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Filmmaker Dee Rees tells a Brooklyn tale of love and acceptance in 'Pariah'

MICHAEL GILTZ
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Dee Rees' debut film may be called "Pariah," but the New York-set, coming-out drama has made the 33-year-old writer-director feel like part of the filmmaking world.

An NYU grad and former intern for Spike Lee (he serves as an exec producer on "Pariah"),

Rees moved to New York from her hometown of Nashville several years ago to pursue her dream after wandering the corporate wilderness.

"After three years and three cubicles, I finally thought to myself, 'Maybe it's not the job — maybe it's me, and I need to pursue the thing I love,'" Rees says.

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After working for Lee on two 2006 projects — the Denzel Washington-led "Inside Man" and the HBO documentary on New orleans, "When The Levees Broke" — Reese wrote the screenplay for "Pariah."

Set in her former neighborhood of Fort Greene, Brooklyn, the movie, opening Wednesday, follows Alike (Adepero Oduye), a teenager navigating her life with determination.

A smart student, Alike tentatively tests the lesbian nightlife in New York with her best friend — both are out to each other, if not to their family and friends — while dealing with her uptight mother (Kim Wayans), reaching out to her loving but unhappy father (Charles Parnell) and exploring the possibility of romance with a pretty fellow student (Aasha Davis of "Friday Night Lights").

Rees says she wrote the film — which recently won her Breakthrough Director at the 2011 Gotham Independent Film Awards

— as part of her own coming-out process. She turned a section of it into a short film, then secured the backing for an 18-day shoot last year.

The movie, she notes, also allowed her to bridge a gap within her family: Her parents attended a red carpet screening of the film in New York with much of the cast, and Lee, in attendance.



Director Dee Rees on the set of her movie Pariah >

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"It was really a 180-degree turn for [my parents]," says Rees. "It was a big night and a big moment. It just really taught me that people can change.

"When I first came out, it wasn't easy, and my parents and I weren't on the same page. For them to say they're proud of me and that they love me was a big deal.

"I always knew this film could change other parents' minds, but I didn't know it could do the same with my own parents."

While filming in Brooklyn, Rees says she also discovered she loves working with actors and helping them immerse themselves in their roles.

"It was important to me to shoot the movie there, because I really wanted to show a cross-section of a community. And Brooklyn is a great place, where there is truly diversity.

"It's a place that creates a sense of home, yet still gives you the space and anonymity to be who you need to be, or find yourself."

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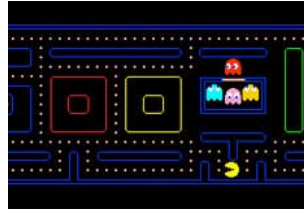
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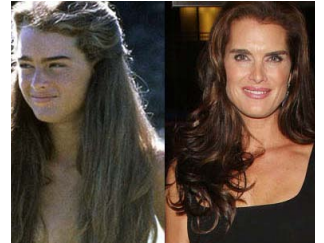


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