

Sean Baker's *Anora*: Half a film

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Anora is a film written and directed by Sean Baker (*Tangerine*, *The Florida Project*). It concerns a young erotic dancer and escort from Brooklyn who meets and marries the even younger son of a Russian oligarch. His family and their lackeys subsequently intervene in an effort to break up the relationship. The film depicts the world of sex workers convincingly, before evolving into a type of dark “screwball comedy.”

Baker (born in New Jersey in 1971) has received various accolades and honors for his film, including six Academy Award nominations (best picture, best director, best actress, best supporting actor, best original screenplay and best film editing).

Anora Mikheeva (Mikey Madison)—or as she prefers to be called, Ani—is a 23-year-old stripper who lives in Brighton Beach, a Brooklyn neighborhood with a significant Russian-American population. Ani is thoroughly Americanized and speaks Russian poorly.

At the Manhattan club where she toils providing lap dances and such, Ani encounters Ivan “Vanya” Zakharov (Mark Eydelshteyn), the son of a Russian billionaire, Nikolai Zakharov. Ivan, 21, is theoretically in the US to study, but instead squanders abundant amounts of money enjoying himself. Although immature and spoiled, he is pleasant enough and Ani has no difficulty spending time with him. Soon, he offers her \$15,000 for a week of her company. In the course of those seven days, Ivan, Ani and his entourage fly off on a private jet to Las Vegas for more amusement. While there, Ivan asks Ani to marry him, so he can obtain a Green Card and remain in the US. They proceed to take that fateful step at one of the local wedding chapels.

Word of this filters through to the Zakharov family in Russia, who are outraged, and their hired hands in Brooklyn, who were supposed to have kept a watchful eye on Ivan. Toros (Karren Karagulian) and Garnick (Vache Tovmasyan), two Armenian handlers, and Igor (Yuri Borisov), their Russian sidekick, show up at the Zakharov mansion in Mill Basin, where Ani and Ivan have been passing their time. Toros insists the marriage to a “prostitute” is a fraud that must be annulled, much to Ani’s bitter protests. She gets into a violent altercation with Garnick and Igor, while her cowardly “brat” of a husband takes off for parts unknown.

A healthy portion of *Anora* is then taken up by the efforts of Ani and the other three to track Ivan down. They search through various restaurants and clubs in Brooklyn, before finally locating him in Manhattan at the club where he met Ani to begin with. He is in the arms of her most bitter rival.

Eventually, the Zakharov parents arrive and rudely hustle their son and his “bride” off to Nevada for an annulment. Threatened and coerced into agreeing to the legal action, Ani is offered a small cash settlement and the possibility of returning to her old life.

Baker is a conscientious filmmaker and takes care to be accurate about the conditions of his characters and their lives. In interviews, he emphasizes the research he and his performers carried out and their degree of preparation:

I love shooting on location because it takes the audience into a place that they can tell is real. Even the layman audiences will

know that isn’t an actor. Mikey’s research really informed her improv because she learned so much from just spending so much time at that club getting to know the dancers. Before she meets Ivan at the club, I wanted to set up the mechanics of Ani’s world, to show the labour of their work, and to shoot a night in her life in a docu-mode.

Likewise,

For the Brighton Beach sequences, we brought the actors into restaurants, into billiard halls in which they interacted with the community.

Baker has explained that he wanted to create “a truly empathetic approach to sex work.” One of his intentions was to intercut Ani’s work “with other people’s work and showing that there are more similarities than differences with sex work and other forms of labour, which all can all sometimes feel menial.” (dazeddigital.com)

Accuracy, empathy, realism. All that is fine as far as it goes.

One commentator, at NPR, refers to Baker having been “carving out an auteurist’s legacy for years now, crafting quietly political stories by deliberately avoiding sensationalizing people and communities living on the margins.” The article goes on to praise “Baker’s disarmingly lighthearted and non-judgmental perspective.”

Baker’s compassion for the marginalized and his deliberate, almost self-conscious refusal to moralize speak well for him. But the latter is a negative quality, merely indicating what he *rejects* doing. In that regard, *Anora* goes a certain distance and no farther.

First of all, there is the matter of the human beings with whom one is obliged to spend nearly two hours. Ivan, his family and entourage are largely deplorable (in Ivan’s and his parents’ case) or negligible (the rest of them). This is the screenplay’s description of how Ivan and his pals Tom (Anton Bitter), Aleks (Vlad Mamai), Dasha (Maria Tichinskaya) and Crystal (Ivy Wolk) occupy themselves, first in Brooklyn and then Las Vegas:

Mid-week, Tom, Aleks, Dasha and Crystal are hanging in the house. Lines of powder spin from person to person on the Lazy Susan. ... Ani, Ivan, Tom, Aleks, Dasha and Crystal, take a private flight to Las Vegas. Ivan and Ani are sipping champagne. Ivan chats away in Russian about a cool DJ set he saw the other night. ...

