Mongrel Media

Presents

CIRCUMSTANCE



A Film by Maryam Keshavarz
(106 min., USA/Iran, 2011)

Distribution

1028 Queen Street West
Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M6J 1H6
Tel: 416-516-9775 Fax: 416-516-0651
E-mail: info@mongrelmedia.com
www.mongrelmedia.com

Publicity

Bonne Smith
Star PR
Tel: 416-488-4436
Fax: 416-488-8438
E-mail: starpr@sympatico.ca

High res stills may be downloaded from http://www.mongrelmedia.com/press.html

CIRCUMSTANCE

Short Synopsis

Set in contemporary Iran in the unseen world of Iranian youth culture, filled with underground parties, sex, drugs and defiance, *CIRCUMSTANCE* is the story of two vivacious young girls -- wealthy Atafeh and orphaned Shireen -- discovering their burgeoning sexuality and, like 16 year-old girls anywhere, struggling with their desires and the boundaries placed upon them by the world they were born into.

Winner of this year's Sundance Audience Award, *CIRCUMSTANCE* is Maryam Keshavarz's directorial debut and stars newcomers Nikohl Boosheri, Sarah Kazemy, Reza Sixo Safai, Soheil Parsa, Nasrin Pakkho, Amir Barghashi, Fariborz Daftari and Keon Mohajeri. The producers are Karin Chien, Keshavarz and Melissa M. Lee.

About the Production

Story

A tale of love and family upended by obsession and suspicion, *CIRCUMSTANCE* is also a provocative coming-of-age story that cracks open the hidden world of Iranian youth culture, where a young woman's most electrifying passion is her most dangerous secret.

The Audience Award winner at this year's Sundance Film Festival, Maryam Keshavarz's debut boldly takes filmgoers inside a modern Iran rarely witnessed by outsiders: an exhilarating, invisible realm of illicit parties where young hipsters risk arrest, and their futures, as they experiment with sex, drugs and defiance.

In this unseen world, rife with playfulness and peril, two vivacious teenage girls -- wealthy Atafeh (Nikohl Boosheri) and orphaned Shireen (Sarah Kazemy) -- are discovering their burgeoning sexuality. Like 16 year-old girls anywhere, they are full of wild yearnings and imaginative fantasies. And while the simplest things - swimming, singing, becoming who they dream of being - are often disallowed to them, they take risks every day to lead their own lives.

But when Atafeh's troubled brother, Mehran (Reza Sixo Safai), suddenly returns home from drug rehab, their private world is threatened. Looking to start his life anew, Mehran joins the Morality Police, a volunteer force that pursues those who break the country's strict cultural laws. Attracted to Shireen and dismayed by her love for Atafeh, Mehran begins an unsettling and shadowy campaign of spying on his own family. As he ramps up his surveillance, the consequences ensnare them all in a complicated web of desire and betrayal that will unravel their bonds and compel them each to make starkly different decisions.

Filmed in an undercover production in Beirut, Lebanon, Keshavarz's fast-paced, sensual style forges a powerfully relevant tale of youth in search of freedom. *CIRCUMSTANCE* will be released nationwide on August 26, 2011.

Roadside Attractions and Participant Media present *CIRCUMSTANCE*, written and directed by Maryam Keshavarz, and starring Nikohl Boosheri, Sarah Kazemy, Reza Sixo Safai, Soheil Parsa, Nasrin Pakkho, Amir Barghashi, Fariborz Daftari and Keon Mohajeri. The producers are Karin Chien, Keshavarz and Melissa M. Lee and the executive producer is Christina Won.

Screenplay

Maryam Keshavarz's *CIRCUMSTANCE* introduces two defiant young heroines who stand apart in contemporary film. The joyful, rebellious adventures of Atafeh and Shireen, two Iranian girls on the tumultuous verge of adulthood, could take place anywhere in the world, but they take place in Iran, where they unfold inside an atmosphere of danger, fear and repression.

Keshavarz exposes a world where the pleasures that fuel youth culture across the globe – music, dancing, sexuality, humor, politics, and self-expression – are forbidden and even criminal. Keshavarz presents a portrait of an intensely cosmopolitan Iran and two modern young women whose personal search for identity, excitement, love and freedom is richly relatable to young Westerners. It is in their need to keep their night lives, love lives and dream lives a secret, where the perils they face as young women in Iran emerges.

For Keshavarz, who grew up with one foot in the U.S. and the other in Iran and has personally experienced the underground world of Tehran nightclubs, telling this story was risky. Even before she wrote the screenplay, she knew that doing so could prevent her from ever returning to a country she considers home, and could endanger the Iranian cast and crew she hoped to involve. Yet, no matter the tricky consequences, this was a story she felt she could not turn away from. She began making the film several years before the youth-driven, Green Wave demonstrations that rocked the Middle East started in the summer of 2009, and watched as her film began dove-tailing with fast-moving international events and a youth-quake across the region.

