

THE GIRL ON THE LEFT IS LENA DUNHAM

Pen pals
Desiree Akhavan
(right) with Lena
Dunham in season
four of *Girls*



THE GIRL ON THE RIGHT IS NOT THE NEW LENA DUNHAM*

***SHE INSISTS**

But Desiree Akhavan is following in her footsteps, writing, directing and starring in witty, intelligent films based on her own life. Christopher Silvester meets a bisexual movie maverick

Desiree Akhavan is used to being called the new Lena Dunham, although she wouldn't thank you for the comparison. Ever since the 30-year-old co-wrote, co-directed and co-starred (with her then girlfriend Ingrid Jungermann) in *The Slope*, a 2010 comedy series about a couple of superficial, homophobic lesbians living in the Park Slope district of Brooklyn, Akhavan has been both flattered and annoyed by comparisons to Dunham. Various articles have described her as 'the next' or 'the bisexual Persian Lena Dunham', but while she shares a milieu and sensibility with Dunham, her work also references Woody Allen, Noah Baumbach and Todd Solondz.

'I watch *Girls* every week,' she says. 'It speaks to me because I see the world in a similar way. I'm proud that *Girls* exists and I'm proud that Lena exists, because before that there wasn't really any proof that money could be made off intelligent, funny young women from New York. She paved the path. I know that a lot of the reason I get any attention is because of a standard that she set.'

Like Dunham, Akhavan is proudly not a size zero. She has a long Persian nose and full, luscious lips. Her facial appearance has been likened by interviewers and critics to Queen's Freddie Mercury and, more happily, to Sandra Bullock and Hilary Swank. On screen there is grace in her gawkiness and in person she has an imposing presence that is nonetheless more feminine than tomboyish. She talks fast and with no sense that she is censoring herself.

But she's quick to point out the differences between herself and Dunham: 'I deal with very different subject matter and my experience of life is very different.' In her latest film, *Appropriate Behaviour*, Akhavan plays Shirin, an Iranian-American girl working out her bisexual identity, who detaches herself from the conventional expectations of her family while dating and breaking up with her first girlfriend. It is a stylish and confident film, which she wrote for her film studies thesis at New York University and which was a hit with audiences at last year's London and Sundance film festivals. *Appropriate Behaviour* was financed by a UK company, Parkville Pictures, took 18 days to shoot, cost less than £350,000 and will play well to fans of *Girls*. *The Washington Post*'s critic called it a 'cult classic for young urbanites'; *The New York Times* said it was 'packed with smart remarks, clever and unpredictable turns of phrase that knock you off balance'; and Dunham tweeted that it was 'audacious, funny and unique'. Soon after, she auditioned Akhavan for a role in season four of HBO's *Girls* and cast her as Chandra, someone Hannah Horvath encounters at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, in three episodes.

Akhavan's parents, Cyrus and Yasmin, ran a textile manufacturing business. They had her brother (now a paediatric urologist) in Iran but fled after the 1979 revolution, spending a few years in France, before Akhavan was born in the Manhattan suburbs in 1984. 'No one goes there, there's nothing to do. I would commute every day to the Bronx for high school. My life was in New York City but I would sleep in the suburbs and I didn't know anyone there. I



Oh, behave!
Akhavan at the
2014 Sundance
Film Festival

'BEFORE GIRLS THERE WASN'T ANY PROOF THAT MONEY COULD BE MADE OFF INTELLIGENT, FUNNY YOUNG WOMEN FROM NEW YORK'

didn't have friends and I didn't have a life, other than watching television and movies.'

It was apparent from a young age that Akhavan wanted to tell stories. 'As a kid I put on a lot of sketch shows, so it was never a shock to my parents that I wanted to do this. I wrote a lot of plays. Really obnoxiously self-indulgent, one-woman shows, monologues with lots of characters, weird hair, different voices. We loved Tracey Ullman [the British actress who crossed the Pond in the 1980s and was given her own sketch show on Fox], that was something we could all enjoy. There were very few things that both my parents and I found funny, especially my dad. He's very supportive but I still don't think he finds my work very funny.'

In *Appropriate Behaviour*, Shirin comes out to her mother but not to other members of her family. What was coming out like for Akhavan herself? 'It was a long conversation that took many years,' she says. 'We skated around it for ages and finally, at 24 or 25 - I was with a woman at that point and I wanted that relationship to be taken seriously - that was the breaking point. I started making *The Slope* after that and it was so public; that's essentially



Akhavan in *Appropriate Behaviour* and (above) with Rebecca Henderson in the film



how I came out to my extended family.' It was this ongoing experience that inspired *Appropriate Behaviour*: 'The thing I tried to communicate was that it was a process and that there wasn't this one watershed moment where everyone knew. This girl would have to come out a million times in her life. That was something I heard from many of my friends, that they kept having to come out of the closet.'

As a girl, Akhavan visited Iran and many of her family still live there, but she hasn't been back since she came out. 'It's too dangerous,' she says. In New York, however, her family and the wider Iranian community have accepted her sexuality. 'I'm treated with respect and my girlfriend is treated with respect. They're very kind to us and we're invited to all the same things my ex-boyfriend and I were invited to.'

Akhavan lived in London for a year, studying film and living on campus at Queen Mary in Mile End, where she made her first film, *Two Drink Minimum*, about three couples in a London bar whose stories connect ('A really stupid, shitty film,' she volunteers). Living in London was the first time in her life that she hadn't felt 'like a weirdo, that I had some room to explore different options'. New York may be known for its ethnic diversity, but Akhavan found London less culturally homogenous. And she fell in love for the first time, meeting her ex-boyfriend, an Austrian, who lived and worked in Bristol as a scientist.

Akhavan says she never switched from gay to bisexual. 'I was in one serious relationship with a man and I've been in two serious relationships with a woman. When I was with him I was bisexual and before him I had a casual girlfriend but nothing serious. Since him I've dated several men, for a month or two at a time. Everyone always knew I was bisexual and it was something that I always knew about myself.' At a Q&A following the London Film Festival screening of *Appropriate Behaviour* last October, she said: 'There just isn't a real clear bisexual identity and I think people are perplexed by how a person could split themselves like that. There aren't that many openly bisexual people.'

With *Appropriate Behaviour* now showing across Europe and in Australia, Akhavan is currently developing a bisexual dating comedy series for cable TV. 'It's about a 30-year-old woman who's been lesbian-identified her whole adult life and then comes out of the closet as bisexual and starts dating men for the first time. She loses her gay identity, loses her friends and has to reinvent her life. It's a reverse coming-out. When you're partnered with someone of the same sex, that identity is on you. You live this other life. It's very different from when you're partnered with an opposite-sex partner. And to be that person who goes back and forth and experiences life on both levels is a real mindf***. Nobody wants to judge you, but you get that sense that they're thinking, "Why can't you choose? What is wrong with you that you don't have a preference?"' If it's time for a new voice of a generation, Desiree Akhavan may just be it. **ES**

Appropriate Behaviour is in cinemas now