

# Nothing to boast about

## Last Resort & When Brendan Met Trudy

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*Last Resort*, directed by Pawel Pawlikowsky, written by Rowan Joffe and Pawel Pawlikowsky; *When Brendan Met Trudy*, directed by Kieron J. Walsh, written by Roddy Doyle

*Last Resort* from Britain begins promisingly enough, as though it had serious things on its mind, but loses its way almost entirely, or perhaps finds it, and becomes another in an apparently endless stream of films advocating “personal responsibility” and generally letting the social order off the hook.

A young Russian woman, with her 10-year-old son in tow, arrives in England, hoping to meet her fiancé, or a man she considers her fiancé. He doesn't show up, and threatened with being sent back to Russia, Tanya (Dina Korzun) claims political asylum. Mother and son are promptly shipped off to Stonehaven, a rundown resort town by the sea, to await the results of the processing of her claim. When Tanya and Artyom (Artyom Strelnikov), who find themselves housed in a dismal flat in a half-dead town, make an attempt to get to London, the police bring them back.

Tanya befriends Alfie, an arcade manager (Paddy Considine), who does what he can for the pair. The woman eventually withdraws her claim of refugee status and simply asks to be sent back to Russia. That too will take months, unless she can pay for her own ticket. She takes up the offer to do a bit of Internet pornography to raise the cash. This sets off a major crisis with Alfie and her son. In the end, the threesome make an attempt at an escape.

At first—despite the fact that the work is a production of BBC Films—one naively imagines that *Last Resort* will offer some kind of exposure of the mistreatment meted out to immigrants and refugees in Britain and Europe generally. It seems a reasonable supposition, considering the record of official brutality and indifference. And the first sequences, relatively sharp-eyed and critical, of Tanya at the airport, being herded along with rest into vans and shipped off to this awful prison of a town, seem to confirm that idea. All the performers are affecting, especially Korzun as Tanya. The film has an intelligent and restrained look and feel to it.

The focus of *Last Resort*, however, shifts steadily away

from the procedures and policies of the authorities and the potentially tragic situation in which Tanya finds herself. Somewhere in the middle of the film, it dawns on the spectator that the film is not turning out to be a critique of British officialdom or an examination of the plight of refugees and immigrants at all, but instead is aiming its polemic against Tanya herself. She is the author of her own difficulties, it turns out. When she starts going on about how her mother and grandmother loved the wrong man and how she has to stop treating life like a romance and so on, the relatively unpleasant character of the filmmaker's project becomes apparent.

After that, it is almost impossible to take the work entirely seriously. *Last Resort* becomes one more fantasy about the state of the world organized by an apparently contented individual who can't really see a compelling reason to make a fuss about things. The harsher elements—police, bureaucracy, the unhappy state of the other refugees or would-be refugees in Stonehaven—having served their purpose of drawing us in, are gradually pushed to the film's margins and eventually vanish. What's left behind are the individual moral choices Tanya must make—to do pornography or not, to stay with Alfie or not, to pursue her vision of love or not. Not very edifying.

Director and co-screenwriter Pawel Pawlikowski (sometimes credited as Paul Pavlikovksy) has no interest in looking too sharply at conditions in Russia or Britain or the state of refugees. Pawlikowski, born in Warsaw in 1957, made a number of documentary films ( *Serbian Epics*, *Dostoevsky's Travels*, *Tripping with Zhirinovsky*) for British television before directing his first feature film, *The Stringer*, in 1997. It is safe to say he represents no ideological or intellectual threat to the status quo.

Making the central character a false claimant to refugee status is a means of stacking the deck to begin with. The production notes observe that the coastal town “is also an ironic background for this drama because Tanya is not actually a refugee at all,” as though this “irony” is an objective fact that the filmmakers stumbled upon and are

merely registering, rather than a conscious choice by the director and his fellow screenwriter from which all sorts of elements of the story and responses on the part of an audience flow. In reality, one is always conscious of the fact that Tanya is a “fake” asylum-seeker, and this casts a definite light on her situation and potentially on all the others in the holding area. “How many of them are fakes too?” Considering the wretched state of refugees and immigrants at present, who number in the millions throughout the world, the film's attitude is fairly reprehensible.

The filmmakers are relatively open about their lack of interest in the problem. The production notes explain: “For all that, the issue of refugees is never brought to the fore in this film. ‘When we started planning this film, the issue of asylum-seekers wasn't as hot a subject as it is now,’ says [producer Ruth] Caleb, ‘it simply was not what drew us to this story in the first place. What attracted us was the human angle—relationships are the kernel of this film. We don't want this to be seen as a campaigning film...’

“Pawlikowski agrees, ‘I wanted to use a particular landscape to tell an original story about characters who transcend the landscape. As a filmmaker, you need characters that represent a social sphere but also resonate beyond it. You need to go beyond sociology and the realm of cardboard cut-outs.’

“*Last Resort* is not a passionate social plea. It highlights the refugee problem, but as an aside. A social realist drama about the misery of refugees would be much more dull. With a love story, you can hook the audience in—everyone can relate to falling in love.... I can't relate to the idea of making a drama full of social comment. For me, nothing is ever so straightforward.”

In their own way these are remarkable comments. On one side of a divide the director and producer blithely place “campaigning,” “cardboard cut-outs,” “social realism,” “dull[ness]”; on the other, “the human angle,” “relationships,” “characters who transcend the landscape,” “love,” and presumably complexity. Is this a legitimate set of opposites, one that should go uncriticized? This reproduces the tired argument that the investigation of social life is somehow extrinsic to art, contrived, a sort of perpetual “outside agitator,” while art's natural subject matter is “human relationships,” perceived as somehow transcending social life.

Moreover, it would be interesting to determine at precisely which historical moment it became possible for a filmmaker, and more particularly a filmmaker with a background in documentary films, to boast that he was *not* making “a passionate social plea” and be fairly certain that most of those reading the remark would find it acceptable, perhaps

even commendable.

*When Brendan Met Trudy* is a slight comedy from Ireland. The original screenplay is by Roddy Doyle, who previously based scenarios on his own novels, *The Commitments*, *The Snapper* and *The Van*. Kieron J. Walsh directed, in his feature film debut.

A very slight comedy. In Dublin, Brendan (Peter McDonald), an uptight teacher and lover of films, becomes involved with a vivacious young woman, Trudy (Flora Montgomery), who turns out to be a cat burglar. Since she has added passion to his otherwise dull existence, Brendan is prepared to go to any lengths to please her, including participating in her crimes. That only adds more excitement to their relations. At one point, an unhappy encounter with his middle class family provokes Trudy to drop Brendan. A semi-heroic act on his part, in defense of a Nigerian refugee, brings her back. Despite difficulties, including trouble with the law, it seems that Brendan and Trudy will prove to be a serious item.

Peter McDonald ( *I Went Down*) is an appealing performer. His deadpan approach provides most of the film's delights. Flora Montgomery is pleasant enough, when she is not trying so hard to be tough and sassy and sexy. But the film's conceits are not only slender, they are stale. A respectable middle-aged woman who loves to mouth obscenities? A film “buff” for whom characters in old movies are more real than the people around him? We have seen this before. Frankly, there is something provincial about this work. The homage paid to Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* and Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* might have seemed fresh and original, if that sort of thing ever did, around the time of *Annie Hall* in 1977.



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