"The film is not autobiographical but elements of it are based on some of my own experiences and those of people that I know," Keshavarz explains. "I've always been so impressed by young people in Iran who try so hard to find a sense of freedom within the restrictions. Whenever I've gone out in Iran, I've been in awe of their bravery, and I'm especially in awe of the women, because they're so much more vulnerable, especially when it comes to arrest and interrogation."

She continues: "That's where Atafeh and Shireen come from. I really wanted to explore how two young women come into their sexuality and their sense of self in an atmosphere that isn't conducive to that, and the way they carve out these private moments of sanctuary, until Atafeh's brother brings the outside world into that sanctuary and shatters it."

For Keshavarz it was important to excavate not only Atafeh and Shireen's external struggles in their daily lives but also their rich inner worlds and, most of all, their fantasies.

"Fantasy is a way for these girls to escape the realities of their repressive environment," she comments. "Fantasy operates on several different levels in the film: the daydreaming at school, the musical sequences, the sexual fantasy of escaping to Dubai, and the fantasy of sexual freedom through the creation and recreation of cinema. Atafeh and Shireen's fantasy

life is a feminine space where the state's attempt to control all social interactions is foiled, and it's the only place in which the girls can truly be free."

Meanwhile, the biggest obstacle for Keshavarz would be internal. "I kept hitting layers of self-censorship," she explains. "I realized that it was fear holding me back from going deep enough into this story. So much of the writing process for me was stripping away that fear, and facing up to the loss of knowing that making this film might mean never going back to Iran. But ultimately, the characters became so alive to me that I realized I could not stop, because halting the film would be the same thing as killing them and denying their voices."

In her screenplay, Keshavarz forged an Iranian family that is, behind closed doors, quite liberal, free-thinking and highly educated, yet has to play by entirely different rules in the outer world. "Atafeh's family has raised her to be very strong-willed and to have her own very clear sense of right and wrong, but that is in conflict with the society," she observes. "Inside the family house, there is a kind of utopian sense of freedom, but it's just not sustainable in the outside world."

The corruption and brutality of that outside world begins to bleed into Atafeh and Shireen's blissful, private space when Atafeh's brother Mehran joins the Morality Police.

"Mehran's surveillance of his own family is really the greatest violation there can be in a home, and I think his character speaks to the way that the nature of the state can sometimes pervert the actions of the individual, and how repression can corrupt even the most intimate relationships," Keshavarz observes.

As Mehran spies on his family, the audience itself is drawn into his world of suspicion and fear. "Through the course of the film, as the frame becomes more claustrophobic and darker, I want the viewer to feel more and more trapped," says Keshavarz. "By the film's end everyone is trapped, from Atafeh and Shireen, to the strong patriarch of the family, down to the very instigator himself, Mehran. No one can escape the destruction of the repression; it is a zero sum game. Yet, I hope the viewer has as much sympathy for the jailers as they do for the incarcerated."

Weaving through all these conflicting elements is Atafeh and Shireen's deeply sensual relationship. The film may mix elements of a political thriller, a youth comedy and an expose of life in modern Iran, but at its core it's very much a tale of star-crossed lovers.

Keshavarz says she has always been attracted to love stories. "I'm fascinated by youthful love, because it is the most intense relationship we ever have. It's the one you fully abandon yourself to without inhibition and that's what I see in Atafeh and Shireen," says the writer-director. "They're in the middle of something so strong that I don't think they ever really question it or even name it. It's simply a form of passion that they give themselves over to with all the energy of youth."

After Keshavarz completed the script and started casting, two highly independent and entrepreneurial women producers – dGenerate Film's Karin Chien and Bago Pictures' Melissa M. Lee – came on board and became instrumental in assuring that Keshavarz's vision was brought to the screen undiluted.

"This script had everything I look for in a movie," says Chien. "It was a smart, entertaining story that dealt with important issues of freedom, repression, sexuality, class and what many women go through all over the world. It addressed all these big issues in the most emotional, enjoyable and human ways. I really fell in love with and empathized with Maryam's complex characters. I was also very impressed with how she put female desire front and center in her story. I really only want to make movies that I feel need to be made and this film absolutely needed to be made."

Comments Lee: "Prior to working on *CIRCUMSTANCE,* I knew very little about life in Iran but Maryam's script just drew me in and immersed me completely in this world I had never seen before with so much intrigue and emotion. It really opened my eyes to what life is like for young women in countries that don't have the freedoms we take for granted. What really motivates me as a producer is to make films that I feel move people, whether momentarily while they're in the theater or even changing the way they see the world. *CIRCUMSTANCE* had the potential to do both."

