



Director Sean Baker in May celebrates “Anora” winning the Palme d’Or, the top prize at the Cannes Film Festival. Pascal Le Segretain, Getty Images

MOVIES

With ‘Anora,’ indie director from Jersey may have a Hollywood ending

Sean Baker has already won at Cannes with a sex worker ‘love story,’ and an Oscar may follow.

Amy Kuperinsky For The Star-Ledger

In the sparkling new film “Anora,” an exhilarating high meets a sobering reality. Anora — “Ani” — is a young Brooklyn sex worker whose quickie Vegas marriage to the son of a Russian oligarch fuels a singular thrill. As the couple dashes to the Little White Chapel, the night is music and the future seems wide open.

When his parents find out, Ani from Brighton Beach is left to deal with the consequences. (Don’t worry about spoilers — that’s just the setup.)

But for director Sean Baker, there has been no morning after, no cold light of day. “Anora” has just been one thrill after another.

In May, the filmmaker from New Jersey was ecstatic over the work’s big win at the Cannes Film Festival in France, where it received the Palme d’Or, the top prize.

Now, “Anora,” playing in Jersey theaters, is at the forefront of the Oscar conversation. The brilliant lead performance from star Mikey Madison has her on just about everyone’s best actress list, and Baker is being eyed for best picture, director and screenplay.

“It really feels great because I honestly never expected anything after,” he tells NJ Advance Media.

“I always thought ‘Oh, OK, so we won the Palme d’Or. I can now just sleep nicely



The dazzling “Anora” stars Mikey Madison, right, as a young Brooklyn sex worker who marries the son of a Russian oligarch (Mark Eydelshteyn). Neon

at night,” Baker says, laughing.

“I never really thought about this, and I didn’t think forward to the release and the possible campaign. And so it’s nice that it’s playing out this way, and especially for my cast and crew. Mikey is getting a lot of attention, and that’s really all I care about. I don’t care about my own stuff, quite honestly. I care about my cast and crew getting the recognition they deserve. ... So if Mikey is on her way to possibly being recognized by the Academy, hey, that would be incredible, incredible.”

It’s the dream reception for any film.

For Baker, a gem of independent film for more than 20 years — known for stand-out films like “The Florida Project” (2017), “Tangerine” (2015) and “Red Rocket” (2021) — it’s a new echelon of awards season love.

It’s true that his films have not gone unrecognized. Willem Dafoe was nominated for an Oscar for his performance in “The Florida Project,” while “Red Rocket” was nominated for the Palme d’Or and picked up an Independent Spirit Award for Simon Rex’s lead performance.

Baker’s movie “Starlet” (2012), led by

Dree Hemingway, won the Independent Spirit Robert Altman Award. “Tangerine,” famously filmed on three iPhones, won an audience award at the Gotham Awards, with transgender actor Mya Taylor making history with her award-winning performance (best supporting female, Independent Spirit Awards; breakthrough actor, Gotham Awards).

But the kind of warm welcome “Anora” has received is what fans have long wanted for Baker.

The director was born in Summit and grew up in Short Hills and Branchburg. He made films starting when he was a young child and worked in a Manville movie theater as a manager and projectionist when he was in high school. He used his experiences driving a taxi in Somerville to inform his character studies in movies like “Tangerine.”

Baker’s films are lively, funny and center on people from the margins of society. He dedicated his Palme d’Or win to sex workers, who are the subject of more than half of his films (“Starlet,” “Tangerine,” “The Florida Project,” “Red Rocket”).

Getting at the heart of characters and their humanity is one way the director tries to counter societal shame and ridicule heaped on people doing various jobs, whether they are sex workers, dancers, strippers, escorts or porn stars.

Baker’s movies are also beauties, prized for their dreamy skies and authentic locations.

His latest effort is, in all of these details and more, very Sean Baker.

The indie auteur wrote, helmed and edited “Anora,” a story suffused with riotous

SEE MOVIES, E4

TRAVEL

A two-week cruise through Europe is a luxurious adventure

It offered a bit of everything, from the Norse homelands to the beaches of southern Spain.

