

Movie Review: 'The Visitor'

by Zachary Woodruff

It has been five years since writer-director Thomas McCarthy's debut, "The Station Agent," topped everyone's list of "favorite films about a dwarf, a train, and a hot-dog stand in New Jersey." With "The Visitor," McCarthy has added a second slice of pitch-perfect independent cinema to his resume. It's sure to be everyone's favorite film about an economics professor, a bongo player and a nondescript detention center in the middle of Queens.

'THE VISITOR' - Richard Jenkins (foreground) is an economics professor and Haaz Sleiman a young drummer who comes to change his life in 'The Visitor.' CNS Photo by JoJo Whildon. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) That professor's name is Walter Vale (Richard Jenkins), and as the film begins, this 62-year-old widower is in a personal and professional rut. Blandly aloof, Vale constantly seems to be shooing people out of doorways, whether it's his piano tutor or a college student late turning in an assignment. He's like a zombie with tenure. In evenings, Vale is often seen carefully sipping a glass of red wine as if it contained what little lifeblood he had remaining.

Enter Tarek (Haaz Sleiman) and Zainab (Danai Gurira), a Syrian musician and his Senegalese girlfriend, whom Vale discovers living in his Manhattan apartment due to a rental scam. At first kicking them out, Vale follows a whim - more from boredom than compassion - and invites the young couple to live with him. This small act of kindness opens the door to the movie: Vale's friendly immersion in the worlds of these two immigrants gradually re-connects him to humanity.

There's a familiar formula at work here, and at first "The Visitor" plays it for laughs, putting the stilted Vale in amusing fish-out-of-water scenarios, such as covering for Zainab to sell handmade jewelry at a street market, or bobbing his head to the Afrobeat music of Fela Kuti instead of his somber classical favorites. When Vale comes home to discover Tarek, in only his underwear, wailing away on a bongo-like drum, you can be sure there's an upcoming scene of Vale getting profusely percussive in his PJs as well.

But director McCarthy has much more in mind than comedy: He invests us in Vale's transformation from uptight square to globally aware. Then he takes the story several steps further.

That's an impressive feat, since at first "The Visitor" is so unassuming you hardly notice it has anything to say. Trading on awkward silences and mundane details, the film recalls the minimalism of indie filmmakers like Jim Jarmusch - though without Jarmusch's punk sensibility - and Scotland's William Forsyth ("Gregory's Girl"). As in a Forsyth picture, the story has no bad guys, just characters going about their own lives, with their own reasons.

If there is an antagonist in "The Visitor," it's the immigration system itself - particularly in the latter half's dramatic turn, when Tarek is caught at random and held in a nondescript detention facility in midcity Queens. As in the Stephen Frears' movie "Dirty, Pretty Things," we see the rigid, post-9/11 policies that force thousands to live in the shadows, fleeing the persecutions of one government just to play hide-and-seek with another.

Yet there's no thorny moralizing here, no bombastic Oliver Stoning. "The Visitor" remains true to its modest scale, elegantly walking a balancing act between sweetness and severity. The key is the film's commitment to character: Most of McCarthy's film credits are as an actor, and he writes with the clarity and naturalism of someone who loathes having to ask, "What's my motivation?"

As a result the cast delivers charming, impeccable performances, from Danai Gurira's distrustful Zainab to Haaz Sleiman's appealing and heartbreaking Tarek. The film's third act ups the ante with the arrival of Tarek's lovely, dignified mother, played by accomplished Middle Eastern actress Hiam Abbass. Though technically the film's second "visitor," Abbass is the first with romantic possibilities, and the film blossoms in her presence.

But the film really belongs to Richard Jenkins as Vale. You've probably seen Jenkins in a dozen movies (everything from brothers Farrelly to Coen) without knowing his name, as he's one of those character actors whose singular professionalism props up everyone around him. "The Visitor" lets him shine. Symbolizing America's emerging global awareness while remaining completely credible as a character, Jenkins has a very good reason to beat his drum.

"The Visitor." Running time: 1 hour, 48 minutes. Rated: PG-13. 3 stars.

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