The intense challenges of the film started right away, as the producers looked for those willing to champion and financially support the movie. "It wasn't easy because there are a lot of assumptions when you say 'a movie set in Iran,'" confesses Chien. "But we were wholly embraced by a lot of non-profit organizations who believed in the project early on. A good portion of our funding came from grants, which is usually only true for social-issues documentaries, not fictional films. So this was very unique – and what was so gratifying as we progressed is that, as people started seeing the film, the support began growing and growing."

This support was also reflected in the unwavering commitment of cast and crew, despite the film's inherent dangers, provocative themes and challenging production in Beirut, Lebanon. Sums up Lee: "It's a testament to Maryam's vision the way that people rallied around the production and wanted to support the film. Making this film was often an uphill battle, but you couldn't help but be moved by how many people were willing to join with so much passion."

Context

CIRCUMSTANCE unfolds in an Iran that is right now at a volatile crossroads, as a massive youth population strains against a political regime that has attempted to maintain strict, religious-based control over the nation's social, cultural and political lives.

More than 70% of Iran's population of 70 million people is under 30 years old, making it one of the most youthful nations in the world. This new generation grew up in the shadow of the Iranian Revolution that in 1979 – after a popular uprising against the corruption and excesses of the country's monarch, Shah Mohammed Rezi Pahlavi – forged a conservative Islamic Republic. But, having lived in a time of repression against cultural expression and decreased rights, especially for women, many of those born in the 1980s and 90s now seek increased personal freedom.

The Iranian Revolution brought greater educational and health care opportunities to much of the nation. But it also altered the cultural landscape, particularly for women. Soon after the founding of the Islamic Republic, women were required to wear Islamic dress in public, they

could only attend segregated beaches and sporting events, and laws allowed for girls suspected of sexual activity outside of marriage to undergo virginity tests. “Morality Police” began operating undercover, watching for those who dressed or behaved in ways that broke the rules.

Despite the fear of these police, many teenagers in Iran’s cities have become willing to risk jail, humiliation and even physical harm just to have a party, dance at a night-club, or wear make-up and sexy dresses. In a country where there are few options for legitimate political dissent, today’s urban, Iranian youth seek out self-expression and personal freedom where they can and a dynamic, fertile culture of underground art, music, filmmaking and clubbing has sprung up around them.

Says Maryam Keshavarz: “In a normal city, you would just go out with your friends to a restaurant or a bar, but in Iran, you could be interrogated as to who you’re with and what your relationship is with that person. It got to be such a hassle, people said ‘let’s forget this,’ and that’s when things started to go underground. Once there was an underground, it started out quite cautious, but it became wilder and more debauched as time went on.”

Few people outside of Iran are aware of this underground culture that percolates beneath the surface of a country that is usually seen only in brief news clips. A compelling glimpse into the yearnings and commitment of Iranian youth came recently, with the Green Revolution, a series of massive protests sparked in June of 2009, in the wake of election fraud. Amidst vast, diverse crowds of peaceful protestors, dozens were killed and thousands arrested, resulting in televised images that stunned, and also inspired, people around the world.

These events, which took place just as Keshavarz was preparing to shoot, drove home even further the importance of telling the story of Atafeh and Shireen. “I’ve always known that the people of Iran are incredibly brave, but as vibrant and daring as the people are, what happened in 2009 was beyond any dream of what I thought was possible, because it was people of all ages and from all background,” she says. “The events were both incredibly exciting and disheartening. I have friends who have been jailed, tortured and forced out of the country. But I also think that once you start something like that, it’s very, very hard to contain. And it’s the responsibility of the artist to try to reflect the energy of that kind of moment.”

Nikohl Boosheri, who plays Atafeh, has been rapt watching recent events in Iran and across the entire Middle East echo the themes in *CIRCUMSTANCE*. “I think what we are seeing right now is how strong youth can be, how young people in Tunisia and Egypt have decided they are going to try and change their worlds,” she says. “It’s amazing to see young people fighting for the lives they want. To me, this film is not really political, but it is about that yearning of youth to be free.”

Cast

When it came to casting *CIRCUMSTANCE*, Keshavarz faced more major challenges. “We had a tough bill to fill,” she admits. “We were looking for an unusual combination of people who were young and natural, yet who could speak Farsi, were ready to do nudity and sexual scenes, and who were also willing to take risks within their families and not be able to travel to Iran. That wasn’t easy to find.”

She began with a journey across the "Iranian Diaspora" - cities with large Iranian populations all over the world, from New York and L.A. to London, Paris and Cologne, auditioning more than 1,000 women for the roles of Atafeh and Shireen. It was in Paris that Keshavarz discovered a young French woman of Iranian descent, Sarah Kazemy, who was not a known actress but instead was studying law and literature when she was cast as Shireen after a mesmerizing audition.