Nicole Pensiero For The Star-Ledger

As much as I enjoy cruising, the idea of taking a longer ocean journey — say, 10 or 15 days — never crossed my mind, until some friends took a lengthy cruise around the South Pacific and came home raving.

The prospect of exploring several European countries in one visit — without lugging baggage or having to deal with planes, trains and automobiles — soon took hold. It was then just a matter of picking an itinerary and deciding how long to cruise.

After a bit of back-and-forth (there were

so many options), we decided on a 14-night sail in mid- to late September, when we’d hopefully still have enough warm days to lounge by the pool (we did). Viking’s “Trade Routes of the Middle Ages” itinerary — which indeed does follow the medieval routes of commerce — offered a bit of everything, from the Norse homelands to the beaches of southern Spain.

It also was nicely bookended by overnight stays in two wildly diverse cities, Bergen and Barcelona, and made stops at some of Europe’s most picturesque places, including Amsterdam and Bruges, Belgium. While cruising around Europe is not as immersive as, say, a land tour, it makes up for it by providing a grand, floating hotel with fine cuisine and an array of amenities and activities. We loved unpacking once and letting the days unfold with a “tasting menu” of several magical

SEE TRAVEL, E2



The coastline in Murcia, Spain, is perfect for sightseeing on a sunny day. Nicole Pensiero, for The Star-Ledger

FROM THE COVER



The Viking Venus approaches the historical English maritime city of Portsmouth, home of a famed battleship of Henry VIII’s. Photos by Nicole Pensiero, for The Star-Ledger

TRAVEL

A two-week cruise through Europe is a luxurious adventure

Continues from E1

destinations. And we got a good “taste” of each place we visited — enough to decide if we’d want to return someday (Hello, Bruges!).

Traveling with a New Jersey college friend who now lives in Atlanta, we were amazed to run into yet another college friend on our ship whom we hadn’t seen in more than 40 years. It was an unexpected touch of serendipity adding to the magical feel that accompanied us the entire trip.

Any concerns, however fleeting, I had about the idea of being on a ship for more than the standard weeklong vacation dissipated the moment we stepped onto our ship, the Viking Venus. From there, it was smooth sailing (pun intended) as we visited Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, two cities in England, Portugal and three ports in Spain.

Like all of Viking’s identical vessels, the Venus is classified as a “small” ocean liner, with room for 930 passengers. But the ship certainly didn’t feel small; it was quite spacious, and even with our ship nearly full, we never felt closed in. At one point, my traveling companion declared that she “owned” the sports deck, as it became a favorite spot to hunker down with a good book in the late afternoon.

The ship’s décor is modern Scandinavian — light wood, neutral colors and always elegant. (Speaking of Scandinavian, there is also a fascinating exhibit of Viking culture and artifacts onboard). Our three days at sea were spent lounging at one of the two pools (including an infinity pool), enjoying the jacuzzi, or sipping a drink at the Viking’s centerpiece, the striking, two-level Explorers’ Lounge. And there are books, shelves of them, in fact, throughout the ship; passengers can borrow from this informal “library” for the duration of their cruise. The customer service — from the front desk to the wait staff — was excellent and we felt pampered every day. I mean, how often does one get called “My lady” when being seated for dinner?

We often headed to the spacious Star Theatre for port talks, educational (often nature-focused) lectures and for evening entertainment. Our cruise director, a charming Englishman named Andre Gaffney, had the crowd on its feet during his impressive one-man show in our final days aboard.

Cruising around the North Sea, the Atlantic and the Mediterranean for two weeks gave us opportunities to try all seven dining options onboard, including two specialty, themed restaurants. The ship’s buffet restaurant, The World Café, became our go-to for breakfast most days, where we could get anything from freshly made omelets to delicious sticky buns. The Restaurant is the formal dining room and often features regional fare. The ship’s two specialty restaurants — Italian-themed



Between its breathtaking beauty and countless chocolate shops, Bruges, Belgium is a traveler’s delight.



We started our trip with a view of Bergen, Norway, at the top of Mount Floyen, reachable by the affordable funicular.

Manfredi’s and The Chef’s Table — are by reservation only.

