

Production Slate

A tryst between Atafeh (Nikohl Boosheri, left) and Shireen (Sarah Kazemy) unfolds in a glamorous seaside location in *Circumstance*, shot in Lebanon by Brian Rigney Hubbard.



Forbidden Love in Iran

By Patricia Thomson

Set in contemporary Tehran, the drama *Circumstance* addresses the potentially incendiary topics of sexuality and religion. The Farsi-language feature, which had its premiere at this year's Sundance Film Festival, centers on school chums Shireen (Sarah Kazemy) and Atafeh (Nikohl Boosheri), whose steadfast friendship evolves into a closeted lesbian relationship. Born to liberal, secular Muslims, the young women attend a traditional Iranian school but also frequent Tehran's lively underground. Their relationship is forever altered when Atafeh's brother, Mehran (Reza Sixo Safai), becomes a fundamentalist Muslim and decides to marry Shireen.

"I think any family can deal with a repressive environment as long as they have the sanctuary of the home, but when that safe space is threatened, things become unbearable," says Maryam Keshavarz, who wrote and directed the film. "The family's world starts to fall apart when Mehran becomes part of the repressive environment. It's when the outside starts to seep through that you know it's going to be a tragedy."

When Keshavarz workshoped *Circumstance* at the 2007 Sundance Directors Lab, she was teamed with cinematographer Brian Rigney Hubbard. Both of them had earned graduate degrees in film at New York University, but they had never met. They hit it off immediately, and for the next two years, as Keshavarz sought financ-

ing for the film, they met periodically in New York, where they are both based, to compile a look book, discuss scenes and build a 65-page shot list.

During that process, Hubbard noticed that Keshavarz favored a snapshot aesthetic that referenced photographers such as Ryan McGinley and Bill Henson. "The images Maryam liked had a certain sense of naturalism, but the color might be slightly shifted, or the lighting might not provide perfect keylight on the actors — I would refer to it as the look of an 'aestheticized' snapshot," he explains. "McGinley's work has strong but intentionally casual compositions and saturated color, and there's a theatricality to Henson's lighting, even though it's never a perfect key."

The pair always envisioned a 2.40:1 aspect ratio. "The story is about people and their environment, and on a very literal level, I wanted to make sure we had the environment in every close-up," Hubbard says.

Keshavarz was keen to shoot at practical locations — "I don't believe in studios," she states — and when funding fell into place, in 2009, she scouted Turkey, Egypt and Morocco. "None of those places worked," she says. Then Sundance mentor Atom Egoyan suggested Lebanon. "It's an amazing location," Keshavarz attests. "It's so small you can go from city to mountains to seaside within an hour. And because it has experienced war, there's a mix of old buildings and new construction, which is also true in Tehran."

In order to pass muster with the Lebanese censors, however,



The young women share a duet at a family gathering.

Keshavarz had to winnow her 110-page script down to 60 pages. She recalls, "The censor said he liked the film, and I was thinking, 'What film?!'"

Once Lebanon was chosen, Hubbard lobbied to shoot film. "I'd heard how unstable the electricity is in Beirut," he notes. "Plus, we had concerns about the digital cameras that would be available locally and whether we'd have the necessary tech support. So I said to the producers, 'I know this really great hard drive: film. It has amazing resolution.'"

Hubbard tried to obtain a camera capable of shooting 2-perf Super 35mm in Austria, but was stymied by border issues. Producer Karin Chien then suggested shooting Super 16mm. She noted that Gamma, the production's rental house in Beirut, had an Arri 416 and could also supply a set of Arri/Zeiss Ultra Primes and a Cooke 18-100mm zoom. "I thought Super 16 could look beautiful, but I was concerned about cropping [to 2.40:1]," says Hubbard. He called his NYU mentor, cinematographer Maryse Alberti, to ask for advice. "Maryse was extremely generous in walking through the issues she faced on *The Wrestler* [AC Jan. '09]. She said, 'Crop

it, but make sure you do a test.' We did, and we liked the results." Hubbard subsequently chose three Kodak film stocks, Vision3 500T 7219, Vision2 200T 7274 and EXR 50D 7245.