"When I saw Sarah, I thought 'she's too beautiful to be a great actress' but as soon as I saw her read, I realized I was wrong," laughs Keshavarz. "I really connected with Sarah. In many ways, she's a lot like me, someone who spent her whole life going back and forth between two cultures, and has a unique understanding of the world from that."

Kazemy was so attracted to the script that she decided to make some sudden changes in her life plans – leaving academia for acting. "Everything about it was very challenging and risky for me," she admits, "but I wanted to take those risks because of this story. There has never been a truly honest story about Iranian youth, and the relationship between Atafeh and Shireen was so beautiful. The images that many people have of Iran are clichés, so I found it really important the way this film shows that young people are young people everywhere. This is the first movie that I think does that, and I wanted to be a part of it. I was so grateful to Maryam for giving me this opportunity."

Later, Keshavarz found her Atafeh in a last-ditch pile of video auditions, where on the penultimate tape in the bunch, she came across Nikohl Boosheri, a young Canadian actress who had only had a theatre background to date.

"I thought I was at the end of the process of looking, but as soon as I saw Nikohl, I felt like there was Atafeh staring at me," the director recalls. "I asked Nikohl if she could come to Toronto to meet with me, and she said, 'I don't know, I've never been on a plane before.' But then she arrived, with her mother, and there was something so fresh and real about her. And when she and Sarah were together, the chemistry was amazing."

Boosheri says: "I was just blown away by the script – it was unique, daring and unprecedented. It was a risky story, and I did think about that, but I felt we should be able to tell this story, so it didn't stop me. I loved the way Maryam stayed so true to her characters, how they were never black and white, and how she was able to say so much in such subtle moments. I loved how she shows how strong women in the Middle East are, and I was really excited that she focuses on the underground youth culture. I think when people see images of women in burqas in the desert, Iran seems so far away. But when you see kids partying, you see that we are not so different after all. We are all trying to lead happy lives within the rules of our society and figure out our own definitions of normal."

As soon as Kazemy and Boosheri met during the final auditions in Toronto, their chemistry and vibrant rapport was obvious. "We stayed up all night eating chocolate and talking. There was just an instant connection," says Boosheri.

Later, just prior to production, the pair would spend three weeks living together amidst the dizzying newness of Beirut, sealing their friendship further. This would be key in allowing Atafeh and Shireen's intimacy to unfold on the set.

"Maryam really trusted in our bond," says Boosheri, "which made us feel comfortable. She was very open and we had a lot of creative input. It also helped that she's an Iranian woman who really understands all the layers of family, culture and politics that the characters are dealing with, and that faced us also."

Kazemy and Boosheri each felt a deep, personal link to their characters – and explored the ways that Shireen and Atafeh's contrasting backgrounds lead them to make starkly opposite decisions: one to accept a trapped fate, the other to make a daring and uncertain escape.

"I'm very different from Shireen," says Kazemy, "but I really feel a lot of love for her. I could relate to the way she feels so torn and conflicted by the choices she faces with Atafeh and Mehran. She doesn't have the social status or the family support of Atafeh, so she always has these questions about the future. All she wants is to find a way to live freely, to live her love and her dreams, but in the end, she has no real choices, like so many women in the world."

Boosheri notes that Atafeh has an opposing view. "Atafeh has grown up differently than Shireen. She's always had security and her family has always told her she can do anything she puts her mind to, so I think she truly believes she can run away and survive. She reacts more like a teenager than an adult and I think it really shows how she and Shireen come from completely different 'circumstances.'"

Both young women enjoyed working with Reza Sixo Safai as Mehran. Safai, who was the last to audition for the role, was immediately drawn to the film's sense of honesty and daring. "Most Middle Eastern roles you get offered are smaller parts without any depth," he explains. "But when I read this script it was so intense and I was overtaken by feelings of suspense and claustrophobia. Mehran fascinated me and I felt I understood him. I thought it would be a trap to simply play him as a straight-up villain, so I wanted to really go inside and explore his vulnerability."

Safai too had to confront the possible consequences. Born in Iran, he grew up in the U.S., and had traveled to Tehran freely in the past. "As I was reading, I thought 'My God, am I really going to do this?!' But knowing the danger only made me feel it was more important. What Maryam captures is what young people are dealing with all over the world, the universal struggle for freedom, with sexuality as part of that struggle. But it's so much more intense in Iran."

Keshavarz herself gave Safai the courage to take it all on. "Maryam's got this crazy, passionate energy, and you just know she's not going to settle for anything less than 100% commitment," he notes. "There was always a feeling that something bigger was going on here than just making another movie and that was inspiring."

