



FILM

**TIFF 2014 Film Review: Learning to Drive**

Posted on September 11, 2014

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*Isabel Coixet's Learning to Drive is a comedy with touches of drama. The feel good film renders some life lessons through the premise of driving.*



Starring Ben Kingsley and Patricia Clarkson in the lead, the film is based on Katha Pollitt's autobiographical essay which appeared in the New Yorker in 2002. At its core the film is about a friendship that forms between two individuals who come from different cultures and explores what happens when their lives intersect.

The life of Manhattan book editor **Wendy Shields (Patricia Clarkson)** takes a U turn when her husband of 21 years walks away from their marriage. Shattered by this turn of events Wendy struggles to get on with her life and decides to take up driving. **Darwan Singh (Ben Kingsley)**, a Sikh driving instructor and part-time cab driver comes to the rescue. Initially reluctant to learn or drive, Wendy begins her lessons with Darwan who urges her on saying, simple yet meaningful things like "pay attention" and "I will help you." As the driving lessons continue an unlikely bond develops between the two. The film helps both the characters steer their lives in a positive direction.

A kind critic and a wise yet firm instructor, Darwan helps Wendy navigate the road and also her life. Yet there are challenges he faces both in life and marriage. The film takes a peek into his life showing glimpses of Sikh culture as he goes about cooking curries and visiting the Sikh Gurudwara (temple). Darwan points out to Wendy that when behind the wheel it doesn't matter what's going on in your life right now, it's your life right now that matters.

Patricia Clarkson excels in her portrayal of the perplexed woman going through a marital crisis. Kingsley is well poised as a Sikh gentleman and keeps up the faith for Wendy. The film also features Sarita Choudhury known for her roles in Mira Nair's Mississippi Masala and Kama Sutra: A tale of love. Choudhury plays Kingsley's wife Jasleen in the film who doesn't know how to speak English well. Given the fact, it is interesting to note that Punjabi is not used in the film.

*Learning to Drive* is funny and smartly scripted by Sarah Kernochan. However the film leans towards cultural stereotypes like the immigrant taxi driver, refugees seeking political asylum, arranged marriages, racism, a Sikh man being called terrorist etc.

Nevertheless Isabel's Coixet's film is light and entertaining. It is sure to attract Clarkson and Kingsley fans and of course the North American Sikh community.