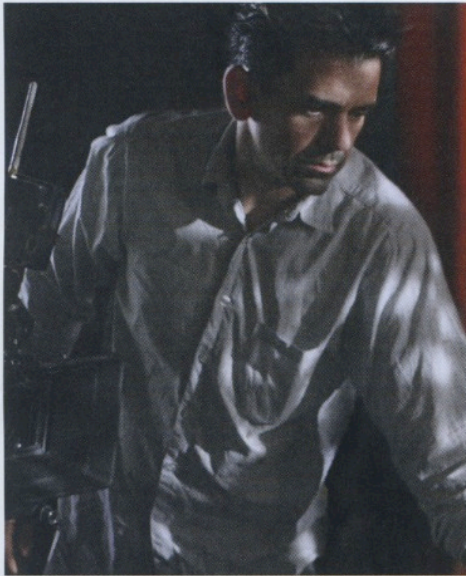
Hubbard arrived in Beirut for two months' prep in late 2009. Photos sent by a source in Tehran provided a visual template. "Tehran is mainly a warm, neutral environment with splashes of color — green and blue are used over and over again as accents," he says. "Trying to re-create that was what drove our choice of locations and the aesthetics of the movie."

Although Keshavarz was determined to use practical locations, securing them proved to be a Sisyphean task. "Everything was constantly falling through," recalls Hubbard. "You had to request 10 locations to end up with one. And every neighborhood seemed to be controlled by a different group, so negotiating permission was very time consuming." In one location, he adds, the use of a balcony outside one end of the room was controlled by one party, while permission to use a balcony off the other end of the room was handled by another.

In the end, every room shown in the film was a different location, mostly private

residences. (The more sensitive scenes were shot in Hubbard's and Keshavarz's local apartments.) "Finding the right Ottoman-era architecture for Atafeh's house, the main location, was quite a feat," says the director. Cost was a significant factor. "Almost everything shot in Lebanon is a commercial for the Arab Emirates, and they have a lot of money!" Keshavarz notes ruefully. "You end up sitting down and having lots of tea, trying to sell people on your project."

Time and again, the filmmakers confronted different ways of doing things in Beirut. "When you rent lights, you rent everything that comes with the lights, including the gaffer and the other technicians," says Keshavarz. Before Hubbard chose Gamma, he asked to meet with the company's gaffer, Joseph Khamis, a.k.a. ZuZu, and his crew. "The initial response was, 'You don't do that here,'" he recalls. But he persisted, and when he finally met with ZuZu, he discovered the gaffer spoke Arabic, very little French and no English. But then ZuZu walked Hubbard around the corner to show him a rig his team had designed at Hubbard's request. "Working on a multi-story building in a cramped



Left: Hubbard at work on the set. Right: The mood in Atafeh's home darkens considerably after Shireen marries Atafeh's brother, a Muslim fundamentalist.

neighborhood, they had rigged a lamp three stories up perfectly safely," says Hubbard. "I knew they'd had to talk all the neighbors into it, and I thought, 'This guy is politic — he's a solver.'"

Throughout the shoot, Hubbard and Khamis managed to communicate through diagrams and gestures. The cinematographer recalls, "My first AC, Fernando Gayetsky, and I kept a little black notebook by the camera. He had all the lenses in Arabic, and we had all the lighting details in Arabic. But ZuZu and I just had a shorthand. With the five Arabic words I learned, combined with a little French and a few English words, we figured it out."

The look of *Circumstance* evolves as the story progresses and takes a dark turn. "For the first part of the story, we wanted to capture the idea of youth and energy within an environment that doesn't allow that," says Keshavarz. Color was one means of achieving this. "There's definitely a color arc in the story, with warm light used to create different moments of rebellion," says Hubbard. "In the beginning, there are a lot of neutrals, blue and green, especially in places like the school courtyard. The girls' homes are not a riot of color either, but they're very warm. I tried to keep the colors not easily identifiable hues."

By contrast, the party scenes feature vivid colors. "The clubs are a relief from the

exterior world," says Hubbard. The lighting for these scenes progresses from simple multicolored lights in an apartment to a kaleidoscopic QuickTime light display on LED panels in an underground nightclub.

Meanwhile, Atafeh's home transforms from a light, airy space to a claustrophobic, cave-like one as Mehran asserts control over the family. "A lot of that arc had to do with lens selection, blocking and locations," says Hubbard.

The spacious living room is initially seen in wide shots, and dolly shots throughout the space suggest a sense of freedom. As the mood becomes oppressive, "there's a progression from wide shots and wider lenses to tighter shots and longer focal lengths," says Hubbard. A particularly dramatic scene, showing Atafeh returning home from the police station and seeing her family brokering her brother's marriage to Shireen, "was shot in details rather than wides." Likewise, for scenes featuring the ill-matched newlyweds, "we tried to crowd the frames as much as possible," says Keshavarz. "They're like tigers trapped in a cage."

