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A Basketball Film About So Much More

By Ken Plutnicki

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Melissa Johnson's new documentary, "No Look Pass," is alternately a basketball buddy film; a "Love Story" for modern times; and, as Ms. Magazine describes it, a feminist "Hoosiers." But while the film is ultimately more American dream than "Hoop Dreams," it does not fit neatly into any category.

Nor does Emily Tay (Etay to her friends), the subject of the documentary. And that is what makes the film so interesting. Tay is a gay Harvard basketball player from Chinatown in Los Angeles. She has little self-confidence but mad ball- handling skills — the film could easily have been called "Crossover Dribble."

Courtesy of Melissa Johnson: Emily Tay, left, and filmmaker Melissa Johnson.

We learn that Tay was born to Burmese immigrants who came to America with $65 in their pockets. They would not only like to see their daughter marry a Burmese man but they also expect to have a role in choosing which one. Tay, meanwhile, tries hard to find her own place in the world, and tells the camera what she can't always tell her parents. She dates a cheerleader in college, then falls in love with an American servicewoman living under Don't Ask, Don't Tell in Germany while Tay and her close friend and teammate Katie Rollins are there playing pro ball.

Rollins, a 6-foot-3 diva from Augusta, Me., keeps things real, and Tay, a 5-8 guard, can laugh when she's not crying, at one point telling her best friend: "I'm allowed to" make gay and Asian jokes, "I'm gay and Asian."

"No Look Pass" will have its New York premiere on Saturday, the first of three screenings in the next five days at the DOC NYC film festival at the IFC Center, 323 Avenue of the Americas, at Third Street, in Greenwich Village. The film will show at 2:15 p.m. Saturday, 10:15 p.m. Monday and 4:30 p.m. Wednesday. "No Look Pass" won the special programming award for freedom at Outfest over the summer and will show at the International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam later this month.

Johnson, who wrote, produced and directed, is a former Harvard basketball player herself, from the class of 2001. She met Tay in 2008 while filming the short documentary "Act as If," about the role of positive thinking in Kathy Delaney-Smith's success as the women's basketball coach at Harvard. She wrote about Delaney-Smith for The Times in 2009.

After her first interview with Tay, Johnson knew she wanted to make the film. "It was late, it was a Sunday, we set up in the locker room, the gym was dark, everyone was gone," she said. "When I walked back into that gym it hit me like a thunderbolt. I just had a flash where I could see 'No Look Pass.'

"I knew it would be the story of her final year at Harvard, her first year out, and the skeleton of the story would be basketball but so much deeper, into her personal life, using basketball as a through line."

The climax of the film, then, is probably not the big game, although there are a few of those. More likely it is when Tay fully confronts who she is and in a tearful speech describes how unfair it is to have to choose between being the perfect daughter and perhaps growing old and having never felt love.

"She's crying but she's so powerful in it," Johnson said. "She gives this incredible speech.

"We shot that moment in my third and final trip to Germany, when we were almost ready to wrap shooting. We were ready to roll and I lobbed this beach ball of a question to Emily, like, How are you doing? How's it going with your folks? She just burst into tears. She had what felt to me like a meltdown on camera. Any documentarian is going to say, Keep the camera rolling. But these people are really important to me as my friends. And being a decent human being is paramount, or should be. And I said cut, we're going to stop right there and take a break to make sure you're O.K. because this is not feeling very good to me.

"She said: 'No, Melissa, I want you to keep rolling. I got this. I need to say this.'"