



Cinema Café Serves Up Young Stars of Sundance

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PARK CITY, UTAH – JANUARY 23: (L-R) Rich Brian, David Jonsson, Lio Meheil, and Priya Kansara speak onstage at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival Cinema Café 4 at Filmmaker Lodge on January 23, 2023 in Park City, Utah. (Photo by Unique Nicole/Getty Images)

By Peter Jones

The next generation has arrived.

Four emerging performers took the stage at the Filmmaker Lodge on January 23. It was a friendly and casual introduction to a group of talented young actors who are quickly making their way into the broader awareness of movie audiences.

All four appear in films that premiere at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival, having gotten their start on television, and some are playing roles not particularly distant from their own life experience.

Brian Imanuel stars in *Jamojaya*, in which he portrays a variation on himself — an aspiring Indonesian rapper who is waging battles with his father while struggling to gain a foothold in the cutthroat music industry.

Immanuel's true-life alter ego is an Indonesian rapper known professionally as Rich Brian.

"Before music, my main passion was in cinematography," Imanuel says of the dual film-music passions that *Jamojaya* represents. "... I find myself truly wanting to be a part of something. ... I started making music when I was 15."

David Jonsson leads the cast, with Vivian Oparah, in *Rye Lane*, an offbeat romantic comedy about two Londoners who joyously — but cautiously — rebound together as they nurse the wounds of recent painful breakups and maybe discover something new along the way.

Jonsson might be a bit like his hapless character, Dom, at least that's what his agent thought when he first read the script.

"The first description of my character was that he's in his 20s and good-looking in an awkward way. I asked, 'Is that how you see me?'" Jonsson said. "... As a script, as a whole, what I really loved about [*Rye Lane*] was that it's unexpected. It's a romantic comedy, but completely reinventing what that is."

In *Mutt*, Lio Meheil plays a young transgender man who is having a really bad day in New York City. Sure, it might just be one day in the life — but it's a day full of reminders of a life full of challenges.

"I was always a performer," Meheil says. "I was a professional salsa dancer as a kid, and I was a child actor for a period of time. But it wasn't until I saw *Boys Don't Cry* with Hilary Swank where I was like 'oh, my god.' Look at this girl playing a boy, and that's probably indicative about another aspect of my life."

Like that 1999 film, *Mutt* also focuses on the difficulties of transgender life in a world that doesn't understand.

"It explores what it means to live in between genders, hence the title *Mutt*," Meheil explains with a laugh.

As a trans actor, Meheil says it has been easier to find work on television than in film, but that luck has come at a price.

"A lot of the parts I'm given the opportunity to audition for are like the assistant or the best friend... The primary motivation of that character is usually their gender identity," Meheil says.

The final actor on the panel, Priya Kansara, walks briskly into *Polite Society*. She plays an ambitious London schoolgirl who will stop at nothing to stop her older sister from abandoning her dreams to become little more than a trophy wife.

"I just love to escape to different worlds, and I remember so much of Hollywood when I was growing up and being mesmerized by everything I would see on television, and wanting to create that feeling for somebody else," Kansara says.

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