

The Visitor

Ever since 9/11, the portrayals of Arabs and Muslims in our mass media have leaned heavily towards the stereotypes of the implacable fanatic, feeding our ready paranoia and taking over the place of the “Commies” as our ever-ready public enemy. What a relief to witness an American movie that presents a moving cross-cultural story of Americans and Arabs on a human scale, with genuine emotions. Such a one is *The Visitor*.

60-something Walter Vale (Richard Jenkins) is a university professor of economics who is running on fumes, having lost his beloved wife and going through the motions of teaching and writing. Sent grudgingly to Manhattan to attend a conference, he is surprised to find a young couple camped out in an apartment he has owned for many years. Victims of a real estate scam, Tarek (Haaz Sleiman), a Syrian man, and Zainab (Danai Gurira), his Senegalese girlfriend, have crashed at his pad.

Though they leave, Walter has second thoughts and soon allows the couple to stay with him. Touched by his kindness, Tarek, a musician who plays the African drum, urges the dulled academic to try his instrument. The drum's lively rhythms, and Tarek's ready enthusiasm, trigger a rejuvenation of Walter's spirit and open his eyes to a vibrant world of local jazz clubs and drum circles. Even Zainab, initially skeptical of Walter's interest in them, begins to warm up to him, and Walter puts his stale academic life on hold.

After Tarek and Walter attend a drum jam in Central Park, the Syrian is arrested for jumping a subway turnstile and determined by the police to be an undocumented alien. He is summarily sent to a Queens holding center and held for potential deportation. Walter becomes involved in helping his new friend with a sense of commitment he thought he had long ago lost. Adding to his concern is the arrival of Tarek's mother, Mouna (Hiam Abbass), who cannot visit Tarek herself but urges Walter to serve as an intermediary for her son. He offers her his apartment to stay in, and the two, focused on Tarek's release, form a tenuous bond, but with little hope for a positive outcome.

Written and directed by Tom McCarthy, *The Visitor* delicately captures the cadence of a man, once gone to seed, who begins to blossom again. That man is embodied by Richard Jenkins, best known as the ectoplasmic father Nathaniel Fisher in HBO's drama “Six Feet Under.” Whereas, in that latter role, he was a smirking devil, here he is seen at first as a dulled presence with dead eyes and no enthusiasms (he cancels long-planned piano lessons at the film's opening). Walter's awakening, as embodied by Jenkins, is slow and gradual—very believable, in fact—an awakening to the new intercultural couple, to a new interest in different music, and to the new responsibility of caring for someone. His performance, lovely to watch, is capped by a most authentic outburst at officialdom and then a striking final gesture—an homage to Tarek and his drum—which signals Walter's new sense of freedom and connection to others.

Jenkins is ably seconded by his young co-stars Sleiman and Gurira, the first a bubbly extrovert who loves his new country but can't escape his look and name in an anti-terror era, the second a sweet/sad creative woman longing to make a life for herself. The two effectively present a balance between the optimism and skepticism of

the new immigrant while also sharing an agonizing poignancy confronted by rules they do not understand.

As Mouna, Hiam Abbass (*The Syrian Bride*, *Munich*) matches Jenkins phlegmatic nature with intimations of passion buried under a studied calm. Her initial awkwardness, then acceptance of Walter and his goodwill are handled exquisitely. Abbass possesses a quality of both innate intelligence and dark-eyed smolder that this reviewer hasn't seen on the screen since the hey-day of the great Irene Pappas. This is her first English-language movie (she lives in Paris), and she nails it.

Only the second directorial effort by Tom McCarthy (his first was the *The Station Agent* in 2003), *The Visitor* consolidates the taste, intelligence and casting acumen he displayed in that fine picture with this latest production. He tells his story in lapidary, measured scenes whose very modesty makes the eventual traumas that the characters endure that much more telling. Most Hollywood efforts would coarsen this kind of tale with an outsized crisis, some egregious sex scene, or facile violence. McCarthy avoids all these clichés to place believable people in believable dilemmas, and the movie resonates the more for it.

It's easy to lambaste the overkill of our "war on terror;" it's difficult to meld our national security and immigration issues into cogent, credible drama, but *The Visitors* achieves this.

("The Visitor" is rated PG-13 for brief strong language.)

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