



Patron: Jim Broadbent
Registered Charity No. 1156478
Friday November 18th, 2016

Tangerine (15)

dir: Sean Baker

Starring: Kitana Kiki Rodriguez. Mya Taylor

Sponsor: Alan Dixon

Synopsis: Present day Los Angeles, Christmas Eve. Transgender sex-worker Sin-Dee's first day out of prison after a four-week sentence starts badly: her best friend Alexandra lets slip that her pimp-cum-boyfriend Chester has been seeing someone else - and this new girlfriend was born female. Determined to punish the upstart girl, Sin-Dee eventually tracks down a hooker called Dinah in the motel where she is working, and drags her out by the hair. Alexandra, meanwhile, is due to make her debut appearance as a singer at a local bar, and is desperate to whip up some interest in the show. The one person who should be there is Armenian cab-driver Razmik, a long-term customer who is secretly in love with her, but he has his own problems in the form of a demanding wife and constantly complaining mother-in-law. In the end, Sin-Dee and Dinah are the only people who witness Alexandra's big moment. When Sin-Dee finally confronts Chester, she learns that Alexandra too has slept with him. The big showdown is interrupted first by Razmik and then his appalled mother-in-law: with everyone's life on meltdown Sin-Dee and Alexandra realise that they only have each other to rely on.

This review is reproduced with the kind permission of Sight and Sound magazine

You might assume that the most remarkable thing about Sean Baker's touching and occasionally hilarious neo-screwball is the fact that it was shot on a handful of iPhones. The phones in question were only slightly modified - fitted with Kickstarter-funded lens adaptors and software that allowed Baker to lock exposure and focus to his own specifications - but the result sits very comfortably on the big screen and never feels like a home movie. In fact, this zero-budget work-around produces a dreamlike, colour-saturated effect that perfectly matches the drug-tinged hyper-reality of its protagonists' lives on the seedier streets and corners of Tinseltown. Likewise, working with minimal equipment allowed the small crew to roam around their locations without drawing attention to themselves, giving the film an edgy, guerilla feel. But just as impressive is the quality of the performances, and the sheer big-heartedness of the story, which traces one incident-packed Christmas Eve in the lives of two transgender sex workers. The immediacy of the handheld camerawork - coupled with the actors' semi-improvised dialogue, which is mostly drawled out in long strings of slang-peppered invective plunges the viewer straight in at the deep-end of their hardscrabble existence, where they eke out a precarious living while battling to maintain some dignity in the face of the ridicule and disgust of mainstream society. The result is so grippingly watchable that the type of camera being used is neither here nor there.

As played by Kitana Kiki Rodriguez and Mya Taylor - both appearing for the first time on film - best friends Sin-Dee and Alexandra are both heroic and deeply flawed. Taylor plays



Alexandra as the quieter, more cautious of the two, though her sweetness has a flinty edge that becomes more apparent as the plot thickens. In contrast, Sin-Dee, as played by Rodriguez, is a tornado of rage and emotional venting from the very first scene; having learned that her pimp and supposed fiancé Chester (talented character actor James Ransone) has been cheating on her with a cisgendered woman, she sets off to find them both and bring hellfire raining down on those who dare to disrespect her.

Interwoven with this love-rat revenge plot is another domestic drama: Armenian cab-driver Razmik (regular Baker collaborator Karren Karagulian) is a long-term john of Alexandra's and is, perhaps, in love with her. His own Christmas Eve has brought about a crisis in his marriage as he walks out of the suffocating festive meal prepared by his wife and overbearing mother-in-law (Luiza Nersisyan and Alla Tumanian respectively) and goes in search of Alexandra. For her part, Alexandra can only think about her debut as a singer in the local bar: she has invested everything into what she hopes will be a life-changing opportunity, but will Razmik get there in time to show her some support?

By bringing these two disrupted love stories together, Baker teases out unexpected subtleties in a film that mostly majors on broad farce. The popular image of trans women as trashy, tart-with-a-heart loudmouths in impossible heels is a cliché that he can't dodge and doesn't try to. Instead, he allows the context that creates and explains them to gleam around the edges: the precarious poverty that informs their everyday choices, and the emotional vulnerability that makes them a magnet for heartbreak. Razmik, likewise, begins as a stock character - this time, the hard-working but henpecked immigrant - but then becomes far more complex as the film gets under his skin. A series of vignettes supplied by his hotch-potch of taxi customers adds some welcome light relief to the narrative thread of Sin-Dee's intense melodrama, but Karagulian's sympathetic performance brings home the conflicted yearning of his romantic aspirations with the full force of tragedy.

As well as the men who are attracted to Sin-Dee and Alexandra, Baker also insists that we consider the plight of the cisgender woman, Dinah (Mickey O'Hagan), who has taken up with Chester and must now answer to Sin-Dee. Dinah is a sleazy type with a bitchy attitude, but if she were ever invited to check her privilege, she'd have trouble finding any. Her life turning

conveyor-belt tricks in a fleapit motel looks a lot worse than Sin-Dee's defiantly freelance existence, and the two women come together in strange moments of mutual understanding as the intersections of their lives are brought to the surface. This generosity towards Dinah is typical of a film that never settles for obvious polarities or entrenches its characters in two-dimensional assumptions about their moral or strategic priorities.