To play Atafeh and Mehran's parents, Keshavarz cast Soheil Parsa, an award-winning theatre director, writer, choreographer and actor living in Toronto, and documentary filmmaker and actress Nasrin Pakkho. "Soheil was introduced to me by one of my mentors, Atom Egoyan, and he was so awesome," says Keshavarz. "He ended up introducing me to many of the people who play the older characters in the film. A lot of them actually went to school together in Iran

in the 1970s. They hadn't seen each other in years, but when they came together, they had a terrific chemistry."

Boosheri and Kazemy learned a lot from the veterans. "They were not only amazing actors but since they had all lived in Tehran at one, they had a lot to share," notes Boosheri. "We didn't have to go to Iran because they brought Iran to us."

Production

The production of *CIRCUMSTANCE* was always a risky proposition, and it played out like a tale of suspense at times. From the beginning, the filmmakers understood that they could not shoot in Iran. But it was essential to Keshavarz to film in an environment as authentic to the Iran she knows as possible. After scouting a variety of potential locations in the Middle East, she chose Lebanon, a country that might be 1,000 miles from Iran, but shares many vital qualities.

"Lebanon was the closest we could get to a country that could pass for Iran," comments Keshavarz. "It has both the older Ottoman-style architecture and the ultramodern buildings you would see in Iranian cities. It's a very compact country with a vast geography that contains mountains, coastlines and urban areas. Most of all, the people look Iranian. We were able to make it real enough that there are people who have seen the film and still don't believe that we didn't sneak into Iran!"

Even shooting in Lebanon, secrecy was necessary and the logistical challenges were daunting. Beirut might be called "the Paris of the Middle East," but this teeming, vibrant city is rarely host to film productions (*CIRCUMSTANCE* was only the fourth U.S.-based production to shoot there) and also has numerous social and cultural restrictions of its own. A realm of intense contrasts, Beirut is a city that has repeatedly been rocked by war and strife, yet is also a legendary party town, glittering with nightclubs and a spirit of adventure and warmth. It is one of the most liberal cities in the entire region, yet traditional attitudes towards women, sexuality and artistic freedom also can prevail.

"You had to have nerves of steel to shoot there," admits Keshavarz, who traveled to Lebanon nine months before production to meet with anyone she could find who was involved in the film business. "In order to get permissions, we had to submit a fake script to the censors, because there couldn't be any references to sex, homosexuality, religion or even Iran, which has been a player in Lebanese politics. We turned in an alternative script, in Arabic, that the censor thought was a comedy – they kept telling us how funny it was!"

There were also surprise visits from the military, especially after an anonymous person called in a report that the production was making a porn film. "We had to be ready to shoot fake or improvised scenes in English at any moment," Keshavarz explains, "and we had to find ways sometimes to shoot surreptitiously so that no one knew what we were shooting."

Footage also had to be hand-smuggled out of the country to prevent it from being confiscated. "We would take the film to Jordan, trying everything we could do to prevent the canisters from being x-rayed. At one point, I had to convince a pilot to let me on the plane with the film. Then

the film would go from Jordan to Dubai to Los Angeles, where it was finally processed," says Karin Chien.

Near the end of production, when the military came on set to see if there was indeed a pornographic film in progress, Keshavarz was particularly nervous, because she had 17 days of film waiting to get out of the country. "I knew that if the production was shut down, we'd lose it all and it would be a disaster," she says. "After so many people risking so much, we couldn't let that happen."

Shooting for 25 days in Beirut came with both discoveries and pitfalls. "We had to do a lot of learning," notes Melissa Lee. "There was such a mix of cultures on our set and you had people speaking English, Arabic, French and Farsi. It was exciting to see things from other perspectives but it also meant trying to get through a lot of layers of communication."

In order to get a true sense of their environment, the production team and cast resided in a traditional Ottoman building in a historic district. "We were all stoked to be shooting in the Middle East and although it wasn't always easy it was a great experience that brought us very close to each other, and I think you can see that in the movie," comments Safai.

Boosheri and Kazemy admit they had a blast exploring the city and all it has to offer, but they were also impacted by soaking in the ambience. "Beirut gave us a lot to work with because it's a great example of the new, more cosmopolitan Middle East," says Boosheri. Adds Kazemy: "It has a lot of traditions but it also has a very modern culture. It's a very alive place and we used that in the film."

To shoot Lebanon as Iran, and to capture the kinetic urgency and passionate hues of the story, Keshavarz worked closely with director of photography Brian Rigney Hubbard. Hubbard, who entered cinematography through painting, photography and politics, shot the film in lush Super 16mm.