Ivan loses 200K [\$200,000] gambling. They laugh about it. ... Dancing and drinking bottled water and taking bumps of coke and K [ketamine]. ... Ivan and Ani are getting hangover IV’s. A nurse sits nearby. Ani is loving every minute of it. ... Ivan and Ani have a splash fight while holding their fancy cocktails. ... A hip and fun

crowd gather at the Las Vegas hot spot. ... The crew enjoy a huge and elaborate sushi platter and drink bottles of sake.

Why would this be intriguing for any length of time? The tawdry, tasteless excursion in Las Vegas seems mostly a punishment, for characters and audience members alike.

The Zakharovs, unsurprisingly, are portrayed as nasty, arrogant horrors. When Ani momentarily refuses to board the plane for Nevada, threatening to hold out for a divorce that will enable her to “walk away with half,” Ivan’s mother, Galina (Darya Ekamasova), more or less whispers in her ear:

Do that and you lose everything. Any money you may have, although I doubt you have any, will be gone. You have a house? A car? All gone. (she leans in) Your life and the lives of your family and friends will be destroyed. If you doubt I can do that, please go ahead, see what happens.

As for Toros and Garnick, Baker would like us, it seems, to view them as semi-comical, ineffectual characters, doing their best in a bad situation. They are not so much villainous as in over their heads. But, frankly, in the final analysis, they are doing filthy work for filthy people.

Ani too, although she becomes more sympathetic in the film’s final moments, along with the beleaguered Igor, does little for most of the film to win us over. Narcissistic, money-hungry, abrasive, she may be precisely drawn, but she is not for the most part terribly moving.

Asked about Ivan, Ani tells her sister,

How well do I know him? ... Did you hear what I said? Try to keep up. His dad is loaded... Nikolai Zakharov. F—ing Google him. He’s worth 22... billion. BILLLLLLIIOOOONNNN.

It does matter, in the end, what people do and what they are. Art is not simply a technical exercise, a matter of “getting things right.”

Part of Ani and Ivan’s week together is described like this in the script:

The next section shows us the crazy fun week that Ani has with Ivan. Ani is physically close to Ivan at all times, giving him the “girlfriend experience.” Ani plays video games with Ivan and his friends. They have a pile of pizza boxes and bags of candy, etc. They party at VIP tables at NYC’s best clubs. (We show 7 club interiors and 4 exteriors).

Again, to capture is not necessarily to captivate. Uninteresting goings-on, including uninteresting sex ...

INT. MANSION - MASTER BEDROOM – NIGHT: Ani and Ivan have sex in the master bedroom.

INT. MANSION - SAUNA – DAY: Ani and Ivan have sex in the sauna.

INT. MANSION - FATHER’S OFFICE – DAY: Ani and Ivan have sex on the rug of the upstairs office.

INT. MANSION – DAY: Ani and Ivan have sex in the shower.

To spend so much time in the company of backward or narrow people, often shouting insults at one another, is not that enjoyable or illuminating. We know them all fairly rapidly. The filmmakers do not stand at a sufficient distance from their creations to hold them up to the light, making possible serious criticism of their environment, instead they are largely pushed in our faces.

That Baker doesn’t wag his finger and lecture about buying and selling sex can hardly be the end of the story. “Sex work” is not simply like any other labor (even if Ani tells her boss at the club, “When I’m getting health insurance, worker’s comp and a f—ing 401k, you can tell me when I work and not work”). There are degrading and humiliating aspects. And, as Engels once pointed out, prostitution

demoralizes men far more than women. Among women, prostitution degrades only the unfortunate ones who become its victims, and even these by no means to the extent commonly believed. But it degrades the character of the whole male world.

It is not a matter of “criticizing” the prostitute, but of opposing a society based on class exploitation and oppression, of the power of some to lord it over others, as well as the depths of alienation and loneliness that are so pervasive and destructive, that make prostitution inevitable. But Baker’s watchword, as it were, is no indictment, no condemnation. When it comes to Ani, that’s fine. When it comes to the social order, that turns into artistic and social negligence. At some point, cool matter of factness runs the risk of becoming a means of accommodating oneself to what exists. Along these lines, one reviewer approvingly asserts that the film explodes “the fantasy that we can ever escape the chains of capitalism and remove ourselves from the cycle of infinite transactions that fuel the myth we call the American Dream.” In fact, it had better not be a fantasy!

And this is not even to raise even more vexing questions, which the film entirely ignores and which the critics would never pose themselves: Why was there Soviet emigration to Brooklyn? What happened, after all, to the USSR? One might add that the Russian oligarch is something of an easy target, almost a cliché by now.

All in all, what does Baker stand for? What does he think about the world he colorfully but only partially creates? He plays his cards too close to the vest. We said, in praising *The Florida Project* (a better film about more sympathetic human beings):

Wherever it comes from, Baker has caught on to the fact—in other words, he has the intuition—that even very oppressed people are not simply beaten down, submissive and silent.

But we continued:

Of course, the advantage given Baker by that intuition is not open-ended. Ultimately, the artist has to develop a more systematic, thought-out criticism of the existing set-up or that initial intuition will stop providing the necessary emotional and intellectual fuel.

The writer-director remains at a promising but unsatisfying juncture.



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