

Breaking and Entering

Anthony Minghella is a British writer/director who has made a considerable reputation with adaptation of major, sometime prestigious, literary works with exotic or period locations, such as *The English Patient*, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, and *Cold Mountain*. His first film, however, the modest “Truly, Madly, Deeply,” was a critical and popular success in 1991, and for his debut, Minghella also wrote an original screenplay about contemporary British life. It’s been 15 years, but he has returned to those roots with a fresh original screenplay: his *Breaking and Entering* takes an incisive and intriguing look at modern life in London.

The story mingles the classy and the underclass, family struggles and secret affairs set mostly within the Kings Cross section of London, an ethnically diverse area where a new architectural firm, headed by landscape architect Will Francis (Jude Law), is taking on a major development project located near the landmark train station of the area.

Will has trouble at home with his long-time Swedish live-in Liv (Robin Wright Penn) and her daughter Beatrice (Poppy Rogers), the former unaccountably depressed, the latter developmentally challenged. His testy life takes a new hit when a local gang of Bosnian émigrés breaks into his posh new construction site and runs off with the company’s precious electronic gear. The gang is aided by a super agile teenager, Miro (Rafi Gavron) himself an exile from Bosnia, whose mother Amira (Juliette Binoche), once a professional musician, is now a widow taking in sewing in a Kings Cross housing project.

After staking out his office to identify the perpetrator, Will discovers and trails the boy, but he decides not to have him arrested. Instead, he becomes absorbed by and then romantically involved with Amira, a benign, sweet presence who contrasts dramatically with his stressful home life. Further, the boy, having stolen Will’s personal laptop, discovers the former’s affluent world through the man’s computer images. Thus, the break-in at the office is followed by a “break-in” to the life of a cosseted immigrant family. How Will works out the complications of what his affair and his relationship with Miro has wrought constitutes the remainder of the film, which ends in a surprising, touching hearing.

The working out of the story’s scheme is, along with the quality of the acting, the strength of *Breaking and Entering*. Minghella, from the first, keeps you guessing, and interested, as to where his tale is headed, with pungent asides—like a very sassy hooker played by Vera Famiglia—and startling turns—as when Amira sets up Will for potential blackmail. It’s complex and intricate, and one must pay attention. Minghella and his team also give you a palpable sense of a “transitional” neighborhood in the city, depicting a stark London you don’t see in the tourist brochures.

If there is a weakness in the script and performances in “Breaking and Entering,” it is in the cramped and whining role of Liv (a thankless part for Wright Penn) that lacks motivation and dimension. The malady of her daughter, while touching, is also not well explained. Otherwise, the cast is imposing, with fine

British actors like Ray Winstone and Juliet Stevenson making even small roles worthy. A real revelation is young Gavron, who performs a crucial role in the story and brings complexity to the role of an alienated young man. In the film's first sequences, he appears as merely a coarse, hustling teen, but as the story develops, his character gains richness and poignancy, and Gavron effectively embodies those changes.

Juliette Binoche, almost always a delicate, intelligent presence on the screen, brings off the combined hesitancy and humanity of Amira. One might wonder whether this most attractive woman can really impersonate a downtrodden Bosnia Muslim, but I feel she carries it off. Her discovery, after so much grimness (her husband has been killed in Bosnia), of Will's genuine tenderness is heartrending, as is her fierce attachment to her son. Jude Law, he of the Michelangelesque visage, is here more than his crystal blue eyes and his perfect chiseled jaw; he portrays Will as a contorted, questing soul, knowing he has flaws that he battles, but with a chunk of empathy at his core. It doesn't hurt that he delivers the King's English with impeccable taste.

Breaking and Entering arrives rather too late in the movie awards season to have received much attention. Too bad, because its writing and acting turns can stand comparison with many of the currently favored films.

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