

Ali & Ava: A love story between people “ordinarily overlooked”

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Written and directed by Clio Barnard

Ali & Ava, written and directed by British filmmaker Clio Barnard, opened in the US in late July. It is worth making an effort to see.

Barnard has directed several interesting working class dramas, including *The Selfish Giant* (2013), as the WSWs wrote, “a wrenching tale of survival on a run-down housing estate in Bradford, West Yorkshire. The title comes from one of Oscar Wilde’s stories for children (1888), about the consequences of selfishness and private property.” The story centers on two teenage boys caught up in stealing scrap metal.

About *The Selfish Giant*, we commented: “With great empathy for her characters, Barnard locates her movie in a bleak, postindustrial landscape, where the possibility of a decent future has long since disappeared. Working in the British social realist tradition, she shines a light on a world where the trade unions and political parties that once claimed to represent the working class are now entirely absent. People have been left to fend for themselves, but this also means they no longer have any allegiance to those organizations. This state of affairs leaves the filmmaker with not much of a perspective perhaps except a belief in people’s innate decency. Not a small thing.”

Ali & Ava, the filmmaker explains, “is a love story” inspired by individuals Barnard met while making *The Arbor* (2010), about playwright Andrea Dunbar, and *The Selfish Giant*.

Ali (Adeel Akhtar) is a British-Pakistani working class landlord obsessed with hip hop and prone to dancing enthusiastically on the roof of his car. He and his Bangladeshi wife are separated, although they continue to live in the same house. Awkwardly, he doesn’t dare tell his family the shameful truth.

Ava (Claire Rushbrook) is an Irish-born teacher and

single mother of five, living in a tough housing estate. Her former husband, a member of the National Front, used to regularly beat her up—he “put his boots on to do it.”

The film documents the developing relationship between the pair, which encounters a number of obstacles, including family members and different tastes in music.

Ali “used to be a DJ,” he explains. “I’m nought [zero] to 70, because there’s no ... gradual acceleration.”

“Are you into music?,” Ali asks Ava during one of their first serious conversations. “Yeah, I like country music,” she replies innocently. “Well,” he says, only half-jokingly, “that’s it then ... That’s it, that’s it for me. Country? You can’t dance to that, can you?” She also likes “folk,” she says. Ali: “It’s getting worse.”

There are more serious obstacles, including the hostility of Ava’s son Callum (Shawn Thomas), who has a deluded, romantic notion about his dead father. Callum bursts in on the new couple at one point with a sword. (Ali: “Like f---ing Zorro in here, in’t it?”) Ava suggests that her son can be “a bit over-protective.” “Is that what you call it?”

However, Callum and Ava later touchingly get to sing Ewan MacColl’s haunting “Dirty Old Town” together: “I met my love / By the gas works wall / Dreamed a dream by the old canal / I kissed my girl / By the factory wall / Dirty old town / Dirty old town.”

“It started with the characters of Ali and Ava, and a question,” says Barnard. “What would happen if you took melodrama as a genre and applied it to a social-realist version of Bradford that’s based on real people? It’s an opportunity to think about what it means to be part of a community. There’s a lot of kindness, generosity and support in Bradford, and I wanted to see

that writ large on the big screen.” *Ali & Ava* is a generous, warmhearted work.

Akhtar, an energetic, endearing performer, explains that *Ali & Ava* has at its center “the idea of giving a space and a voice to people or a type of person that is ordinarily overlooked and not really seen. And allowing those people to have a very intimate connection with each other.” Barnard’s film allows that story to unfold, with honesty and sensitivity.



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