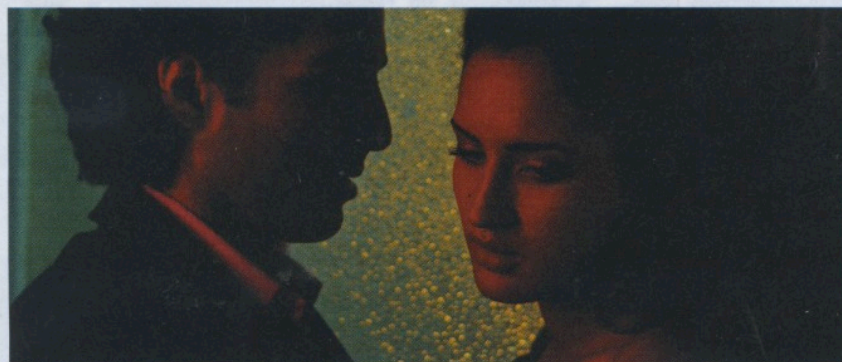
Shireen and Atafeh's lesbian fantasies have their own unique look. Slick and highly saturated, they were intended to emulate advertising. "Iranians their age are so influenced by Western media," Keshavarz observes. One fantasy suggests a seaside

resort in Dubai, where the women shed their clothes in a sunlit room with floor-to-ceiling windows. "There's so much glass it's almost an exterior," notes Hubbard, who shot the scene on 7217. "Our shot sees the horizon line. The idea is that they can be intimate in a completely open space. We wanted the audience to feel a sense of release." He adds that he balanced the light with indirect HMIs and negative fill.

Needing a seaside location with a high-end look, the producers rented a restaurant in Byblos and cordoned off a private area. But at one point, someone phoned the authorities. "They thought we were making a porn film," says Keshavarz. "We purposefully scheduled that scene on the last day of the shoot, figuring that if we had to reshoot it in Miami, we could."

Hubbard's solution was to put the authorities behind the camera. "Inviting them to see what you're shooting always works," he says. "They're always wowed — it's very Hollywood. We convinced them the girls were trying on dresses."

The stakes were particularly high that day: dozens of cans of unprocessed film were sitting on set. The filmmakers had been shipping negative to FotoKem in Burbank, Calif., every few days, but a series of Islamic holidays had interfered with the shipping schedule. "We actually had 14 days' worth of film on set when the police



These frames show an original Super 16mm frame (top) and the cropped final image. "I was concerned about cropping," says Hubbard, "but we tested it and liked the results."

arrived," says Keshavarz. "It was nerve-racking. I don't think insurance covers that!"

Hubbard, Chien and 1st AD Kit Bland subsequently hand-carried those reels to Jordan, where they were sent through Dubai to California. "In order to get it out of Beirut, we said it was unexposed film," says Hubbard. "Otherwise, they would have opened the cans."

The 2K scanning and color correction took place in the safe environment of Company 3 in Santa Monica. The filmout, done by EFilm in Hollywood, was funded by a Sundance grant, and the festival print was made on Fujifilm Eterna-CP 3514DI by Digimage in Paris.

By the time Hubbard sat down with colorist Siggie Ferstl at Company 3, Ferstl had a clear idea of what the filmmakers wanted, because Hubbard had e-mailed

him many color-corrected stills from Beirut. "I was a little nervous because that's every colorist's nightmare: a cinematographer you don't know sending you stills," says Hubbard. "But the 'aestheticized snapshot' we had in mind could easily look like mud if someone tried to make it all neutral and balanced and hide the key. Siggie really took the time to listen and get on the same page with me, and when we started to work together in person, we just flew through it."

TECHNICAL SPECS

2.40:1

Super 16mm

Arri 416

Arri/Zeiss Ultra Prime, Cooke

Kodak Vision3 500T 7219,

Vision2 200T 7217, EXR 50D 7245

Digital Intermediate

Crime à la Mod

By Nic Sadler

The British thriller *Brighton Rock* follows in the fated footsteps of Pinkie (Sam Riley), a handsome sociopath who cold-bloodedly romances a shy waitress, Rose (Andrea Riseborough), who is the sole witness to his brutal slaying of another gangster. Pinkie's cruelty inflames Rose's masochistic obsession with him, but his arrogant disrespect toward a flamboyant mob boss (Andy Serkis) imperils both their lives.

