



PREVIEW

Joyland

+ Q&A with director Saim Sadiq

In inner city Lahore, Haider, a quiet and seemingly happy house husband is pressured by his fiercely patriarchal father into finding work. He takes a job in an erotic dance theatre, where finds himself infatuated with Biba, a dazzling transgender performer. The Pakistani entry for Best International Feature Film at this year's Academy Awards is a distinctive and vibrant visual feast, encasing a tender and deeply moving queer drama of family, social expectations, love and longing.

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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 make-up 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. This impressively honest and empathetic film deserves better than to fall victim to the same draconian moral code that has entrapped its characters.

Philip Concannon, *Sight and Sound*, April 2023

Director's Statement

I have lived with the story of *Joyland* for a very long time. Today when I look back, I realise that this entirely fictional yet emotionally autobiographical story came to my young adult brain like a gift. It became a means of investigating my own place as a young man who was never man enough for a patriarchal society. As I grew up, I found the characters of *Joyland* growing with me, like the few teenage friends who stick around long after school is over. My struggles with the concepts of desire, tradition, masculinity, family, and freedom became their struggles. When I got too angry, they taught me to be empathetic. When they got too disillusioned, I cracked a joke or took them on a ride in an amusement park. Ultimately, their catharsis became mine.

Joyland is a de-romanticisation of a coming-of-age tale and a homage to all the women, men, and trans people who pay the human cost of patriarchy. It is also a celebration of the desire that creates unlikely bonds and the love that immortalises them. Ultimately, it is but a heartbroken love letter to my homeland.

Production notes

JOYLAND

Directed by: Saim Sadiq

©: Joyland LLC

Production Company: allCAPS, Khoosat Films

Executive Producers: Riz Ahmed, Ramin Bahrani, William Sten Olsson, Jen Goyne Blake, Owais Ahmed, Tiffany Boyle, Elsa Ramo, Oleg Dubson, Hari Charana Prasad, Sukanya Puvvula, Kathrin Lohmann

Produced by: Apoorva Guru Charan, Sarmad Sultan Khoosat, Lauren Mann

Producers: Kathryn M Moseley, Oliver Ridge, April Shih, Saim Sadiq, Katharina Otto-Bernstein

Co-producer: Sana Jafri

Line Producers: Rashid Bokhari, Fawad Akmal Khan

Unit Production Manager: Sheikh Muhammad Tanveer

Production Co-ordinator: Fawad Akmal Khan

Production Accountant: Bilal Malik

Post-production Supervisor: Nadeem Abbas

Post-production Consultant: Mark Sean Haynes

Script Supervisor: Tabish Habib

Casting: Sana Jafri

Written by: Saim Sadiq

Co-writer: Maggie Briggs

Script Doctor: Bane Fakhri

Script Consultant - US: Zackary Drucker

Script Consultant - PK: Mahnoor Chaudhary aka Moon

Director of Photography: Joe Saade

Visual Effects: Tangible

Editors: Jasmin Tenucci, Saim Sadiq

Production Designer: Kanwal Khoosat

Art Director: Fyque Nadeem

Set Decorators: Amir Hussaini, Umer Ali Adnan, Umar Hayat, Yaqoob

Costume Designer: Zoya Hassan

Hair & Make-up Artist: Haabil Saddiq

Special Make-up Effects: Ahsan Sethi

Main Title Design: Rob Bellon, Zahid Mayo

Original Score: Abdullah Siddiqui

Stylist & Dance Choreographer: Gulshan Majeed

Sound Design: Nathan Ruyle

Sound Recordist: Faiz Zaidi

Re-recording Mixers: Nathan Ruyle, Robert Louis Howley

Supervising Sound Editor: Nathan Ruyle

Sound Editor: Henry Maynard

Dialogue Editor: Kayle Khanmohamed

Sound Effects Editor: Michael Stevenson

Cast

Ali Junejo (*Haider*)

Rasti Farooq (*Mumtaz*)

Alina Khan (*Biba*)

Sarwat Gilani (*Nucchi*)

Salman Peerzada (*Rana*)

Sohail Sameer (*Saleem*)

Sania Saeed (*Fayyaz*)

Ramiz Law (*Qaiser*)

Honey Albela (*Ashfaq Saab*)

Priya Usman (*Shabnam Rani*)

Muzammil Khan (*Bobby*)

Honey (*Honey*)

Shahbaz Rafiq (*Nenson*)

Iftikha India (*India*)

Umar Fiaz (*Tipu*)

Pakeeza Batool (*Maeedah*)

Eeshal Ali (*Madiha*)

Shiza Moin (*Momina*)

Izna Hayat Khan (*Geeta*)

Saima Butt (*Guru*)

Nirmal Chaudhry (*Britney*)

Aqeel Nasir Khan (*Rizwan*)

Ali. Tahira (*Amna*)

Farhat Khan (*Ayesha*)

Hassaan Gardezi (*Naeem*)

Pakistan 2022

126 mins

Courtesy of Studio Soho

IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

Preview: Joyland +Q&A

Wed 8 Feb 18:00

Spike Lee in Conversation

Mon 13 Feb 18:15

Summer of Sam + Introduction by Spike Lee

Mon 13 Feb 20:35

BFI Future Film Festival

16-19 Feb

Preview: Subject + Q&A with director Camilla Hall and contributor

Margaret Ratliff

Fri 17 Feb 18:10

Preview: The Strays + Q&A

Mon 20 Feb 18:15

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