As Sin-Dee drags Dinah through the streets like a mediaeval scarlet woman, the audience is pulled along just as insistently. *Tangerine* takes you by the scruff of your neck into a parallel world where tattered reality is shot through with neon flashes of colour, clarity and pure emotional honesty.

Credits

Kitana Kiki Rodriguez	Sin-Dee Rella
Mya Taylor	Alexandra
Karren Karagulian	Razmit
Mickey O'Hagan	Dinah
Alla Tumanian	Ashken
James Ransone	Chester
Luiza Nersisyan	Yeva
Arsen Grigorian	Karo
Director	Sean Baker
Screenwriter	Sean Baker, Chris Bergoch
Cinematography	Rodium Cheung, Sean Baker
Editor	Sean Baker
Location sound recording	Irin Strauss
Costume	Shih-Ching Tsou

USA 2015. 87 mins

Another view

Donuts feature heavily in Sean Baker's *Tangerine*, and watching this film is the visual equivalent of eating about 500 of them in one sitting. This film is a shot of dayglo-coloured adrenaline to the vein, a vat of sugar poured into the eyes. Fast, foul-mouthed and outrageously funny, this shot-as-real-time drama takes you on a flâneur-type ramble through the wild side of LA by day and night, and you won't want to leave.

Baker and his co-cinematographer Radium Cheung filmed *Tangerine* on their iPhone 5s with lens adaptations, catching most scenes with just two cameras and dolly shots filmed from bicycles. The result is a close-up, intimate trawl through a hyper-saturated City of Angels, with the potent feeling of immediacy heightened by a thumping gunshot-heavy score and rapid-fire editing. For most of the running time, these cameras are keeping up alongside Sin-Dee Rella (Kitana Kiki Rodriguez) and her best friend Alexandra (Mya Taylor), two transgender working girls who know their way around the block and don't take any bullshit.

Sin-Dee is a scatology-heavy motormouth and drama queen extraordinaire, while the more world-weary Alexandra is clearly the one who has to pull her friend's ass out of the fire on a daily basis. You totally buy transgender non-actors Taylor and Rodriguez as both friends and three-dimensional characters, and their banter is so naturalistic and funny that if the film had just been 90 minutes of them bitching in a car park it would've been gold. They aren't the only sex workers we will meet during the events of the film; an entire downtown sex worker culture - trans and cis-gender - is shown to us over the course of one day, one that operates to its own rhythms and contains its own networks of knowledge, support and slang.

But this is a film about movement, and standing around is not something Sin-Dee intends to do much of, not least given Alexandra reveals to her in the first five minutes that her beau, local pimp Chester, has been cheating on her with a 'white fish' (a Caucasian female-born woman) while she was in prison. Having processed that shocking information over a donut, Sin-Dee declares she is going to find Chester's new girl, beat her up and haul her across town to confront Chester. It turns out she is not joking, and in short order Sin-Dee pinballs from donut

shops to karaoke bars, bus stops to brothels, until things collide in Chester's 'place of business' in a scene that plays like some warped version of a 1940s screwball comedy of manners.

Alexandra, meanwhile, tries to get through a day's work and prep for her vocal performance at a local bar, despite knowing she will probably get caught up in Sin-Dee's drama.

With all the meth-smoking, bitch-slapping, door-kicking and trash-talking going on, it is easy to think that *Tangerine* has been set up to be enjoyed as a high-energy comedic dive into the world of lowlifes. But through little moments like Sin-Dee sharing her drug stash with the very prostitute she just beat up and dragged around, or Alexandra trading her wig in a dingy laundromat with her downcast friend, the film gradually shifts towards being a tender and bittersweet salute to female friendship and solidarity on the mean streets. Given the film already has refreshingly busted casting taboos alongside being a hugely funny experience, this extra layer of emotional complexity is just the icing on a quite beautiful donut.

Owen van Spall: Eye for Film

Our next screening - November 25th, 7.30pm Attila Marcel (France 2013. Cert 12)

Our final screening of 2016 takes us to France, for a story that will put a smile on anyone's face. Directed by Sylvain Chomet, the film invites us into the strange world of Attila Marcel. Orphaned - and mute - since birth, he lives with his 2 eccentric dance-teacher aunts, whom - as a talented pianist - he accompanies. An encounter with a neighbour, Mme Proust - a 'herbalist' with an interesting product line - provides the catalyst for change and begins to unlock memories buried deep in Attila's subconscious - with surprising but always entertaining consequences.

Lovely production values, some good gags and a wealth of references to the films of Jacques Demy and Jacques Tati (both of whom have influenced Chomet) make Attila Marcel a delightful choice to round off the year.