



Anora

Review by Vince LePlavy

On the fringes of cinema there have always been the side players: the unsung heroes who never get their due credit because of an unaccepting public or a society that's not ready to see stories with these characters up on the big screen. The Roger Corman films of the 1960's and 1970's mined out a unique niche within Hollywood while the adult film industry boomed with a golden age unlike any has seen before it. Then the last 50 years happened and audiences are facing a significantly similar cultural moment that they want to see conveyed in the films they watch. Enter Sean Baker. With his smash indie hit *Anora*, one can feel a sense that the spotlight has finally turned back on to those "fringe players" and shows them as fully emotional and complex human beings. Baker has adeptly depicted these individuals before with *Tangerine* (2015), *The Florida Project* (2017) & *Red Rocket* (2021), but with *Anora* he fastens a wide-scope cinematic lens to his usual dynamite storytelling and swings for the fences with awards-worthy results.

Mikey Madison (*Once Upon A Time... in Hollywood*, *Scream 5*) makes a star turn as the titular Anora. Her braggadocio and Brighton Bay accent cloak her comely California origins and showcase her as another one of Baker's unforgettable character creations. More than once does one get reminiscences of a young Jane Fonda in *Klute* (1971). On a regular day Anora can be found working at the nearby dance club courting shy (and some not-so-shy) rich men to indulge her in a dance, a drink or even just casual conversation. The opening fifteen minutes of the film are masterfully captured through a tracking shot that follows "Ani" (as she likes to be called) through this theatrical routine that she must do to hustle and make a living. It all turns out to be another night until she meets Vanya (Mark Eydelshteyn), the son of a wealthy Russian oligarch. He wines and dines her with nary an ounce of worry which she finds very alluring; as well their similar ages solidify much of their connection. One date back at Vanya's compound-like mansion in Brooklyn makes Ani truly think that this may be her ticket out of day-to-day tricking, train-rattling apartment windows and venomous coworkers. Within two weeks Ani and Vanya rush to Vegas to get eloped and have a secret blow-out wedding with a small group of friends. After the celebration, Ani settles back in Brooklyn and all seems like a fairytale dream come true. Until it becomes a nightmare. Somehow Vanya's parents (and his father's personal band of security goons) have found out about the secret lovers and are en route to force them to annul the marriage. The remainder of the film escalates into a wild fever dream where no one knows what's coming until the very end. At times the third act almost veers off the rails but director Baker is an assured conductor who brings this crowd-pleaser into the station with flying neon colors. With a Palme d'Or win to brag about, expect to see much, much more about this one throughout awards season with key emphasis on the directing, acting and writing.

Anora herself isn't perfect... but she doesn't have to be. With filmmakers like Baker carving out room for fallible, vulnerable, REAL human beings within the pantheon of the amorphous Hollywood system, he's brave enough to know that it isn't about perfection... but it's the pursuit of it that's everything.

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