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Who is Sean Baker, the indie filmmaker behind Oscar sweeper Anora?

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Director Sean Baker has made history by becoming the first person to win four Academy Awards in the same night for the same film – Anora – taking home prizes for original screenplay, film editing, directing and best picture.

Anora centres on Ani (Mikey Madison), a Brooklyn sex worker entangled with Ivan (Mark Eydelshteyn), the immature son of a Russian oligarch. After Ivan disappears, Ani searches through New York with his handler Toros (Karren Karagulian) to find him.

Baker's Oscars sweep capped off a string of wins over the past year, but surprised many pundits who expected three-and-a-half hour epic The Brutalist to take home the top prize.

He's made the 97th Academy Awards one for the history books. So who is Sean Baker?

Oscars 2025: Sean Baker accepts award for best director of "An...



An indie film lifer

Baker has been a fixture of the international film festival circuit for more than a decade. His films are carefully researched character studies, often focused on sex workers, immigrants and low-income communities.

Baker maintains creative control by working with ultra-low budgets, often serving as writer, director and editor simultaneously. He often casts new or non-professional actors and prefers to shoot on location with natural light.

His breakout film *Tangerine* (2015) followed two transgender African American sex workers in Los Angeles. *Tangerine* grapples with the complicated lives of its characters but also celebrates their humour and friendships. The film was a technical milestone: shot entirely on the iPhone 5S by cinematographer Radium Cheung. The total estimated budget was just US\$100,000.

Baker's next film, *The Florida Project* (2017), was a portrait of low-income children living in cheap motels near Walt Disney World. The film playfully frames its characters' difficult childhoods as colourful and ecstatic, drawing an outstanding performance from six-year-old star Brooklynn Prince in her first film appearance.

Red Rocket (2021) centred on a retired porn star returning to his Texas home town, but struggled at the box office amid the COVID pandemic.

Baker's film budgets have increased gradually over time, but have still remained very small by Hollywood standards. *The Florida Project* was produced on a measly budget of US\$2 million, while *Anora* cost just US\$6 million. For context, the production of last year's best picture winner *Oppenheimer* (2023) cost Universal Pictures about US\$100 million (before marketing costs).

Tangerine - Red Band Trailer



The high price of creative freedom

Anora premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in May 2024, where it won the coveted [Palme d'Or](#).

The Palme d'Or is widely considered the most prestigious award in international art cinema – and has launched previous Oscar winners such as Parasite (2019), The Zone of Interest (2023) and Anatomy of a Fall (2023). These awards play an important role in marketing and financing films outside the studio system.

The realities of independent filmmaking are harsher than the glittering appearance of awards season. Independent filmmakers are often precariously employed and earn modest incomes from their work.

In a [speech](#) delivered at the Director's Guild of America Awards earlier this month, Baker laid out the financial difficulties associated with working as an indie director:

It's just simply not enough to get by on in today's world, especially if one is trying to support a family. I personally do not have children, but I know for a fact that if I did, I would not be able to make the movies that I make.

Fellow nominee Brady Corbet, who made The Brutalist with about US\$10 million, faced similar challenges, saying in an interview with [Vanity Fair](#) that he had made nothing from his two previous films.

Little films on the big screen

Anora has arrived during a time of great upheaval in Hollywood. Studios and streaming giants are adjusting their [business models](#) to maximise profits.

Meanwhile, the industry is still recovering from [strikes](#) in 2023 by the Writers Guild of America and The Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, which shut down productions for months.

Hollywood has often turned to independent filmmakers in such moments of crisis. In the 1970s, independent filmmakers such as John Cassavetes, Roger Corman, George Lucas and David Lynch disrupted an industry that was stagnating after its Golden Age.

Today, distributors such as Neon (which distributed *Anora*) and A24 specialise in marketing independent films through careful awards campaigns and viral marketing strategies.

Baker's win underscores the role of independent films — less constrained by commercial expectations — in shaping the industry's future. By taking greater creative risks, his style of intimate filmmaking is a breath of fresh air in Hollywood's stuffy, franchise-driven business model.