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Joyland (15)

Dir: Saim Sadiq

Starring: Ali Junejo, Rasti Farooq, Alina Khan

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Synopsis: Patriarch Amanullah, elder son Saleem, his wife Nucchi and their four young daughters, younger son Haider and his wife Mumtaz, the latter couple childless, all live in Lahore. Haider, unemployed and browbeaten by his disdainful father, does not have the self-confidence to stand up for himself. His wife works as a beautician, a job that she loves but is forced to give up by her in-laws when Haider finally gets work. Surprisingly, this is as a backing dancer at a burlesque theatre where trans-gender Biba is the star of the show. Needless to say, the true nature of this work has to be kept secret from his father.... This bold, imaginative debut film not only wowed critics when it was shown at Cannes but secured a nomination for Best International Film at the 2023 Oscars

In Saim Sadiq's 2019 short film *Darling*, the transgender actress Alina Khan played an aspiring dancer auditioning for a central role at a mujra theatre, only to be told by the manager, "In this theatre, the men only come to watch real girls." To appear onstage, Khan's character ultimately has to present herself as a male backing dancer to a female star. The strictures of gender roles in Pakistani society is a theme that Sadiq pushes further in his debut feature *Joyland*. Khan again stars as a mujra dancer – this time her character Biba is established as a regular attraction – but Sadiq expands his focus to take in several characters, each of whom is struggling within the bonds of familial and societal expectations.

Chief among these is Haider (Ali Junejo), a perpetually unemployed young man who appears quite content to stay at home and tend to his brother's young daughters while his wife Mumtaz (Rasti Farooq) works. Haider's father (Salmaan Peerzada) makes no effort to disguise his disappointment at his unmanly offspring, a dynamic established in an early scene, when Haider is tasked with slaughtering a goat for the family's dinner: holding the blade over the animal's throat, he finds he simply can't do it. Mumtaz takes over, putting both the goat and Haider out of their misery, and drawing rancour from the wheelchair-bound but still intimidating patriarch.

When Haider (somewhat implausibly, given his awkwardness) wins a role as a backing dancer for Biba, he must keep the true nature of his new employment a secret from his family, and come to terms with his burgeoning attraction towards his new boss. The hugely



charismatic Khan plays Biba with a brash, diva energy ("She uses her tongue like scissors," one fellow dancer observes), and her confident demeanour, which is essential for her survival in this world, is in stark contrast to the sweetly humble Haider. A familiar narrative threatens to take shape here, with Haider growing in confidence and affirming his sense of his own identity through dance and through this taboo-breaking relationship, but Sadiq isn't interested in giving us such an uncomplicated, optimistic arc.

Joyland is primarily concerned with the impossibility of following one's desire in a rigidly patriarchal society. When Haider's newfound employment forces Mumtaz to give up the makeup job she loves and take on the more accepted female role of staying at home to raise a family, we witness the gradual disintegration of her spirit through Farooq's quietly devastating performance. Even her more traditional sister-in-law (Sarwat Gilani) feels the intolerable pressure to produce a male heir after giving birth to three daughters. The film is also a portrait of a society stricken by the fear of 'Log kya kahenge' ('What will people say?'), which doesn't only affect women: Haider's father and the elderly widow across the street shy away from easing their loneliness and spending time together because of the potential gossip it may spark. The restrictions these characters live under strangle the joy from their lives.

As in *Darling*, Sadiq favours an Academy ratio, accentuating the sense of these characters being hemmed in by their environments. When Haider is taunted by the other male dancers with questions about what's under Biba's dress, the camera slowly moves in to capture his passive anguish, and even when Haider is faced with the wide-open expanse of the ocean, the tight frame around him suggests there's something inescapable about his circumstances. Lebanese cinematographer Joe Saade displays a real knack for expressive compositions and inventive lighting choices; the use of cheap green disco ball lights spiralling around the walls adds a tenderness to an encounter between Haider and Biba in her bedroom, while a couple of scenes set during the power cuts that intermittently afflict this community are skilfully lit using only mobile

phones.

Watching a film as bold and imaginative as *Joyland* from a young Pakistani filmmaker should be a point of pride for the nation's film industry, but after being selected as the country's official Academy Awards entry, it subsequently had its theatrical release cancelled by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, which said it contained "highly objectionable material which does not conform with the social values and moral standards of our society". *Joyland* was ultimately passed for release, but only after a number of cuts were imposed by the censors; it remains banned in the Punjab region. This impressively honest and empathetic film deserves better than to fall victim to the same draconian moral code that has entrapped its characters.

