

TIFF 2012 Film Review: Peddlers

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By Preeti Thandi.



Vasan Bala's *Peddlers* snakes through the streets, lanes and alleyways of Mumbai. The film progresses slowly yet leaves you on the edge. As the lives of the three main characters entangle, the film tries to bind the audience but leaves you wondering as to what's going to happen next. *Peddlers* is a **dark film** that draws out the flaws of its characters – Mac (Siddharth Menon) the young orphaned drug dealer, Ranjit D'Souza (Gulshan Devaiah) the narcotics officer, who seems adept at his job but is unable to perform sexually. Introduced to this mix is Bilkis Bano (Kriti Malhotra), a Bangladeshi immigrant who is also involved in the **drug trade** but her part is not quite clear as the drama unfolds.

Fresh off the screen at Cannes, Bala's film actually became a reality due to funding through facebook. Bala worked as an Associate Director on Michael Winterbottom's *Trishna* starring Freida Pinto, which premiered at **Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) 2011** and considers Anurag Kashyap as his guru. The influence of both Kashyap and Winterbottom is apparent in this debut feature. *Peddlers* screens as part of TIFF's City to City Programming and spotlight on Mumbai this year.

Interestingly, Bala doesn't focus on the **hustle and bustle** of Mumbai rather depicts it in a murky way as the characters go about their tribulations. Drugs, dingy streets and nightclubs are visual cues to bring out the nasty streak of its characters.

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Ranjit, the narcotics officer depicts himself as a player and effortlessly charms women. The seemingly harmless exchanges between Ranjit and his neighbour's pretty wife Kuljeet (Nimrat Kaur) appear to be friendly banter until it becomes apparent that his eyes are set on the woman next door. It begins with text messaging and then **transforms** into a **secretly brewing affair** but shockingly all goes awry. Gulshan Devaiah is tempting in his

portrayal of the ruthless officer with a sadistic streak due to his own set of deficiencies. The scenes with Nimrat Kaur and the ensuing chemistry have been really well done by Bala. But the attraction for the charmer Ranjit gets lost, as he turns beastly.

The lives of Mac and Bilkis become **intertwined** as Mac develops a soft corner towards her and discovers that she is terminally ill. They are both involved in the drug trade, Mac as a peddler and Bilkis, a former chemistry teacher who finds work in a Meth lab. Yet both these characters have a certain degree of **innocence** and vulnerability.

Kriti Malhotra who was also seen in Kiran Rao's *Dhobi Ghat* at TIFF 2010 is somehow not as **endearing**. This maybe due to the fact that her character in *Peddlers* is meant to be distant and doesn't offer her the **scope** she had in Rao's film. Siddharth Menon is true to the framework of his role. Due to the complexity of the characters it's hard to connect with any of them but that's perhaps how Bala designed it to be.

The camera work and soundtrack both enhance the **smoky ambience** the film creates. *Peddlers* is sure to travel to more festivals beyond TIFF.