"Brian and I started working together long before production at the Sundance labs and we had a great collaboration," says Keshavarz. "We worked very closely to establish a visual language for the film. We were very specific with the palette. In the beginning everything is very monochromatic, with mostly earth tones, except for the girls, who are always wearing rich blues and reds. They're always the life in the film, always popping out of the frame. The camerawork at the start of the film is purposefully very open and fluid with a lot of dolly work. But as the film continues, the image grows darker and the camera becomes more cautious. I think Brian's work really gives you a sense of the changing psychological space of the characters."

Keshavarz also worked at Sundance with composer Gingger Shankar, who earlier collaborated with John Debney on the Oscar® nominated score for *Passion of the Christ* and whose music is also heard in Mike Nichols' *Charlie Wilson's War*. At the Sundance Composer's Lab, Keshavarz requested to work with Shankar because of her wide diversity of musical influences and her instrumental virtuosity, which ranges from the double violin to vocal work.

As the bedrock of youth culture, Keshavarz knew music would be an important character in the film. Echoing the clash of generations and cultural influences, classical Persian music weaves

through pulsating Persian hip hop, which has been massively popular among Iranian youth for more than a decade, despite clampdowns on the music and raids on CD shops, with much of it being distributed on underground websites.

"Gingger knows classical West Asian music but she also knows pop and hip-hop," explains the director, "and the idea for the music in *CIRCUMSTANCE* was always to echo that struggle between the generations by including both classical Persian songs along with the Persian hip-hop and punk. Gingger was able to cross that divide fluidly. She's very talented and also does a lot of the vocals on the score herself."

When Keshavarz began to edit the film, her remarkable adventures continued. She traveled to Chile to work with editor Andrea Chignoli, who has edited all her work. While there, the massive, 8.8 earthquake (one of the largest ever recorded) struck. "That was even scarier than the shoot, but it gave me a real perspective on life," she says. With uncertain electricity in Chile, Keshavarz and Chignoli repaired to Los Angeles, where they finished the film.

Soon after it was accepted into the Sundance Film Festival, where it would go on to win the coveted Audience Award. "We all believed in the movie, but it was so gratifying to see the response," recalls Lee. "So many different kinds of people, from all walks of life, felt strongly about it and that's everything we dreamed of."

Adds Chien: "We worked so hard to get this movie made. Winning the Audience Award was the last thing we expected. But I think people really responded to it because it provides a strong view into a world audiences are excited to know more about and, at heart, it's about something that's important to everyone in the world, the ability to express yourself as an individual."

"The reaction was very moving for me," concludes Keshavarz. "What meant so much is that people came up to me and said 'this story is just like my family, except that they're in Brazil or Kentucky.' That's all I had hoped for, that the relationships would seem real, would be visceral and emotional, and that Atafeh, Shireen and Mehran would touch people in some way."

After screening at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival, Participant Media acquired North American rights to *CIRCUMSTANCE*, and partnered with Roadside Attractions to distribute the film nationwide on August 19, 2011.

ABOUT THE CAST

NIKOHL BOOSHERI (Atafeh) may be a newcomer to the world of film but she is no stranger to the stage. Emigrating from Iran to Canada at a mere three months old, she showed a flare for the dramatics even at a young age. Upon entering high school she committed herself to Gleneagle Secondary's challenging and rewarding Broken Wing Theatre, being granted the Gold Achievement award every year, and continued to develop her skills studying Performing Arts at Simon Fraser University. She has appeared in an impressive 27 plays, her resume showing an extensive list of characters including; Madge in William Inge's classic *Picnic*, Fay in Don Nigro's *Greenman*, Lady in Tennessee Williams' *Orpheus Descending*, Marcy in Bert V. Royal's *Dog Sees God*, and most recently Slim in a very well received run of Sarah Dixon's original show *The Dark* at the Vancouver Fringe Festival. Nikohl's love and dedication for her craft and a twist of fate have brought her an opportunity to enter the previously unexplored world of film. She is delighted and humbled to make her debut with the talented and lovely cast of Maryam Keshavarz's *Circumstance*.

SARAH KAZEMY (Shireen) is a French actress, born in 1987 in Neuilly sur Seine (a suburb of Paris), the daughter of an Iranian father and a French mother of Algerian descent. With her diverse background she has professed an interest in foreign languages and cultures since childhood. She speaks fluently French, Farsi and English and has studied Arabic, German and Italian. Sarah felt the need to pursue her education before starting an acting career, studying contemporary literature and law. She received no formal acting training before making her film debut in *Circumstance*. Right after that she landed the lead role in the movie *Kanyamakan*.

