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Review: 'Circumstance' shines a light on today's Iran



Tehran teen Shireen (Sarah Kazemy) deals with the advances of her friend's brother, Mehran (Reza Sixo Safai), in "Circumstance." Roadside Attractions/Participant Media

BY SEAN P. MEANS

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There's the Iran we see on television — whack-job news conferences with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, pronouncements from ruling clerics or anti-American mobs in the streets — and there's the Iran in which people live, love and thrive.

Writer-director Maryam Keshavarz's touching drama "Circumstance" begins in that second Iran and depicts what happens when two teen girls in the second Iran collide with the first one.

Atafeh (Nikohl Boosheri) and Shireen (Sarah Kazemy) are high-school friends in Tehran, girls who cover their hair in public but let loose in private — in their homes and in the hidden underground of disco clubs where banned Western music can be heard. Atafeh's parents are liberals by Tehran standards, intellectuals who privately rail against the strict restrictions on personal freedoms placed by Ahmadinejad's regime and the clerics who hold the real power in Iran.

When Atafeh's brother Mehran (Reza Sixo Safai) returns home, things change. Mehran is a former junkie who has found salvation through Islam and turned into a conservative member of Iran's morality police.

Mehran's strict adherence to Muslim law causes a chilling effect in the household. His watchful eye is particularly troubling to Atafeh, who is starting to realize her attraction to Shireen — at the same time Mehran seeks to arrange marriage with his sister's best friend.

Keshavarz — filming in Lebanon, but capturing the flavor of life in modern Tehran — creates a fascinating portrait of the youthful revolution happening under the surface of Iran's strict Muslim society. From dance clubs to "American Idol" karaoke to illicit porno tapes, the liberating joy of secular, sensual pleasure roils through the movie, along with the heavy boot of authority ready to stomp it down.

The performances by Boosheri and Kazemy are achingly precise, as the girls chafe against the restrictions that threaten their freedom, their sexual identities and their very lives. (Keshavarz also gathers a talented group of supporting players, including stand-up comic Sina Amedson, who grew up in the Salt Lake City area.)

"Circumstance" is a tender look inside a society most people don't know about, and a thoughtful examination of lives altered by rebellion and repression. It's a view of a place, and of people, unlike any you have seen.

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