

A&E

Living on the fringes: 'Joyland' writer-director, lead actress talk invisible characters, trans rights in Pakistan



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"Why do you want a movie to resolve something that would, in real life, be unresolved?" asked Saim Sadiq. In an interview with The Daily Californian, the writer and director of "Joyland" discussed how he uses visible and invisible characters, along with objective and subjective storytelling in LGBTQ films.

"I didn't want to absolve [any characters].... I didn't want to simplify it and give them a little bowtie conclusion," Sadiq continued. He was later joined by the film's star Alina Khan, who offered her unique perspective as a transgender actress in Lahore, Pakistan.

"Joyland" is Sadiq's feature-length debut, following a 2019 short film "Darling" that explored similar themes in the Pakistani trans community. "Joyland" premiered at both the Cannes Film Festival in 2022 and the Sundance Film Festival in 2023, where it received international acclaim. The film was initially banned in Pakistan, but it was finally approved for theatrical release (with notable cuts) in November 2022.

"'Darling' was a very objective view of the world," Sadiq explained. "And I was just having fun. But 'Joyland' is far more subjective as a film." It manages to tackle the complexity of gender and sexuality while also centering a traditional, religious family. "I just wanted people to like [the family], and to understand that they are worthy of our empathy, even if they're really just a bunch of conservative people who are hurting themselves and hurting each other."

Despite growing up in a family with no artists, Sadiq pursued film at Columbia University and began writing about strange relationships between otherwise ordinary people, a theme which drives the characters of "Joyland." "The husband is the wife and the wife is husband, because that's something that works for them. That's the kind of thing that interests me," he asserted.



The story follows Haider (Ali Junejo) and Mumtaz (Rasti Farooq), a young couple who have swapped traditional marriage roles to the chagrin of the family's patriarch, who desperately wants a male heir. In an attempt to support his family, Haider finds work at an erotic theater where he falls for the mystifying dancer Biba (Alina Khan).

Sadiq described the film's unconventional trajectory: "This movie starts off as a romance and suddenly becomes an ensemble film, but really at the heart of it is the invisibility of a lot of these characters, particularly this girl [Mumtaz]."

"And for me," he went on, "the most interesting way of showing you is by making the audience culpable in the invisibility by distracting them with this exciting new romance — the trans girl and this boy in the theater." Sadiq hopes viewers will be uncomfortable with the sudden shift. "We kind of forgot about her, didn't we? Oh, no, there's payback... And it doesn't make perfect sense, which I liked a lot. I liked that it would be a bit jarring, like how did this happen?"

Later, Khan joined the interview to add her perspective as a trans actress playing a trans character for the first time. She spoke primarily in Urdu, while Sadiq translated her words into English. "Inevitably, what really binds all of these characters is their search for joy," she said. "And they're all too afraid to say it. All except some of the women, like Biba... but you know, the family is very much just one organism."

Khan described her favorite scene in "Joyland," where Biba's backup dancers are mocking her identity backstage. When she enters the room, however, the group falls into a shameful silence as she unleashes a whirlwind of anger. Translating for Khan, Sadiq explained that "[Khan] has heard many similar things about her, but most trans girls don't have the courage to give it back like that. It was a very cathartic experience for her... She's always inspired by Biba."

After astounding critics in the film festival circuit, Khan received many offers from international filmmakers looking to cast her in various projects. She hopes to star in more domestic films one day, but to her dismay, the industry in Pakistan has effectively shunned her.

"Personally, she hopes that ["Joyland"] paints a humanistic picture of a trans person," Sadiq continued translating, "And that it opens doors for people like her to get more opportunities in different fields.... Trans people are as human, as talented, as flawed as any other person. They should be a part of our stories and our society, rather than living on the fringes."

In "Joyland," Biba is unapologetically human; her pride in her identity is unmistakably visible on stage. Yet she knows her secret relationship with Haider is wrong, making her just as tragically fallible as her oblivious lover. "The film would be impossible to make without Alina," Sadiq remarked plainly. "There are no other trans actors in the country."

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