REZA SIXO SAFAI (Mehran) grew up in Palo Alto, CA and later attended UCLA where he was awarded the National Actor's Theatre Fellowship Award for acting. On stage both in LA and NY, he has worked with such diverse talents as Peter Sellars, John C. Reilly, Ann Magnusson, David Schweizer, Martin Sherman, Heather Woodbury and Susan Tyrell. His many credits include Louis in *Angels in America*, Sahtin in *The Lower Depths*, Yasha in *The Cherry Orchard*, Patrick in *The Kentucky Cycle* and Lee in *True West*. Reza also wrote and starred in *Transplant*, a critically acclaimed one-person show about the Iranian James Bond. In addition to being a board member of the non-profit multi-disciplinary arts organization Trade City, he is currently co-producing with the Tony award-winning producers *of A Raisin in the Sun*, the Broadway world premiere of Tennessee Williams' last unpublished play.

He continues to be a key actor in indie films as well, including *Push*, *Dean Quixote, Amp* and *F-Stops*. His short film *The Mario Valdez Story*, which he wrote, directed and starred in won 2nd prize at Cannes. Safai's debut feature, *Sabotage*, inspired by The Beastie Boys and Spike Jonze music video for "Sabotage" is the first ever action-comedy/music-documentary and features DJ Assault ("Ass n' Titties") and Kennedy ("Lovin' Your Mama"). On the small screen, Reza was last seen on "Undercovers" and "The Mentalist." Reza currently lives in Los Angeles with his sweetheart Hollace.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

MARYAM KESHAVARZ (Director/Writer/Producer) received her MFA from NYU/Tisch School of the Arts and has been making award-winning films for 10 years. Her first feature documentary, *The Color Of Love*, an intimate portrait of the changing landscape of love and

politics in Iran, won numerous awards at top-tier festivals and was broadcast internationally. Her short film *The Day I Died* garnered top accolades at Mar del Plata, Clermont-Ferrand, New York Film Festival and Berlin International Film Festival; and was the only short film at Berlinale to win two awards: the Gold Teddy and the Jury Prize.

Keshavarz's first narrative feature fiction film, *CIRCUMSTANCE* has garnered various prestigious accolades including: selection to the Sundance Screenwriters/ Directors Lab and Tribeca All Access; receipt of the Adrienne Shelly Grant, the Sundance Middle Eastern Filmmakers Award, Rotterdam's Hubert Bals Grant, France's Fonds Sud Grant; as well as financial support from Cinereach, Film Independent, and the San Francisco Film Society. *CIRCUMSTANCE* made its World Premiere in American Dramatic Competition at the 2011 Sundance Festival to overwhelming critical acclaim and won the coveted Audience Award.

KARIN CHIEN (Producer) is an independent film producer based in New York City, and the 2010 recipient of the Independent Spirit Producers Award. Karin has produced seven feature films, including *The Exploding Girl* (2009), *The Motel* (2005) and *Robot Stories* (2002), which have won over 75 festival awards, premiered at Sundance and Berlin, and received international distribution. Karin is in post-production on two features, *Untitled Haiti Project* directed by P. Benoit, and Jack & Diane directed by Bradley Rust Gray. Karin is also in pre-production on the film installation *Untitled (Structures)* by Leslie Hewitt in collaboration with Bradford Young. Karin is the president and founder of dGenerate Films, the leading distributor of independent Chinese cinema. Karin is also the Director of the CAAM Fellowship program.

MELISSA LEE (Producer) is an independent producer based in Los Angeles and Hong Kong. Melissa graduated *magna cum laude* with a BA in Literature from Harvard University, after which she worked in investment banking, specializing in Mergers & Acquisitions, with Morgan Stanley. She then went on to receive her MFA in Producing from University of Southern California. In 2008, Melissa produced the feature film, *Dear Lemon Lima*. The film premiered at the 2009 Los Angeles Film Festival where it garnered the jury acting prize, and has continued to be nominated for and win awards at festivals all over the world, including Woodstock, London, Sao Paolo, and Rome. The film will be released theatrically by Phase 4 Films in March 2011.

Under the umbrella of her production company, Bago Pictures, Melissa is in development on several feature film projects. Melissa has been a Film Independent Project: Involve Fellow, was a selected participant for the Sundance Institute's inaugural Creative Producing Summit, and serves as a Judge for the UCLA Screenwriters MFA Showcase.

ANTONIN DEDET (Co-producer) is a graduate of EAVE (European Audiovisual Entrepreneurs) and the Academy des Cesars. He is the head of NEON Productions, an internationally renowned film production company based in Paris and with offices in Marseille. Since 2002, the company has produced a dozen feature films with international co-productions and garnered awards at top international festivals such as Berlinale, Rotterdam, Locarno, Venice and Toronto Film Festivals. In addition, the company has also line produced 10 features, 100 commercials, and numerous short form and TV content. Most recently, he served as line producer on 2009 Cannes Festival Grand Prize Winner *A Prophet* by Jacques Audiard.

