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Friday 26th February 2016, 7.30pm

Appropriate Behaviour (UK/USA 2014. Cert 15)

dir: **Desiree Akhavan**

starring: **Desiree Akhavan, Rebecca Henderson**

sponsors: **Special Edition Chocolate**

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It's not surprising to learn that Desiree Akhavan, writer, director and star of *Appropriate Behaviour* has been invited to join the cast of *Girls*. In its rueful, funny, all hang-out treatment of young female sexual mores in New York, Akhavan's film has a lot in common with Lena Dunham's *Tiny Furniture* (2010) and her hugely successful HBO series. What it adds is the cultural specific of the heroine's Iranian background, and the sexual specific of her bisexuality (though she seems to lean closer to lesbiansim). In both aspects the film is openly autobiographical. Akhavan says she was "inspired by my experience facing life after my first serious relationship with a woman."

In structure, the film moves simultaneously forwards and backwards: we see Akhavan's character Shirin trying to get her life - and especially her sex life - back into some kind of order after the acrimonious breakup with her girlfriend Maxine (Rebecca Henderson), while every so often flashing back to her memories of their one-year affair. The flashbacks - which are dropped in unheralded and not in chronological order - at first make it seem as if the relationship was doomed from the start. Maxine is initially portrayed as hopelessly unimaginative: her idea of S & M role play is to cast herself as a tax inspector who, instead of punishing Shirin, offers to help with her tax declaration. Gradually, though, we're shown a warmer, more positive side, for example when Akhavan cuts from Shirin having impersonal sex with a guy she's met on OKCupid to having a loving, mutually enriching bed session with Maxine.

Interspersed with this are scenes of ethnic comedy, with Shirin attending raucous Iranian parties or evading pressure from her engulfing family to tell them about her boyfriends. (When she finally comes out, to her mother and her brother, far from causing the expected horror or distress, her confession is brushed aside as being of no significance.)

The humour is classic New York deadpan, often mined from embarrassment: in one of the choicest scenes, Shirin, along with her straight friend Crystal, marches into a lingerie shop and demands "the grown up underwear for a woman in charge of her sexuality and not afraid of change." This bid for self-assertion is at once undermined by the saleswoman, who chides her for not wearing a bra. "Just because your breasts are small doesn't mean they're not legitimate."

Appropriate Behaviour ends on an indeterminate upbeat note; it seems that Shirin is finally over Maxine and ready to move on, though not as a result of any specific incident. Altogether the film's random structure and narrative looseness are central to its appeal and sense of truth to life: people and events pop up and disappear, often to no particular end (though there's a sweet



performance from *30 Rock*'s Scott Adsit as Shirin's stoner boss, unfailingly upbeat.) Akhavan may be offering nothing startlingly new in terms of subject matter, but her screen personal is appealing and her voice is unmistakably her own.

Another view (Jenny Kermode, Eye for Film)

"I find your anger incredibly sexy," says Shirin (Desiree Akhavan) to the woman she's hitting on on New Year's Eve. "I hate a lot of things too."

Synopsis: Present-day New York. Iranian-American twentysomething Shirin has just broken up acrimoniously with her girlfriend Maxine. She moves out of their apartment. Her family, who don't know she's bisexual, help her find a new apartment in Brooklyn. Her straight friend Crystal urges her to come out to them but Shirin doesn't dare to. As she has quit her journalism job, Crystal's friend Ken offers her a post teaching a junior film-making class: it turns out that the 'juniors' are five-year old boys. At an Iranian New Year's party, Shirin remembers how she met Maxine on the previous New Year's Eve.

Shirin contacts a man online who calls himself Brooklyn Boy: they have a one-night stand. At her lesbian discussion group, Shirin invites the group leader, Sasha, out for a drink. In a bar, Shirin is picked up by a couple, Ted and Marie, who take her back to their place for a threesome. Marie and Shirin enjoy it, but Ted turns sulky and asks her to leave. Shirin goes to a party: Maxine is there with a new girlfriend. Shirin recognises the girlfriend as fellow teacher Tibet, who's in charge of the junior girls' film-making class. At the end of term, the two groups present their films. The girls' film is sophisticated and minimalist, in black and white. The boys' film is called 'The Tale of the Lost Fart'. Ken says he loves it. At the next Iranian New Year's party, Shirin tentatively comes out to her mother and brother, but neither is shocked.

