

DVD Review: 'Circumstance' Offers Bracing Exploration of Cultural Repression

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CHICAGO – Set during the precarious moment following Obama's election and prior to the Green Wave, Maryam Keshavarz's Iran-set feature debut is one of the most provocative cinematic treasures of 2011. It's an elegantly lensed tale of star-crossed lovers that delivers a real erotic charge, while providing an excellent showcase for beguiling newcomers Nikohl Boosheri and Sarah Kazemy.

Since any public expression of passion is forbidden between Keshavarz's two teenage protagonists, it brings a whole other level of tension and dread to their shared attraction. Atafeh (Boosheri) has the resources and security provided by her wealthy family that allows her to live a double life with her friend and eventual lover, Shireen (Kazemy). In order to fully explore their feelings, the young women escape into their fantasies of living in a more enlightened land. For them, Dubai is tantamount to Oz.



DVD Rating: **4.5/5.0**

There's a fleeting but unforgettable moment when Atafeh, in full dress code, bobs along to the scandalous music playing inside her head, while looking deep into Shireen's eyes. The sensual chemistry between both actresses is utterly electric, and the film's extreme close-ups of lips and fingers create more sexual tension than any nude scenes ever could. Into their enclosed world intrudes the pathetic form of Atafeh's older brother, Mehran (Reza Sixo Safai), a grown man living on his parent's allowance. He clings to fanaticism and sexual obsession with the hope that it will allow him to contrive an "adult" life for himself. His lust for Shireen leads him to ask for her hand in marriage, which results in a painfully repressed dance scene of astonishing power. Yet the film is far from a depressing dirge. During several early sequences, Keshavarz subtly slows down the action in order to emphasize the tangible moments of warmth between family members. There are no villains beyond the society that entraps the characters' humanity.



Circumstance was released on DVD on Dec. 13, 2011.
Photo credit: Lionsgate Home Entertainment

One of the most of the most fascinating aspects about the film is the way in which Atafeh and Shireen’s rebellious spirit is reflected in their parents’ respective pasts. During a quietly potent conversation between Atafeh and her father, he reflects favorably on his involvement in the Islamic revolution, while still fretting like Tevye whenever she mirrors his once restless spirit. There’s a very funny subplot where the girls’ gay friends recruit them to record the Persian audio track for Gus Van Sant’s “Milk.” Though their banter is hilarious, it’s also deeply moving to see the flickering image of an activist like Harvey Milk continue to inspire generations of people around the world. Of course, as one character bitterly notes, Milk would most likely be portrayed by the Iranian government as anti-gay, since “they make Che a god-fearing man here.” Moviegoers of any gender or orientation are guaranteed to be swept up into Atafeh’s and Shireen’s beautiful, heartbreaking, intensely passionate romance. My heart ached for them.



Sarah Kazemy and Nikohl Boosheri star in Maryam Keshavarz's Circumstance.

Photo credit: Lionsgate Home Entertainment

"Circumstance" is presented in its 2.35:1 aspect ratio, accompanied by English and Spanish subtitles, and includes a superb yet all-too-brief making-of featurette. Keshavarz says that the film originally featured three parallel storylines in three different countries, but her plot thread set in Iran routinely received the best reactions from readers. She was initially afraid to tackle such risky material, and says that she and her crew were aware that they might not be able to return to Iran after making the film. The premise was spawned from Keshavarz's experiences of the underground parties in Iran, and her awe at the women her age who threw caution to the wind by breaking the rules. The filmmaker's relationship with her liberal father, and his move back to Iran, is clearly reflected in the scenes between Atafeh and her father.

Based on her NYU thesis project, Keshavarz wanted the picture to be ambiguous and sparse, allowing the viewer to read into the subtext and nuances. She shot the film in the months following the Green Wave, and found an ideal location substitute in Lebanon. She half-jokes that both countries look like they were rebuilt by the same architect after being destroyed in the '80s—Lebanon by civil war and Iran by the war with Iraq. On pins and needles the entire shoot was cinematographer Brian Rigney Hubbard, who wasn't able to review a frame of footage until he got back to America. Onset tension—both real and contrived—proved to be an asset to the production overall. Boosheri and Kazemy didn't speak to each other on the day they shot the wedding dance sequence, leading some to believe they were actually feuding.

Keshavarz is joined on the lively commentary track by Safai, Hubbard and composer Gingger Shankar. The director quips that her film could've been named "Repression: The Musical," since the music functions as a character in itself, mirroring the generational clash between modern hip hop and traditional tunes. Lebanon's censorship bureau requested that the filmmaker cut all religious and sexual content from the script, which probably would've reduced the film to little more than an end-title roll. Keshavarz also wisely refused to slash the comedic bits involving the Persian dub of "Milk," which she likens to the canary screech Orson Welles placed halfway through "Citizen Kane" in order to ensure that viewers were still awake. Yet if viewers drift off halfway through "Circumstance," it's because they don't have a pulse.

'Circumstance' is released by Lionsgate Home Entertainment and stars Nikohl Boosheri, Sarah Kazemy, Reza Sixo Safai, Soheil Parsa, Nasrin Pakkho, Sina Amedson and Keon Mohajeri. It was written and directed by Maryam Keshavarz. It was released on Dec. 13, 2011. It is rated R.



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