

Release for grief

EYE CULTURE

RANJITA GANESAN

“Are you okay?” A seemingly inadequate question to produce during someone’s time of grief. Yet, when Balya, a protagonist in *Sabar Bonda*, poses it to his bereaved friend Anand — away from the earshot of the relatives, who are too consumed by ritual organisation to worry about emotional comfort — it serves to put oxygen back in the airless room. A reminder that in painful situations it is not the language of a question that matters so much as the sincerity in its asking.

The response he receives is just as momentous for its naturalness: “I don’t know.” Anand has lost his father, a parent who accepted his queerness and whose support had nourished him — an answerless sort of hurt. Rohan Kanawade’s feature-length debut, about the connection Anand and Balya form over the course of the traditional 10 days of mourning recently won the grand jury prize for world cinema at the Sundance Film Festival.

The question “Are you okay?” appeared repeatedly this Sundance in several films that chose to hold sorrow to the light. A consequence perhaps of the past few years, which have involved incalculable suffering but have allowed little room for coming to terms. The Marathi-language *Sabar Bonda* had company in a Portland-set buddy

comedy about losing a twin (*Twinless*), a documentary where a terminally ill poet reflects on living (*Come See Me In The Good Light*), and a zom-com drawing from the horrors of the pandemic (*Didn’t Die*).

Grief is a tragic fact with no resolution written. So the inevitable longing for some neat kind of closure has its troubles, the way John Sweeney’s *Twinless* tells it. While dark and funny and entirely contrasting in mood, it would make an interesting double bill with Kanawade’s much quieter film — both celebrate queer love and what it really means to walk alongside someone as they carry their pain.

Sweeney was dating an identical twin when he began thinking about how profound that bond, and how deeply identity-shattering its loss, is. In a particularly striking moment, “I don’t know how to be here without you,” the central character Roman says, falling apart in a support group after the death of his brother Rocky. There he meets Dennis, who, like his twin, is gay. A desire to fill their individual emptiness and right old wrongs brings the two close very fast, but the results are bittersweet.

Survivor’s guilt is similarly at the centre of *Didn’t Die*. Shot in black and white, the low-budget indie makes no secret of the fact it is not actually concerned with gore. Set in a post-apocalyptic time, it features an Indian-American family warding off flesh-hungry zombies. Though affected by repetitive flashbacks,

there are well-imagined echoes of Covid here. The protagonist Vinita does what so many did in lockdown: Start a podcast. “I wonder if any of the people I know ‘made it’. That used to mean being famous, but now it just means being here,” she ponders.

Director Meera Menon and co-writer Paul Gleason turn to the words of wise men and women to make sense of the slow yet sudden, and senseless endings of that period: “No one ever told me that grief feels so much like fear” (CS Lewis) and “You can go on losing after loss.” (Hélène Cixous). The film is stitched together with Vinita’s irreverent narrations that bring out the peculiarity of trying to stay alive even as one watches their dearest go.

A vastly more hopeful approach to sorrow comes from Andrea Gibson, the subject of the documentary *Come See Me In The Good Light*, who proceeds heart-first as the other side of life calls. As one crushing diagnosis after another arrives, the poet laureate of Colorado surrounds themselves with the vitalising warmth of friends. For instance, Gibson’s partner Megan Falley finds an ingenious tech solution to the reality of not being able to grow old together: Using a face-aging app for her proposal video.

Loss is humanity’s lot, but as Gibson reaches urgently for their best gifts — love, humour, creation — we see it ought to be a connecting idea rather than an isolating one. In the poet’s own words, “Happiness becomes easier to find once we realise we do not have forever to find it.”