Credits

Haider	Ali Junejo
Mumtaz	Rasti Farooq
Biba	Alina Khan
Nucchi	Sarwat Gilani
Father Aman	Salmaan Peerzada
Saleem	Sohail Sameer
Fayyaz	Sania Saeed
Qaiser	Ramiz Law
Ashfaq Saab	Honey Albela
Shagnum Rani	Priya Usman Khan
Bobby	Muzamil Khan
Honey	Honey
Nenson	Shabaz Rafiq
India	Iftikhar India
Tipu	Umar Fiaz
Director	Saim Sadiq
Screenplay	Saim Sadiq, Maggie Briggs
Cinematographer	Joe Saade
Music	Abdullah Siddiqui
Editing	Saim Sadiq, Jasmin Tenucci
Costume	Zoya Hasan
Sound	Henry Maynard, Robert Louis Howley
Visual effects	Asad Iqbal

Pakistan 2022. 126 mins

Another View

Saim Sadiq's *Joyland* begins with a game of tag: a man draped with a white bedsheet listens for his nieces' suppressed giggles, his wandering arms outstretched as he attempts to catch them. Yet undercutting the tenderness of the way the pair eventually collapse together in raucous laughter, the camera hovers too close, and the sheet feels as much like an invisibility cloak as an innocent costume. We wonder why the first time we meet this man, Haider – brought to life with an extraordinarily sensitive performance by Ali Junejo – it's as a ghost in his own home.

Off-screen, his sister-in-law's water breaks. In a matter-of-fact voice, she tells Haider to bring the motorcycle around and informs her daughters (three of them, but she's hoping this baby will be a son) that a neighbour will be over with lunch. Some odd and everyday machinery clicks into place: the birth of a child; the rules that define this family; husbands and wives; boys and girls. In this film we constantly see people through doorframes, their bodies boxed in by the house and its walls.

Joyland weaves a tapestry from the lives of a family in Lahore – or rather, contemplates what's left behind when everything comes unravelling. Haider lives in a house where the preordained familiarity and simmering contradictions of patriarchal expectations co-exist. His wife, Mumtaz (Rasti Farooq), is free to continue the work she

loves as a makeup artist because the unemployed Haider takes up housework alongside his sister-in-law. But when he finds a job at an erotic dance theatre, Mumtaz is forced to stay at home. Slowly, aching, the machinery of the house begins to disintegrate.

At the theatre, soft-spoken Haider is a background dancer for an aspiring star named Biba (a commandingly beautiful Alina Khan), a trans woman whose fierce authenticity enthralled Haider for how opposed it is to the hesitant spectatorship of his own life. But the sensuous unfurling of Haider and Biba's mutual attraction is just one thread the film patiently tugs at, in turn pulling at many more intertwined.

Pushed into an unwanted life of domestic labour and registering her husband's slow estrangement, Mumtaz's claustrophobia quietly floods the frame. The dynamic between them is exquisitely written; husband and wife whisper to one another with a genuine yet rueful affection that floats above the depths of what they wish they could confide in each other, if only the house of cards wouldn't come tumbling down.

A beautifully intimate yet open-ended interrogation of the spaces its characters are forced to navigate, Sadiq's intricate debut is a haunting elegy that mourns the deadly suffocation of desire, elegantly tracing how the liberation of men, women, cis, and trans people is always entangled. Named after an amusement park where Mumtaz and her sister-in-law swing high into the sky, neon lights punctuating their delighted, dizzy laughter in a rare moment of escapism and reprieve, *Joyland* swells with the silent pleas of bodies simply wanting to be seen, held, and free.

Xuanlin Tham: Little White Lies

Our next screenings

After tonight's film, the Society now takes a break until the New Year. We return in January with a further selection of films, including a bonus screening, details of which we'll announce in due course.

The films chosen so far are

Afire (Germany 2022): the latest film from Christian Petzold is a comedy drama about a group of friends coping with a crisis.

Fallen Leaves (Finland 2023): Aki Kaurismäki's brings his signature droll wit to this romantic drama about relationships.

Mother and Son (France 2022): Léonor Serraille's touching new film follows a mother and sons as they seek a better life in Paris

Scala! (UK 2023): this vivid documentary tells the extraordinary story of the Scala cinema in London, the go-to place for artists of all types, attracted by the eclectic film programme.

The Night of the 12th (France, Belgium 2022): a thriller from Dominik Moll about the impact on 2 policemen of a crime they're investigating.

Typist Artist Pirate King (UK 2022): Carol Morley directs Monica Dolan, Kelly McDonald & Gina McKee in a film based on the life of artist Audrey Amiss, whose career was affected by her mental health.

Bonus film: to be selected by the membership.