

Blu-ray Review: 'Pariah' Features Adepero Oduye's Star-Making Performance

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CHICAGO – 2011 featured a series of uncommonly affecting films from female directors about young women grappling with their sexual identities. In all three cases, the heroines strain to keep their lesbianism a secret from their families. Céline Sciamma's "Tomboy" centered on a 10-year-old girl who posed as a boy, while Maryam Keshavarz's "Circumstance" explored the forbidden romance of two Iranian teens.

These films are so good that it makes one wonder why there aren't as many accomplished films about young men coming to terms with their homosexuality. Queer cinema too often falls under the stereotypical categorization of soft-core art house fare with earnest messages and amateurish production values. They seem tailor-made for a niche audience, but what makes "Tomboy," "Circumstance" and Dee Rees's "Pariah" so powerful is their resonance as universal human stories. These characters aren't defined by their sexual orientations, despite what society would lead them to believe.



Blu-ray Rating: **4.0/5.0**

As Alike, the Brooklyn teenager at the heart of "Pariah," Adepero Oduye exudes such strength and vulnerability that she instantly reminded me of Whoopi Goldberg in "The Color Purple." Her daily routine involves a series of costume changes that allow her to try on a series of personas, much to the bewilderment of her mother, Audrey (Kim Wayans). The charismatic Laura (Pernell Walker) has grown comfortable within her butch clothing, and tries to get Alike to meet other girls at nightclubs. Potential romance enters Alike's life from an unexpected direction in the form of a girl who masks her own insecurities behind a confident façade. Their tender glances and sensual overtures are no less authentic than the domestic tensions at home, as Audrey's paranoid hysteria threatens to reach a fever pitch. Her worries about Alike are only intensified by her ever-distant husband (Charles Parnell), who resigns himself to the belief that his daughter is merely going through a faze. There are glimmers of Mary Tyler Moore's self-centered mother from "Ordinary People" in Audrey, as her religious beliefs and unwavering expectations make her unable to accept the person that her daughter has become. A climatic confrontation between Alike and her parents is genuinely bruising, but the defiant teen emerges unscathed. In the film's final moments, she recites an entrancing poem with such hard-won conviction that it solidifies Oduye's status as one of the most promising actresses of her generation.



Pariah was released on Blu-ray and DVD on April 24, 2012.

Photo credit: Universal Studios Home Entertainment

There isn't a shred of sentimentality on the screen in "Pariah." Rees is well aware of the fact that manipulative music and melodramatic plot contrivances are pure overkill when staging a story as simple and truthful as this one. Walker's performance is so believable and compelling that she could easily headline her own picture. One of the most heartbreaking scenes in the film occurs when Laura breaks the news to her mother that she just received her GED, and ends up getting the door slammed in her face. Yet for all the hardships faced by these characters, this is ultimately a film about perseverance, self-acceptance and the embracement of life's potential. "Pariah" seems like a title better suited for Lee Daniels's touching but over-the-top "Precious: Based On the Novel 'Push' By Sapphire," which saddled its victimized protagonist with so many taboo trials and tribulations that she began to resemble a "Jeopardy" category ("Trials and Tribulations for 800"). "Pariah" is a more subtle film than "Precious," and all the more effective for it.

"Pariah" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 1.85:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English, Spanish and French subtitles, and includes a pocket BLU app and access to the BD-Live Center. What it doesn't offer is any extras worthy of such a superlative indie triumph. Rees and Oduye clearly have bright careers ahead of them, and this Blu-ray disc would've been an ideal place to assemble in-depth interviews with these hugely exciting talents. Instead, the disc merely supplies footage of the director and actress strolling down the sidewalk with a nearly unrecognizable Walker, while casually reminiscing about the shoot. This footage is chopped up into three dismal featurettes that never deliver on the promise of their respective titles (such as "A Director's Style"). Fleeting highlights include Oduye's story about borrowing her brother's clothes for the "Pariah" audition, and Walker recalling that Rees directed her to "hit on Wayans" in order to make her particularly uncomfortable during a key take. Aside from its peerless picture quality, this excellent film deserved a vastly better Blu-ray release.

'Pariah' is released by Universal Studios Home Entertainment and stars Adepero Oduye, Pernell Walker, Charles Parnell, Kim Wayans, Aasha Davis and Sahra Miellesse. It was written and directed by Dee Rees. It was released on April 24, 2012. It is rated R.

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