Based on the 1938 novel by Graham Greene, the film places the action in the early Sixties. The project marks the feature-directing debut of Rowan Joffé (screenwriter of *28 Weeks Later* and *The American*), who chose John Mathieson, BSC to man the camera. Mathieson, whose credits include Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (AC May '00), *Hannibal* (AC Feb. '01) and *Kingdom of Heaven* (AC June '05), saw *Brighton Rock* as a chance to work on a smaller scale. The result is a stylish and atmospheric drama that immerses viewers in the story's very specific era.

Cinematographer Nic Sadler, who served as Mathieson's camera assistant early in his career, conducted our interview. The following are excerpts from the conversation.

American Cinematographer: It's apparent you were trying to give this film a bold look.

John Mathieson, BSC: If you're remaking a British noir classic, you'd better do something interesting with it, especially if you don't have any damn money! The original *Brighton Rock* [1947, shot by Harry Waxman, BSC] is very well known in British film culture, and Graham Greene is sort of hallowed ground. I suppose you could call the look of our film 'color noir,' but that sounds a bit pretentious. If you're not shooting black-and-white, it's not really noir. I wanted to give the film a period feel, so we used hard light and funky old lenses, Crystal Express lenses, provided by Joe Dunton. They're not a matched set; they're converted lenses, so there are some gaps in terms of the focal lengths. Some of them have big, square elements on the front, and some don't. [According to focus puller Simon Hume, the production also made frequent use of an anamorphicized Optica-Elite 120-520mm zoom provided by Panavision.] >

dylan skolnick



Circumstance

Sexy is generally not the first thought that comes to mind when Americans think of Iran, but that might change after seeing **Maryam Keshavarz's** *Circumstance*. Most of our images of Iran are highly deceptive or difficult for us to understand. Many western commentators paint a picture of a nation of anti-western religious fanatics trying to get their hands on an atom bomb. Conversely, the Iranian films that are released in the USA often cloak their messages in metaphor and allegory in order to slip past Iran's draconian censors.

Along with simply being a fantastic movie, *Circumstance* offers a fascinating look at the real lives of young Iranians trying to be free in a country ruled by a repressive theocracy. Keshavarz's powerful drama about two young lesbians who just want to love each other takes us into a world of private passions, underground youth culture and secret parties fueled by alcohol. It is a life that would be familiar to many young Americans if it wasn't for the omnipresent threat of arrest by the government's feared Morality Police.

Atafeh (**Nikohl Boosheri**) and Shireen (**Sarah Kazemy**) are best friends, and students in the same all-girls school. Atafeh's family is wealthy and cosmopolitan. Her father is a successful businessman and her mother is a surgeon. Shireen lives with her uncle because her parents, both university professors, have been executed for "anti-government activities." Both families have raised their children in a liberal atmosphere that celebrates both Western and Persian culture. Their open attitudes are reflected in the diverse music featured in the film, ranging from Bach sonatas and traditional Persian songs to *Le Tigre* and the pop song "Total Eclipse of the Heart."

As Atafeh and Shireen grow closer, their friendship deepens, and they become lovers. Heady with the



excitement of first love, they think little of the potential danger of discovery. Their situation grows complicated when Mehran, Atafeh's brother, and a former drug addict, turns to religion in an attempt to find meaning in his life. Driven by a mixture of newfound fanaticism and surreptitious attraction to Shireen, Mehran begins watching the young lovers, setting events in motion that will forever change all of their lives.

Director **Maryam Keshavarz** grew up in both the United States and Iran. Her film is powered by both an insider's knowledge and an émigré's expanded perspective. She avoided censorship by shooting her film clandestinely in Beirut, Lebanon, with an all-Iranian cast.

One of the year's best movies, *Circumstance* is an intimate story of two women and their families. Keshavarz subtly evokes the sensual private space that Atafeh and Shireen impulsively create to express their feelings towards each other, which mirrors the cultured world that their parents have tried to preserve. However, Keshavarz also captures the moments where the personal becomes political, where people's individual choices suddenly puts them in direct conflict with the powers that be. *Circumstance* is an ambitious work that beautifully reveals the complex social, sexual, and emotional currents that shape all of our lives. 🍷

Dylan Skolnick is very glad that we live in a country without Morality Police. He can be found most days and some nights undermining or improving (depending on your point of view) the morality of impressionable Long Islanders at the Cinema Arts Centre in Huntington, where he is Co-Director.