BRIAN RIGNEY HUBBARD (Director of Photography) entered cinematography through photography, painting and politics. His most recent credits include; *Tanner Hall*, directed by

Tatianna von Furstenberg and Francesca Gregorini, which premiered at the 2009 Toronto International Film Festival; *The Order of Myths*, directed by Margaret Brown, Sundance 2008; *The Adventures of Power*, directed by Ari Gold, Sundance 2008; *La Santa Muerte*, directed by Eva Aridjis and produced by Gael Garcia Bernal, L.A. Independent Doc Competition. Brian's many awards and honors include being tapped by the Sundance Institute to shoot for the Directors Lab 2007; the Cannes 2006 Kodak Showcase; a Wasserman Award for Best Cinematography; Best Cinematography at both the Aguilar/Semana de Cine Español Festival and the Semana de Cine Medina del Campo Festival.

In addition to his feature film work, Brian photographed the Emmy award-winning PSA "Latino Film Festival"; the Cannes 2005 Commercial Film Producers of Europe (CFPoE) award-winning spec commercial "Awakenings"; director Anne Paas' music video Oxidados/Plastilina Mosh in the Young Guns Showcase at the Art Directors Club; the documentary *This Land* in the Whitney Biennal; and has done commercial, documentary and music video work for Sundance Channel, HBO, Hypnotic/Fox Searchlight, @RadicalMedia, Chelsea Pictures, Louis Vuitton, ELLE, Lancôme, Thom Browne, Scarlett Johansson and Michael Moore, among others.

Brian studied film at New York University Tisch School of the Arts, where he was awarded the Stephen J. Ross Fellowship and a visiting professorship. After living and working many years abroad in Europe and South America, Brian now lives in New York and is a member of IATSE Local 600.

ANDREA CHIGNOLI (Editor) is a Columbia University MFA Film graduate, Fulbright Scholar and a film editor with more than 10 years of experience. Her recent credits include *Post-Mortem* (Venice Film Festival 2010, San Sebastian, and New York Film Festivals), *Tony Manero* (Cannes Film Festival 2008, New York Film Festival, and London Film Festival and awarded Best Film at Turin Film Festival 2008) and *La Buena Vida* (awarded Best Film at Huelva Latin-American Film Festival 2008). Her filmography also includes the award-winning films *Football's Stories* (Chile, 1997), *The Loco Fever* (Chile-Spain, 2001), and *Journey to Narragonia* (Spain, 2002). Currently, Andrea Chignoli is preparing a research study about cult filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky, while she's editing the successful Chilean television series, "Los 80s."

GINGGER SHANKAR (Composer) is the creative force behind some of the most daring, exuberant and technically proficient music being made today. Her haunting, angelic vocals and prolific composition and instrumental talents entwine to create a musical experience unlike any other. Gingger, the artist and co-composer behind the poignant score of Mel Gibson's 2004 box office hit *The Passion Of The Christ*, has lent her voice and vision to several diverse projects ranging from soundtracks to soulful pop and electronic hip-hop.

In addition to *The Passion of the Christ*, Gingger's music can be heard in Mike Nichol's film, *Charlie Wilson's War* starring Tom Hanks, where she had a chance to collaborate with film composer James Newton Howard. Her voice can also be heard in Jackie Chan's film, *The Forbidden Kingdom*. During this time she worked with George S. Clinton on Eastern Indian notation and arrangements for the Mike Myers' picture *Love Guru*. She also composed music for the Sundance award-winning documentary *Recycle* directed by Al Massad.

Most recently, Gingger created a piece for Ajay Naidu's film *Ashes*, which premiered at

Toronto's Filmi and MIACC Film Festivals. She teamed up again with Al Massad for his documentary *This is my Picture When I Was Dead*, which was selected for World Competition at the IDFA film festival as well as the Dubai Film Festival. She is currently working on *Homecoming* a feature film by Sean Hackett.

Gingger has collaborated with such uniquely talented and varied artists as The Smashing Pumpkins, L. Shankar, Zakir Hussain, Phil Collins, Steve Vai, Peter Gabriel, Trent Reznor and Tony Levin, to name just a few. In 2007, Gingger was one of only six film composers selected from around the world to attend the prestigious Music Composer's fellowship at the Sundance Film Institute. This year also saw her appear at the Hollywood Bowl on the 40th anniversary of the Beatles' Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band Album with Cheap Trick and accompanied by the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra.

In February of 2008, Gingger debuted with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra as a soprano in Osvaldo Golijov's opera "Ainadamar." In the fall of 2008, Gingger toured with the Smashing Pumpkins as a special guest on their 20th Anniversary tour. That same month, Gingger debuted at Carnegie Hall as a soprano in the opera "Ainadamar."