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Movie review: 'Circumstance'

Two teenage schoolmates in Iran get involved in things likely to attract the attention of the Morality Police in this provocative drama.

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With "Circumstance," writer-director Maryam Keshavarz offers a taboo-busting snapshot of contemporary Tehran — a provocative psychodrama that's part Iranian "Girls Gone Wild," set just before the 2009 elections.

Shireen (Sarah Kazemy) and Atefeh (Nikohl Boosheri) are beautiful teenage schoolmates attracted to each other — and to a host of things considered subversive in their repressive, male-dominated homeland; at night, the young women boldly doff their head scarves, slip into revealing dresses and then party away in an underground dance club.

When Shireen and Atefeh help a gay director friend dub a print of Gus Van Sant's "Milk" into Persian, you can be sure their assistance won't go unnoticed — and not in a good way. Enter Atefeh's fresh-out-of-rehab brother, Mehran (Reza Sixo Safai), now an informer for the Morality Police, whose new religious fervor masks a pitch-dark soul.

Though there's a certain contrivance to Mehran's stealthy manipulations (how exactly did he install surveillance cameras in his unknowing parents' house?), his presence ratchets up the tension and leads to an unexpected series of third-act events.

Kazemy and Boosheri are excellent, and Soheil Parsa and Nasrin Pakkho are also fine as Atefeh's doting, liberal parents.

And if Keshavarz is less successful managing the film's sometimes choppy narrative, she is clearly willing to take risks on all fronts. More power to her.