There is also round-the-clock included room service — immensely helpful on the days we disembarked for early shore excursions. Along with an elegant tea each afternoon, there were a few extra, unique dining experiences, including a barbecue accompanied by live music and dancing and a stellar Surf ‘n Turf dinner on the outside Aquavit Terrace just before sunset.

Our cabin — like all Viking cruise ship cabins — faced the water and had a veranda; there are no inside cabins. It occurred to us during our trip that Viking inspires repeat visitors by the many things that set it apart. This is a cruise line that does not try to be “all things to all people,” as its website explains, but keeps its focus clearly on cultural enrichment. There are no passengers under age 18, no casinos, no photography sales, no art shows, and no charge for wine or beer with lunch and

dinner. Viking also doesn’t charge to use its spa facilities (there is a massive jacuzzi, a steam room, sauna and even a snow grotto, a nod to the company’s Norwegian roots) or its convenient free launderettes (ideal for longer cruises). Another plus, and it’s a big one: Viking offers an included optional tour at every port.

This once-in-a-lifetime journey did not disappoint. Here are some highlights.

BERGEN

Norway’s second-largest city, Bergen, is known for its history, natural beauty, and for Bryggen, the oldest part of the city — a well-preserved merchant quarter from centuries ago. The highlight of our optional Bergen excursion was to see this lovely city from above via the popular Funicular Railway.

BRUGES

A free day in Bruges, Belgium, introduced us to this medieval storybook city that is sometimes called the “Venice of the North” for its many canals. It is also a chocolate lover’s paradise, with chocolate shops on every street — many made daily. The historic city center is a prominent UNESCO World Heritage Site, and its brightly painted buildings provide a perfect photo backdrop.

HONFLEUR

The waterfront city of Honfleur in the Normandy region of France was another charmer. There is much to see and do in this exquisite harbor town, with its centerpiece being Vieux Bassin, known for the narrow timber-frame houses overlooking the dock on three sides. (Interestingly, the included shore excursion that day was to Paris, about 2.5 hours away from where we were docked in La Havre. But the description of Honfleur sold us on this optional

day trip, and we left enchanted).

PORTSMOUTH

Portsmouth, with its rich maritime history, offers everything from tours of King Henry VIII’s battleship Mary Rose to views of the Isle of Wight (immortalized in the Beatles 1967 song “When I’m Sixty-Four.”) Visitors can get an especially dramatic view of the Isle from the dramatic-looking, 560-foot tall Spinnaker Tower, which opened in 2005.

PORTO

Our gateway to the Iberian Peninsula was the famous city of Porto, Portugal. Even in the rain, Porto is gorgeous. From the sweeping views of the rooftops and the Douro River from the city Cathedral, to the stunning tilework in the busy São Bento railway station, Portugal’s second-largest city is a feast for the eyes — and taste buds. Be sure to sample the popular Pastal de nata, a small, sweet egg custard in a flaky crust that’s served warm.

GRANADA

Any visit to Granada, Spain, merits a visit to the magnificent Moorish place and fortress, the Alhambra. As one of the best-preserved palaces of the historic Islamic world, we were amazed by what we saw there — from the mind-boggling 13th-century hand-carved structures to the gorgeous gardens and water elements. This UNESCO World Heritage Site is, along with the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, one of Spain’s most famous tourist attractions.

CARTAGENA

The city of Cartagena in southern Spain has a special something that draws thousands of visitors each year: a Roman Theatre, built between the years 5 and 1 BC. Discovered during excavation work in 1988, this massive amphitheater opened to the public in 2008, offering a fascinating look into ancient Roman culture.

BARCELONA

Our final port was a longtime favorite of mine, the northern Spanish city of Barcelona. We wandered around the famed Basilica de la Sagrada Família, architect Antoni Guadi’s still unfinished masterpiece begun in 1882, took a stroll through the historic Gothic Quarter, and wrapped up our vacation with a snack of churros y chocolate (basically funnel cake you dip in warm chocolate pudding) before heading back to our ship.

By the end of our journey, we had decided that it might be tough to sign up for a weeklong cruise after such a luxurious adventure. The extra time that comes with a longer cruise for us simply meant more opportunities to explore the world.

We’d do it again in a heartbeat.

Nicole Pensiero is a New Jersey resident and a member of the North American Travel Journalists Association.