

## Bread and Roses

Los Angeles has recently witnessed the phenomenon of the janitors' strike, the emergence of previously obscure immigrant service workers--mainly Latino--working in the city's high-rises and protesting their working conditions and salary levels. The most effective of these groups were eventually able to establish unions for the first time. It's a classic American story by now, and this latest version of it is told in *Bread and Roses* by the socially-committed British filmmaker Ken Loach.

Loach takes on what could be like a right-minded but dull idea and fashions it into a genuine drama by making it personal and human, the tough work of nascent union organizing told essentially through the dynamics of one Mexican family. The story opens with a bang as we see Maya (Pilar Padilla) and other illegals panic-running through border bush to get to LA and the possibility of a job. Maya gets in trouble with her "coyote" but cleverly eludes him to connect with her older sister, Rosa (Elpidia Carrillo), already with a family and working as a janitor in a Century City tower. Rosa is able to swiftly secure a position at Angel Cleaning for Maya, who bristles under the callous office manager Perez (George Lopez) but learns to adjust to survive on the job. The pay stinks and there are no benefits, but work is work, and some of her mates are good folk, including Ruben (Alfonso Chavez), a laconic but ambitious guy who sees college in his future.

Upsetting the janitors' world is Sam Shapiro (Adrienne Brody), a version of Ichabod Crane as labor organizer representing the "Justice for Janitors" campaign, who tries to stimulate protest in this downtrodden crew and senses that Maya is one feisty enough to influence her colleagues. He gradually gets a core of the janitors to test their supervisors and, more importantly, to bring pressure on influential building tenants to, in turn, pressure Angel Cleaning to better their conditions. The human drama comes down to an essential conflict between the activist Maya--a young single woman who wants to make changes--and the anxious Rosa, a lone breadwinner with two kids and a sick husband, who doesn't feel she can rock the boat and lose her job.

That drama comes to a head in a riveting scene when Maya, furious that the burgeoning union has been betrayed by her sister, comes home to confront her. Rosa, at the ironing board, admits of her actions but turns the tables on Maya by bitterly giving her the facts of her ever-tenuous life and graphically describing what she has had to do, what she has had to suffer, to keep her family together. Between their weeping, screaming, moaning, Maya first freezes and then crumples before these acrid home truths. This appears to be pathos and pain beyond acting, a volcanic emotional outburst which, as it drains the viewer, adds real complexity to the film's argument.

Ken Loach (*Kes*, *Family Life*, *Hidden Agenda*, *Riff-Raff*) is known for films that take the side of the underdog, the put-upon. That is his intent again in *Bread and Roses* (his first project in the States), but he also aims to avoid political tracts. Thus, while the janitor's union in the film finally has a breakthrough--gaining recognition by the firm--a pivotal player in their success, Maya, makes a crucial mistake which results in her deportation. The bittersweet ending--Maya looking back at her sister from her departing bus--is right for the film and true to its complex spirit.

(June 2001)