



ReelWorld Film Festival: No Look Pass

On the basketball court, being 6-foot-4 is incredible. In the world of dating, however, it's more complicated

By Daisy Maclean

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A first generation Burmese immigrant from Chinatown, Los Angeles, Emily "Etay" Tay is in her last year at Harvard University, where she attended under a basketball scholarship and maintained a double life away from the traditions and expectations of her family. Struggling to find her own American dream, Emily's story unfolds as she graduates and endeavors to play professional basketball in Europe while coming out as a lesbian in the most public format available, a documentary called No Look Pass.

No Look Pass was one of the feature documentaries presented as part of this year's ReelWorld Film Festival. A five day annual event founded in 2001 by actress Tonya Lee Williams, the festival was as a direct response to the lack of positive diverse stories on screen and sustainable opportunities for emerging talent of colour trying to break into the Canadian entertainment industry. Dedicated to promoting and fostering racially and culturally diverse artists who are emerging within the film industry, the festival offers a diverse program of features, documentaries, animations, shorts, and music videos that all work toward changing the face of Canadian cinema.

"Despite building a solid reputation for over a decade, it [the festival] is still somewhat underground. But it's also a starting point and a developing ground for new stories and new filmmakers, who may be getting their first opportunity for exposure. That certainly was the case for us as they provided an outlet for us to facilitate our first presentation, last year with Not Just A Game," explains Duane Watson of All Balls Don't Bounce, a sports and entertainment content media collective that represents character driven stories rooted in sports like No Look Pass and Mighty Jerome.

He continues, "ReelWord is unique as it is one of the few festivals that truly highlights films and filmmakers from diverse cultural backgrounds. I don't feel there is a film festival that represents a richer mix."

No Look Pass is at the same time both a sports documentary and a very personal glimpse at one girl's coming-of-age story. As the star player on the Harvard basketball team, Emily is surprisingly humble, possibly because of the pressure of being from a working-class background in a school for the privileged, her family having given everything to get her those opportunities. But also because being the only girl of colour on the team, in addition to being gay, may have had an isolating effect even though she is accepted and admired by her friends and teammates. Playing professionally in Germany becomes a double-edged sword. It allows her to continue her secret life, away from her mother's wish for her to marry a man of her choosing, but the clock is ticking. When Emily finds the love of her life in a soldier who risks everything by violating 'Don't Ask Don't Tell' to appear with Emily in the film, it's time for Emily to stand for herself.

"I knew that I wanted to focus on basketball as the transformational element in a young woman's life, the primary vehicle for self-discovery between her senior year of college and first year playing professionally. That said, there were many serendipitous things that happened that I could not have predicted, which made No Look Pass a richer story. For example, the fact that Emily and Katie got on a professional team together and that Emily met Angela, the love her life, a few months after moving to Germany. It felt like the documentary gods were smiling down at us. We rode the wave and kept following the action," responds Melissa Johnson, director of the film.

She continues, "one of the main reasons Emily signed onto the film was because, in her own words, she thought it would be 'good for her' — a means of articulating her thoughts and feelings as well as a way to force herself to go public with being gay. As a filmmaker, I had to empower her to make these decision but not pressure her to do anything she wasn't certain that she was prepared for. She was fearless in her willingness to share incredibly intimate details about her life. Emily isn't interested in fame, she knew this film would help her grow and genuinely wants it to help other young people who are dealing with similar struggles."

Emily's vulnerability and strength make her a captivating subject to follow.