

# Honest, Precisely Acted ‘Pariah’ is Passionate Filmmaking

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on January 6, 2012 - 9:19am

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – The exploration of culture, so tied to class and social standing, is not explored too often in mainstream films. In 2009, there was “Precious,” and this year the stand out is “Pariah.” Writer/director Dee Rees formulates a passionate story about a racial/social/orientation fish out of water.

What is beautiful about the film is its intensity, and how far the ensemble cast was willing to go in a narrative regarding an African American teenage girl who wants to come out as a lesbian. Everybody in the cast, from leads to one-liners, had a real truth to them, there was a palpable desire to tell this story properly, and without sensationalism. The actress who portrays the conflicted teenager was especially strong, and gave a dignity and purpose to her character that made her heroic.

Alike (Adepero Oduye) is a middle class African American teenager in Brooklyn, with a working mother (Kim Wayans), a police officer father (Charles Parnell) and a younger sister Saronda (Sahra Meliesse). When we meet Alike, she is dressed like a male, in a strange nightclub that obviously caters to lesbians. Her best friend Laura (Pernell Walker) is similarly dressed, and it becomes obvious that she is the conduit for Alike into this new world. Alike, however, lives a double life, for she has not come out to her family.



With their suspicions raised, Alike’s Mom attempts to break the kinship between her daughter and Laura. She introduces Alike to Bina (Aasha Davis), a neighborhood girl, and to Alike’s surprise they hit it off. The barriers begin to fall in the teen’s double life, and even her new friend

Bina is involved. The family starts to unravel, the more they stray from the truth, and all the relationships at the tipping point are in danger of breaking apart.

To get an outside-the-subject-matter audience to understand the circumstance in this film, it needed to have all its story-telling strength. This is a relatable tale about any outsider, this just happens to be about sexual orientation. This is also a cautionary moral statement about judging books by covers, because Alike is in – by all observation – a perfect nuclear family. Once inside, we see that Dad is secretive to a fault, Mom is über-religious to survive and the bratty sister turns out to have more courage than anyone.

Like "Precious," it also is a glimpse into another social/economic arena for African Americans. Despite success in community positioning, the family is overly concerned about what others would think of their daughter, especially with Dad's macho police coterie and Mom's religious circles. There is a telling scene as well, as a boorish liquor store customer challenges one of the girls from the nearby lesbian club, in regard to her sexuality. The executed put-down reply by the girl is perfect, but creates a problem for Alike's father. Like the situation of black men on the "down-low," the culture is shown to have difficulty with gay issues.

It would be fascinating to witness the process that writer/director Dee Rees used to cast her film. All the players are great, even the pick-up background folks like the liquor store taunter. Pernell Walker as Laura has a heart twisting scene, for example, with her estranged mother. Both she and the Mom nail it, and the Mom maybe had 2 minutes of screen time. That is a rare sight in a smaller budgeted film, especially one with a large ensemble. Everybody knew their assignment and hit their marks, which is a testament to the talent of director Rees.



Alike's Father (Charles Parnell) in 'Pariah'  
Photo credit: Focus Features

There was a bit too much stretching in the lesbian club scenes, chalk it up to wish or fantasy fulfillment. But it was interesting to go inside a community that is a bit misunderstood in general society, and have it be so real and warm. The girls lean on each other with a necessity that is inspiring, and as a result create individual success. I'm sure this is a personal story for Rees, and she gives exceptional tribute to simply coming together.

It is time to stand up to the narrow-mindedness of politicians and social pundits who make sexual orientation a wedge issue to drive fear and votes. We are all worthy of consideration, and no one should be allowed to think they are a "Pariah."

*"Pariah" continues its limited release in Chicago on January 6th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Adepero Oduye, Pernell Walker, Aasha Davis, Charles Parnell, Sahra Melesse and Kim Wayans. Written and directed by Dee Rees. Rated "R"*



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