

# TREASURES FROM THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

AN ONGOING SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED IN 35MM BY THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 28

7 P.M. • HUMANITIES

QUADRANGLE

ALICE CINEMA

# PARIAH

PRESENTED WITH SUPPORT FROM  
PAUL L. JOSKOW '70 M.PHIL., '72 PH.D.



A Brooklyn teenager comes out and comes of age in *PARIAH*, the debut feature film from writer/director Dee Rees. It follows the story of Alike (ah-LEE-kay, or “Lee” to friends), a young poet struggling with her metamorphosis from an eager-to-please friend and daughter who feels her identity never matches the world’s expectations, into a more confident and independent young woman determined to forge her own path and find her own forms of self-expression. (As a friend assures her, “You’re a grown ass woman, bruh!”)

Rees describes the film as semi-autobiographical, with an emphasis on *semi*. Raised in suburban Nashville, she began her career as a marketing executive and came out at 27, a full decade after Alike. It was after enrolling at NYU’s graduate film program that she developed the idea for *PARIAH*. “One of the things I was amazed by in coming to New York,” she remarked, “was seeing these out teenage girls who not only knew [their sexuality] at that young age, but weren’t afraid to be that. In some ways it’s transposing my experience: if I’d come out when I was 17, what would that have been like?” *PARIAH* became the only film by and about a Black lesbian to receive wide release since Cheryl Dunye’s *THE WATERMELON WOMAN* in 1996, 15 years earlier. “Growing up, I rarely saw my image reflected on screen. *THE COLOR PURPLE* and *WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE* are the few films I was allowed to watch when I was younger that touched on sexuality. I made *PARIAH* to portray images on screen that we hadn’t seen before, and to bring to light the experiences of gay youth of color because those stories hadn’t been fully told.” Rees has since made films such as *BESSIE* (which also foregrounds a Black woman’s sexual identity) and *MUDBOUND* (starring Rob Morgan, who plays the dad’s homophobic friend in *PARIAH*), and has directed episodes of television series including *EMPIRE* and *WHEN WE RISE*.



As a film student, Rees worked closely with Spike Lee—who would eventually serve as an executive producer for *PARIAH*—and she honed her script while interning on Lee’s *INSIDE MAN* and *WHEN THE LEVEES BROKE*. In 2007, she shot a 30-minute version of *PARIAH* as her thesis film, which also starred Adepero Oduye (*12 YEARS A SLAVE*, *THE BIG SHORT*, *WIDOWS*) as Alike. The script evolved while Rees was a Fellow at Sundance Institute’s 2007 Screenwriters Lab and 2008 Directors Lab, and the feature film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2011, where it received the Excellence in Cinematography Award.

Rees worked with cinematographer Bradford Young (*SELMA*, *WHEN THEY SEE US*, Oscar-nominated for *ARRIVAL*) to reveal *PARIAH*’s characters through the film’s camera language. Early in the film, Alike tends to be seen in profile, concealing part of herself, while her bolder friend Laura (Pernell Walker) is seen in frontal, low angle shots. Rees and Young chose to use a very shallow depth of field, which reflects Alike’s sense of isolation (notice how few shots show Alike and another character in focus at the same time), while also transforming her physical environment into an expression of how she experiences it: a Brooklyn streetscape is blurred into a pastel fantasia while she’s enjoying a night out with Laura, while more mundane settings (school, home) are reduced to murky blandness she’s eager to escape. Color is essential to Alike’s evolution, Dee notes. “She’s a chameleon, she’s hiding, so in terms of lighting, she’s constantly being painted by the lights around her, so in the club she’s purple, on the bus she’s green, at home she’s pink, and then as she comes into herself we see her more and more in white light.”

Critical response to *PARIAH* was positive, with A.O. Scott noting, “Rees’s film is sensitive but not sentimental, attuned to sexual and racial politics without succumbing to didacticism or piety.” Adepero Oduye received particular praise for a performance called “luminous” by Alison Willmore and “incandescent” by Stephen Holden. Rees and producer Nekesia Cooper won the Independent Spirit John Cassavetes Award for *PARIAH*, with Oduye receiving an Independent Spirit nomination for Best Female Lead.

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY **DEE REES**  
CINEMATOGRAPHY BY **BRADFORD YOUNG**  
PRODUCED BY **SUNDIAL PICTURES** AND  
**FOCUS FEATURES**  
(2011) 86 MINS.  
STARRING **ADEPERO ODUYE, PERNELL WALKER, AASHA DAVIS, KIM WAYANS, CHARLES PARNELL, SAHRA MELLESE, AND SHAMIKA COTTON**

**DID YOU KNOW:** WITHOUT MONEY FOR A LOCATION SCOUT, THE PRODUCTION COVERED THE MORTGAGE FOR TWO MONTHS ON A BROOKLYN BROWNSTONE THE OWNER WAS HAVING A HARD TIME SELLING, AND MOST OF THE DOMESTIC INTERIORS WERE SHOT IN THAT BUILDING. ONE FLOOR WAS ALIKE’S FAMILY’S APARTMENT, ONE FLOOR WAS LAURA’S, AND ONE FLOOR WAS BINA’S.

**NEXT UP:** FOR THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE PREMIERE OF THE PLAY AT NEW HAVEN’S SHUBERT THEATER IN NOVEMBER, 1947, JOIN US FOR A SCREENING OF A BRAND-NEW 35MM PRINT OF ELIA KAZAN’S **A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE**, STARRING MARLON BRANDO, VIVIEN LEIGH, KIM HUNTER, AND KARL MALDEN. **THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 3 AT 7 PM.**