# 'A frank and honest portrayal of queer sexuality' - Mikko Mäkelä's Sundance hit Sebastian now on digital



Finnish-British filmmaker Mikko Mäkelä's latest film, Sebastian, made its debut at the prestigious 2024 Sundance Festival, where the director articulated his ambition for a “frank and honest portrayal of queer sexuality.” This film has since made its way to Video on Demand platforms following a limited theatrical release.

Sebastian centres on the character Max, played by Ruaridh Mollica, who aspires to be a writer. Max is navigating the complexities of life in London while maintaining a “survival job” at a literary magazine. The film unfolds as he embarks on writing a “pseudo-memoir” about the life of a gay sex worker. This exploration leads him to engage with clients through a gay escort website, blending personal encounters with his literary ambitions. His manuscript gains traction, attracting interest from a publisher, portrayed by Leanne Best, but Max finds himself increasingly entangled in a double life that begins to fracture his relationships and sense of self.

As the narrative progresses, the impact of Max's secretive lifestyle becomes tangible. His friendship with his co-worker Amna, played by Hiftu Quasem, experiences strain, while tensions escalate with his conservative mother back in Edinburgh, who disapproves of his lifestyle choices in the capital. The film also delves into Max’s emotionally charged connections with a significantly older client, illustrated by Jonathan Hyde, showcasing a depth that transcends mere transactional encounters.

The structure of Sebastian elegantly weaves Max’s professional pursuits with his sexual awakening, examining the themes of ambition, exploration, and the eventual consequences of a divided existence. The film begins with an exploration of Max as an escort, yet evolves into an introspective narrative about a young writer wrestling with his creative impulses amid complex societal expectations regarding sexuality and reputation. It hints at the struggles faced by those in the arts to balance personal expression against commercial viability, while also addressing the stigma surrounding sex work.

Central to the film's themes is what Mäkelä describes as “the shame of being ashamed,” which encapsulates Max's internal struggle. His fear of societal judgement fuels his conflicts, driving him deeper into a life of deception—both to others and ultimately to himself. The narrative challenges viewers to consider the effects of societal norms on personal identity, as Max grapples with the weight of his secrets and the dichotomy between his public and private personas.

Mäkelä’s film presents a character arc that emphasises the importance of self-honesty as the core of Max's journey. The film complicates the notion of identity and the facades we create, exploring how such masks can distance us from genuine interaction and intimacy.

Mollica’s performance is highlighted for its authenticity, capturing the nuances of both Max and his alter ego, Sebastian. The chemistry between Mollica and Hyde adds an emotional richness to the film, elevating the narrative through their shared experiences. Mäkelä's direction remains steady, with a focus on character development amidst the multiple plots at play.

Despite its strengths, Sebastian faces criticism for attempting to juggle an abundance of themes and messages. While it seeks to promote a sex-positive narrative and offer an empathetic view of sex work, it sometimes slips into conventional storytelling that may inadvertently reinforce negative stereotypes. The cinematic depiction of queer sexuality is presented with a certain explicitness that some may find excessive, leaving viewers to consider whether the portrayal aligns with the broader aims of genuine representation.

As Mäkelä delivers his sophomore feature, the film succeeds as both a character study and an exploration of self-acceptance. However, it also raises questions about the portrayal of sex work as a legitimate livelihood and its representation in media—a conversation that continues to evolve as society grapples with traditional narratives versus modern realities.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.imdb.com/news/ni64405828/> - Corroborates Mikko Mäkelä's ambition for a 'frank and honest portrayal of queer sexuality' and the film's world premiere at the 2024 Sundance Film Festival.
* <https://filmupdates.net/2024/08/01/interview-mikko-makela-on-sebastian/> - Provides details on the film's premise, Max's double life as a sex worker, and Mäkelä's intentions behind the film, including the exploration of sex work and the commodification of art.
* <https://tv.apple.com/us/movie/sebastian/umc.cmc.55n5a5iqt0pey84fit3fm14ou> - Outlines the plot of 'Sebastian,' including Max's role as a writer and sex worker, and the film's themes of queer sexuality and self-discovery.
* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sebastian_(2024_film)> - Details the film's production, cast, and reception, including its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival and critical response.
* <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt30317033/> - Provides information on the film's cast, plot, and box office performance, as well as user reviews and ratings.
* <https://filmupdates.net/2024/08/01/interview-mikko-makela-on-sebastian/> - Explains the strain on Max's relationships, including his friendship with Amna and tensions with his conservative mother, and the emotional connections with his clients.
* <https://www.imdb.com/news/ni64405828/> - Discusses the themes of ambition, exploration, and the consequences of a divided existence, as well as the societal expectations regarding sexuality and reputation.
* <https://tv.apple.com/us/movie/sebastian/umc.cmc.55n5a5iqt0pey84fit3fm14ou> - Highlights the importance of self-honesty in Max's journey and the film's exploration of identity and the facades people create.
* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sebastian_(2024_film)> - Mentions the critical reception of the film, including both praise for its character study and self-acceptance themes, and criticism for its handling of multiple themes and potential stereotypes.
* <https://filmupdates.net/2024/08/01/interview-mikko-makela-on-sebastian/> - Details Ruaridh Mollica's performance and the chemistry between Mollica and Jonathan Hyde, as well as Mäkelä's direction and focus on character development.