Credits

Ken	Scott Adsit	Director	Desiree Akhavan
Shirin	Desiree Akhavan	Screenwriter	Desiree Akhavan
Ted	Chris Baker	DoP	Chris Teague
Layli	Justine Cotsonas	Editing	Sara Shaw
Nasrin	Anh Duong	Music	Josephine Wiggs
Crystal	Halley Feiffer	Sound mix	Kyle Porter
Maxine	Rebecca Henderson	Costume	Sara Maiorino
Mehrdad	Hooman Majd		
Kate	Kelly McAndrew		
Ali	Arian Moayed		
Sasha	Aimee Mullins		
Marie	Robyn Rikoon		

UK/USA 2014 86 mins

If you're going to write about love, you have to understand hate. Far from the usual insipid luvvies who inhabit most romantic comedies, Shirin and the object of her affections (Rebecca Henderson's Maxine) are willful, obnoxious and undeniably charismatic people who feel very much a part of the real world. That world is a complicated place, however, and Shirin is struggling to find her balance in it. When the relationship ends, Maxine finally running out of patience, she finds herself adrift.

In many ways, this is the story of a young woman confounded by acceptance. That she's a Persian immigrant feels like a big deal to her but doesn't ultimately make her stand out in New York. She gets the odd insulting remark about being bisexual, but for the most part nobody cares, and her hesitation to tell her mother might just stem from a fear that she'll find acceptance there, too. Even at work, her colleagues don't seem phased by her hopelessness when faced with a class of five year olds to whom she's supposed to teach filmmaking. So why is she so discontented? A series of sexual encounters provides no answers. Nor does her determination to win back Maxine seem like a realistic solution. She's faced with the far more difficult task of coming to terms with herself.

*There's a desperate shortage of cinema out there telling the stories of lesbian and bisexual women. As a consequence, much of what is produced is painfully self-conscious and is hyped up way beyond its merits. *Appropriate Behaviour* is a breath of fresh air. It's a solid, grounded piece of work that approaches its subject with a maturity remarkable for a first feature from a young director. The performances are strong and the dialogue acutely well observed, so that the occasional laugh out loud moment doesn't distract from the immersiveness of the whole. Every film about New York must ultimately stand against the work of Woody Allen, and this one fares better than most, in part due to a sense of completeness that brooks no competition. It owns its space and its self-centeredness is as delightful as its heroine's.*

If you hate a lot of things, this is a film you might like.

Programme Update

The 3 films chosen to fill the gaps left in April and May for new titles released after the programme went to press, are:-

April 22nd. The Lesson (Bulgaria/Greece, 2014)

Margita Gosheva is excellent as the initially uncompromising Nadezhda, a teacher in a small Bulgarian town who's troubled by petty thefts in her classroom and is trying her best to uncover the culprit. But financial woes are stacking up in her own life, after her unemployed and hapless husband spends money they don't have, and she must utilise all her energy to ensure that their house isn't repossessed.

May 6th: Tangerines (Estonia, 2013)

A deeply affecting anti-war movie, *Tangerines* takes a simple story and weaves it into a rich drama; deftly balancing pathos, black humour and a pacifist critique of unnecessary violence, Zaza Urushadze's assured direction is completed by the tremendous performance by Lembit Ulfsak, a veteran actor all too rarely seen on UK screens.

May 27th: The Wolfpack (USA, 2015)

In New York, the six Angulo brothers and their older sister live with their parents in a Lower East Side apartment that they are not allowed to leave because their parents feel the world beyond is unsafe. Home-schooled, they go outside only once or twice a year under strict supervision. Film is their shared passion and, unable to explore the world themselves, they do so via the medium of cinema, making endless lists of films & staging elaborate recreations of their favourites scenes Reminiscent of *Capturing the Friedmans* in its portrait of familial dysfunction, this astonishing, haunting and very moving documentary won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance 2015.

Our next film: Friday March 4th, 2016

The Duke of Burgundy (UK/Hungary 2014. Cert 18)

Two women explore the extremes of carnal desire in this deliciously twisted tale of erotic obsession. In a crumbling European estate, butterfly researcher Cynthia (Sidse Babett Knudsen) and her lover Evelyn (Chiara D'Anna) repeatedly enact a sadomasochistic role-playing game, with Cynthia as the stern mistress and Evelyn her subservient sex slave. But as the lines between fantasy and reality begin to blur, and Cynthia grows increasingly uneasy with Evelyn's insatiable appetite for punishment, their relationship is pushed to the limit.

Peter Strickland's 3rd feature (after *Katalin Varga* & *The Berberian Sound Studio*) is a visual and sensual treat, as provocative in what it has to say about men as it is about relationships. *Fifty Shades of Grey* it most certainly isn't.