

In Wake of Terror Attacks, Unlikely Bonds

Rachid Bouchareb's tidy little two-character film, "London River," demonstrates how great acting can infuse a banal, politically correct drama with dollops of emotional truth. This

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FILM REVIEW

cozy tale of the rapprochement between two cultures, each personified by an individual, is likable in the same way as "Driving Miss Daisy," though "London River" is tougher and sadder and not as well written.

Its stars, Brenda Blethyn and Sotigui Kouyaté, couldn't possess more dissimilar screen presences. Ms. Blethyn, the British actress best known for "Secrets and Lies," belongs to the Mike Leigh school of minutely detailed naturalism. Mr. Kouyaté, who died in April 2010 at 73, was associated for many years with the ritualistic theater of Peter Brook. Tall and gaunt, with graying dreadlocks, his deep-set eyes conveying a stoic, bone-weary resignation, he suggested a mythic African pilgrim leaning on a walking stick while roaming



Brenda Blethyn plays a mother searching for her daughter.

the world on an endless spiritual journey. "London River," whose title evokes the city's multicultural stream, was his final film.

Ms. Blethyn's character, Elisabeth, is a war widow who lost her husband in the Falkland Islands conflict and now lives a rustic existence with her brother on a small farm on Guernsey, the English Channel island. Her attitude evolves from one of tight-lipped suspicion into an emotionally unguarded vulnerability. At a hint of good news, she bursts into giggles; bad news makes her crumple into a tearful heap.

Mr. Kouyaté's character, Ousmane, is a gentle West African forester who has lived in France for 15 years and has devoted much of his life to preserving elm trees. Ousmane is a Muslim, and Elisabeth a Christian, but the movie barely begins to explore their potential conflict.

Both are drawn to London after the July 7, 2005, terrorist bombings that killed 56, including the 4 attackers, and injured hundreds more. After watching the news, Elisabeth becomes increasingly alarmed when she is unable to reach her daughter, Jane, by cellphone. She obsesses that Jane might have been injured, or worse.

Ousmane, who hasn't seen his son, Ali, since he was 6, has been asked by his estranged wife to find the boy and bring him home. An unspoken fear felt by both is that their children might have been among the terrorists who were blown to pieces.

Ousmane and Elisabeth first meet after the imam in the heavily Muslim North London neighborhood where Jane lives gives him a picture of Ali taken in an Arabic-language class. After identifying the young woman sitting next to Ali as Jane, whose picture Ousmane noticed on an adjacent leaflet on a missing-persons board, he telephones Elisabeth. She impulsively shuns him.

This 90-minute film has the fussy, programmatic feel of an extended one-act play in which two worlds collide and connect through the shared bond of fearful parenthood. Or, as Elisabeth puts it a little too bluntly, "Our lives aren't that different."

As she keeps running into Ousmane at hospitals and a police station in their common search, she warms to him. Her hostility and condescension evaporate once they become a team. Ali and Jane (herself in the process of converting to Islam) were apparently lovers sharing quarters in a shabby red brick apartment building.

"London River" is nothing like its French-Algerian director's sprawling historical films, "Days of Glory" and "Outside the Law," which go out of their way to examine French and North African relations from an Algerian perspective. This movie is not concerned with history or politics. It is simply a well-drawn portrait of two lonely souls facing the shared possibility of grievous loss.

London River

Opens on Wednesday in Manhattan.

Directed by Rachid Bouchareb; written by Mr. Bouchareb, Zoé Galaron and Olivier Lorelle; director of photography, Jérôme Alméras; edited by Yannick Ker-goat; music by Armand Amar; production design by Jean-Marc Tran Tan Bá; produced by Mr. Bouchareb and Jean Bréhat; released by Cinema Libre Studio. At the Cinema Village, 22 East 12th Street, Greenwich Village. In English and French, with English subtitles. Running time: 1 hour 30 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Brenda Blethyn (Elisabeth), Sotigui Kouyaté (Ousmane), Francis Magee (Inspector 1), Sami Bouajila (Imam), Roschdy Zem (Butcher), Marc Baylis (Edward), Bernard Blancan (Ouvrier Forestier), Aurélie Eltvedt (Guide Chappelle), Diveen Henry (Female Inspector) and Gurdeep Chaggar (Travel Agent).

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