

**GAUTAMAN BHASKARAN**

**W**e all think that hardly any woman takes to the streets on her own sweet will. She is pushed into it either by selfish folks who are greedy for easy money or by the grinding poverty that the woman herself may be facing. In Sean Baker's Cannes Palme d'Or winner, *Anora*, it is never clear why the young woman, Anora, or Ani (played with charming ease by Mikey Madison), as she prefers to be called, takes to exotic pole dancing in a New York strip joint.

After perhaps many months, Ani meets a zillionaire Russian oligarch, Ivan (Mark Eidelstein), a spoilt 21-year-old brat, whose rich Russian parents give him so much money that he does not know what to do with it. So, he pops into the joint and showers currency notes on Ani. Both are kids; she is just 23, and when she sees money floating around her, she feels that freedom from her slavery is around the corner. The two run away to Las Vegas and get married on impulse. Of course, they do not regret it, but Ivan's parents are livid and send Russian hoodlums to annul the marriage. And then begins a romp through the streets of New York, with the men chasing the young couple. They are clumsy and quite inefficient; they are no match for the two kids.

Baker, who is also the writer, dexterously weaves his work away from the usually seedy atmosphere such subjects evoke. On the contrary, he shows us a kind of Pretty Woman tale in which Ani is not an avaricious girl like others in her profession. She is a romantic, and although she tries initially to empty Ivan's pockets, she genuinely begins to care for him as the movie rolls on. In fact, it is Ivan who is a cad, careless about the love she showers on him.

Madison is brilliant as a woman who gets out of a commercial relationship with Ivan, only to fall headlong in love with him. Ivan comes from an indifferent home where his parents are hardly close to him. But when they find him hitched to Ani, they wake up, nervous that they are going to lose their only son to a woman from the "gutters".

What is a real takeaway from the film is the superb manner in which Baker has mounted it. Despite a very serious subject, he has made it not only lighthearted but terrifically comical. The Russian hoodlums are funny to the core, and they turn out to be such bumbling asses that I could not control my laughter.

Baker has this fascination for sex work. Even in his earlier outings—*Tangerine* and *Red Rocket*—his protagonists came from the lowest rungs of social order. But *Anora* is by far his best.

I had been rooting for Emilia Perez, hoping that she would win the Palme d'Or. About a man who transforms himself into a woman, it was a fascinating picture of hope and disappointment, followed by hope and ultimately joy. But many others at Cannes would have wished that Mohammad Rasoulof's *The Seed of the Sacred Fig* would walk away with the top honours. The fact that he ran away from a prison sentence in Iran added to the gravity of the movie, which got a Special Award. It deserved more.

But Anora, a bundle of charm, joy and even sadness, pipped the rest to the post, and this included The Seed and Perez. Madison's heartfelt performance as Ani perhaps floored the Greta Gerwig (of *Barbie* fame) jury.

The writer is a senior film critic who has been covering the Cannes Film Festival for 30 years

