

Dough

“Dough” is a sweet and satisfying cross-cultural fable about how, in contemporary London, an aging Jewish baker and a young Muslim African can bound together over bread. As played by the veteran English actor Jonathan Pryce and Jerome Holder, this comedy drama is tough to resist.

Curmudgeonly widower Nat Dayan (Pryce) clings to his way of life as a Kosher bakery shop owner in London’s East End as his clientele dwindles. It has been in the family for 100 years, but Nat’s son Stephen (Daniel Caltagirone), an ambitious attorney, has no interest in the downscale enterprise. When he loses his only assistant, Nat reluctantly agrees to take on the son of his cleaning lady Safa (Natasha Gordon), a refugee from Darfur.

Safa’s unfocused teenager Ayyash (Holder) has a secret gig selling marijuana to help his mom make ends meet, but according to his boss Victor Gerrard (Ian Hart), he needs a “cover job” to mask his dealing and agrees to take the bakery position. Nat, meanwhile, is under pressure also both from a crafty real estate developer Sam Cotton (Phil Davis), who yearns to take over Nat’s store, and from his landlady Joanna Silverman (Pauline Collins), who is recently widowed and has eyes for Nat.

Even with rising at 4 am, Ayyash slowly takes to the baking game. However, when he accidentally drops his stash into some mixing dough, the store’s “special” challah bread that results starts flying off the shelves--especially among young customers who have never come to Dayan’s before--and an unlikely friendship forms between the old Jewish baker and his young Muslim apprentice. The pair’s domestic life gets more complicated, too, when Safa and Ayyash lose their crummy apartment and have to move into Nat’s large, empty house. Complications pile up as the volatile Victor learns that Ayyash is misusing his cannabis, while Cotton happens upon the apprentice hiding the drug in the store and realizes he has new leverage to shut down the bakery. Can Dayan’s Kosher Bakery be saved?

The plot points are worked out well in this brisk (94 minutes) charmer by writers Yehudah Jez Freedman and Jonathan Benson and director John Goldschmidt. The initial mistrust across racial and religious lines between seen-it-all Nat and fresh-faced Ayyash is never harsh but offers material for gentle jokes about differing cultural mores. There is no heavy religious sermonizing.

There is one wonderful sequence early in the film which cleverly contrasts the two men’s cultural pivot points while symbolizing their commonality. Though utterly different in age, origins, and experience, we see—in a wordless, lovely, intercutting montage--both Nat and Ayyash preparing for their respective days by performing ablutions with their hands, delivering a soft prayer, and donning a head covering. A fitting prelude for what is to come.

As Goldschmidt has said about the film: “The story is set in a multi-cultural part of London and is a film of contrasts. From the ethnic high street shops, to the corporate environment of a big Supermarket chain. From middle class suburbia, to a grotty housing estate. From the staid adult community to the vibrant youth culture.” All of this is

well realized in the movie.

The antagonists-cum-protagonists are very well realized by Pryce, a renowned British stage veteran, with some major film credits (“Brazil,” “Evita”) and 18-year old Holder, appearing in his first feature film. Pryce embodies the crusty old bird mired in his ways but able to be uplifted by the easy-going, but pious, kid. The latter, dreading his new job, ultimately opens to the older man’s knowledge and skills. It’s the well worn cliché of the odd couple that learns from and redeems one other, but in “Dough” it is handled with the care it takes to knead a challah mass.

(Unrated, “Dough” runs a neat 94 mins.)

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