

In life's pressure cooker: *Boiling Point*

Paul Bond
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(Ascendant Films/Burton Fox Films), director Philip Barantini. Now available on Netflix.

The acute personal difficulties of head chef Andy Jones (Stephen Graham) in director and co-writer Philip Barantini's *Boiling Point*, are a tragic expression of a much wider situation.

The 92-minute film is a technically brilliant piece of work, a single take following Andy, a part-owner of the restaurant, into work and through a gruellingly busy night shortly before Christmas. In a tightly choreographed script, cinematographer James Cummings starts by following Andy down the street and into the restaurant, and then moves through the confined spaces after different characters in turn.

The script by Cummings and Barantini plotted every movement of the camera in minute detail, but the dialogue was partly improvised by the excellent cast. The technique creates not just the immediacy of real-time events unfolding to a range of characters in the restaurant, its front and back kitchens and office. The close confines of the location give the film an additional layer of claustrophobia and intensity. There is nowhere to escape for any character, all of whom are under the hammer of events. Even the one character who manages to get outside does so to make a drug deal on the pretext of emptying the bins in the car park behind the building. His cavalier behaviour throughout is condemned by others forced to cover for him.

The intensity of the production was magnified by the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. Originally, they had scheduled to film the piece eight times over four nights. The first night's filming was March 16, 2020, following three weeks' rehearsal. Those two takes were, in Barantini's words, "like dress rehearsals."

The following day, the producers told Barantini this would have to be the last day's filming as crew members were already beginning to pull out because of COVID, and lockdown was imminent. They shot only

two more takes on March 17, the first of which was used. While not all crew members knew they would not have the four additional opportunities to film, the mounting tension around the rapidly developing pandemic must have contributed to portrayal of ever escalating stress.

In such a short film, there is a certain sketchiness to the individual characters' personal inner lives. Their personal travails can perhaps feel a little too quickly pointed up before being passed over, but this is consistent with the relentlessly demanding character of a work environment. And not knowing all that is happening outside work to those forced to act as a disciplined team is an essential element of the drama.

Barantini has been able to use the speedy pace to his advantage here, without getting bogged down in the personal stories he has indicated. For example, a junior pastry chef's self-harming scars are discovered by a colleague. Her reaction is clearly one of deeply felt empathy and compassion, which the demands of the workplace prevent her from expressing fully.

We see from the outset how stressed Andy is. His relationship has broken down, and he has been living out of a suitcase for two months. He has been missing his young son's events, and not even getting to speak to the boy on the phone.

This tells us something of the reality of personal lives under capitalism. All this is going on, but Andy immediately has to set it aside because when he arrives an Environmental Health Officer is downgrading the restaurant's food hygiene rating as a result of mistakes made due to stress.

Throughout, the pressure on staff intensifies as extra covers are ordered and front-of-house manager Beth (Alice Feetham) goes off menu to accommodate the arrogant demands of a group of social influencers.

Graham gives a brilliant performance as Andy, attempting to keep his kitchen operating, for example,

in trying to negotiate a pay rise for his indispensable chef Carly (Vinette Robinson), while it becomes increasingly apparent that his personal crisis is chiefly responsible for the mistakes and conflicts involving others.

There is one moment of quiet and calm, as Andy and Carly together prepare dishes for two important customers. Their focus and concentration are a beautiful counterpoint to everything that has happened around them. This is what they should be doing, yet everything about the world in which they do it prevents this from being the norm.

Everyone is floundering. Beth has no real background in catering, and the kitchen staff are critical of her. A nut allergy is not properly recorded for the kitchen, and Carly turns angrily on Beth for not training the waiting staff in the menu sufficiently. Beth heads for the toilet, where she breaks down in tears. She leaves a phone message for her father, who is an investor in the company. Beth, who is employed for that reason, tells him that she does not really know what she's doing.

Many of the revelations during the drama involve visiting celebrity chef Alastair Skye (Jason Flemyng). His character arc begins as the major source of performance anxiety as Andy's former boss, who has brought a noted restaurant critic as his date. It ends as the personal embodiment of the financial pressures ruining the lives of everyone concerned, Andy above all. The whole cast are solid, but Graham, Robinson and Flemyng in the three weightiest roles bring a particular depth to these characters.

When the final crisis of the evening plays out, Andy calls all the kitchen staff together to explain what has happened. Alastair wants Andy to pin blame for the incident on Carly to safeguard the business. Sous-chef Freeman (Ray Panthaki) erupts in fury at Andy's behaviour and places blame squarely on him.

Andy's final collapse is moving because it rings true to all that has gone before both on and off camera.

This is an authentic work. Barantini knows of what he writes. An actor for 25 years (he and Graham became friends on *Band of Brothers*), he took a second job in kitchens, working his way up to become an agency head chef. *Boiling Point* reflects his experience of the impact of that intensely demanding environment. As he told one interviewer, "It wasn't just me going off the rails, we all were at one point. Everybody's having a

little drink before work, and then you go down the path of people sneaking off and doing lines of coke. Then you start to rely on that... you feel like you're drowning."

Barantini got sober seven years ago and wanted to turn to this milieu when he started directing. His sympathy and honesty gives *Boiling Point* a much broader resonance than he perhaps first imagined. He has talked of the film (which began life as a 20-minute short project) as "a personal story ... a bit of a vanity thing." But the compassion for others displayed in this acutely focused drama highlights the much wider impact of capitalism's many pressures on the daily life of millions.



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