase. Based on what I hear and read, this kind of relationships among school girls in Iran is not that unusual. I don't know if all-women schools in Iran has anything to do with this, or it is just the desire and curiosity for sexual exploration in adolescence, which is beyond just women and Iran. For our two film stars however it is more than just sex. They are also emotionally quite attached.

Atafeh is from a progressive, educated and well-off family. Her dad, Firouz (played by Soheil Parsa), a liberal who went to school in Berkeley in 1970s, is a success and seems to have a healthy



relationship with his wife, Azar (played by Nasrin Pakkho). They are loving and understanding parents to Atafeh and their son, Mehran (played by Reza Sixo Safai based in USA), who has the potential to be a talented musician. However, Mehran is an ex drug addict who has just returned from rehab and decides not to pursue music. Instead he somehow finds god and Islam, and gets recruited by the Basijis (IRI's powerful and evil morality police). Before long, he starts monitoring, spying on, and reporting his family and friends.

Being watched is in fact a theme throughout the film, as often there are low resolution black-n-white surveillance cameras that are monitoring Atafeh and Shireen, possibly a reference to the suppressive and oppressive environment in which people in Iran live. Despite his seemingly calm and amiable personality, Mehran becomes eerily menacing and is feared by most others. Unfortunately he also develops a soft spot for his sister's best friend and lover, Shireen.

Shireen is also from an educated though less fortunate family. Her parents were dissenting university professors who have potentially been killed by the regime. She lives with her grandmother and an uncle, who seem to be in a hurry to marry her off. Shireen has less choices, resources and opportunities than Atafeh has at her disposal, and thus appears somewhat vulnerable.

Atafeh and Shireen also have a couple of male friends, Hossein (played by Sina Amedson) and Joey (played by Keon Mohajeri), whom they hang out with. They discuss Gus Van Sant's *Milk*, Harvey Milk's legacy in fighting for gay rights and draw a parallel to the need for a human rights movement in Iran. They also have the idea to dub the film in Persian. These scenes and conversations especially where Joey does a voice over for Sean Penn, are quite humorous, and provide the right comic relief for an otherwise serious drama.

There is a lot more to the story but I'd hate to write a spoiler here. You just have to go see it for yourself. It suffices to say that while most people succumb to the unfavorable circumstances surrounding them, others refuse to submit and put up a fight. Just how it is in real life.

[Maryam Keshavarz](#), a talented young Iranian-American director, partly influenced by her personal experiences growing up in Iran, has written and directed the film. She has an MFA from NYU film school and an MA in Near Eastern & women's studies from University of Michigan. Though she has done a number of shorts and a documentary before, this is her first feature film.



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A lot of work has gone into *Circumstance*. Maryam has screened more than 2,000 people across North America and Europe before selecting the complete cast. And it seems she has got the perfect people for the key roles. I think if I read the script before seeing the film, in my imagination Atafeh, Shireen and Mehran would look just like Nikohl, Sarah and Reza!

The cast does a wonderful job. What is remarkable is that this is Sarah's and Nikohl's first feature film though Nikohl had done some prior theater work. They both are pursuing acting full time now and I hear that they are already sought after actresses. I am certain that before long we will see them again on the big screen. The film also has great music including older Persian songs as well as some modern Persian rap music. The filming has taken place in various locations in Lebanon (e.g. portraying Beirut as Tehran) under at times difficult conditions.

Needless to say that this film will be banned in Iran for more reasons than one. Furthermore, Maryam and the cast have taken a conscious risk in making this film, knowing that they no longer will be able to travel to Iran without getting in a lot of trouble with the regime (as long as IRI is around). But this is the kind of risk that is worth taking to make a difference and do something worthwhile. I am sure that its rewards will outweigh the risks.

*Circumstance* is in Persian with English subtitles. It will be released on August 19, 2011 in USA nationwide, and in November/December in Europe and Australia. It will also be released on DVD later on. Make sure you see it. I highly recommend it.

## Update – Sep. 2011

*Circumstance* has been on the big screen in major cities in US since late August 2011. Since then it has gotten more than its share of reviews and commentaries. Though some have been quite positive, others have questioned and even attacked the film for being unrealistic, degrading, etc. Here are a few such articles, both positive and negative:

- [“Living and Loving Underground in Iran”](#) and [“Where the Personal Is the Intensely Political”](#) both on New York Times
- [“New Film ‘Circumstance,’ Explores Lesbian Relationship in Iran”](#) and [“Circumstance and Dangerous Elicitations of Truth”](#) both in Huffington Post
- [“Movie Review: Circumstance”](#) and [“Indie Focus: A distinctly varied team effort for ‘Circumstance.’”](#) both in LA Times
- [“‘Circumstance’ review: Fast times in Islamic state”](#) and [“In ‘Circumstance,’ teens challenge Iranian norms”](#) both in San Francisco Chronicle

There have also been a number of reviews and commentaries about the film in Persian that are fairly negative:

- [“‘Circumstance’, an Iranian story for non-Iranian eyes”](#) [title translated] on Persian BBC
- [“‘Circumstance’; a degrading and cliché advertisement”](#) [title translated] on Mardomak.org

I am not going to get into petty points about Atafeh and Shireen having English/French accents when speaking Persian, wearing makeup in school, or a mixed wedding with people dancing in front of hezbollahi's. The notable point in the last review is that this film promotes and strengthens the clichés and misconceptions about Iranian culture, Islam, and the lives of women, the youth and the homosexual in Iran. The Western media tend to feed on such negative and distorted portrayals of people's lives in Iran.

While there is some validity to this argument, and Western made films such as “Not Without My Daughter” and “300” have left a bad taste with many Iranians, I think this fictional film about complex family relationships and friendships under the influence of the regime in Iran, works. I don't view this film as a statement about the situation of lesbians in Iran. As I have said earlier, I don't even think Atafeh and Shireen are necessarily lesbians. This is a point that Maryam herself stated in one of her recent interviews.

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I think this is a well-made and daring film. Ever since the revolution we have had many remarkable Iranian filmmakers and directors whose films have been recognized and won awards internationally. But there have been few films that have dealt with the subject of sex in any meaningful and sensual way, let alone sex between two teenagers. That I think takes courage. *Circumstance* does this in a tasteful way. I enjoyed the film and still recommend it.

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Farshid Ketabchi

here is another recent review of the film:

<http://www.efilmcritic.com/rev...>

4 months ago

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Farshid Ketabchi

I did not make that reasoning and I have revised the paragraph to make sure that I do not insinuate it. This is a film review based on my take of the film, not an essay on why there are homosexual relationships among teenage girls in Iran, and whether they are really lesbian, bi-sexual, or a phase that they go through. That may be an interesting research topic for a sociologist in Iran.

4 months ago

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Savas

So let me get this straight, they "go to underground Tehran parties, flirt with boys, experiment with sex and drugs" but they get involved with each other because they don't go to mixed gender school and they don't have boys to be with so they are not really lesbians....right that comment is not at all ignorant

4 months ago

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