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Outlanders



Reviewed by: **Angus Wolfe Murray**

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Things have moved on since Riff-Raff. Now the building industry is filled with illegals from Eastern Europe. They have no protection against exploitation and are at the mercy of unscrupulous fixers who provide the sites with workers. Fear of the police is one thing, but the expectation of being paid is another. There is something called The Bump, involving holding back wages until the end of a job when the employer flits with the money. When you have no papers, you have no rights. When you have no family, you have no one to plead your case.

Co-writer/director Dominic Lees tells the story through Adam (Jakub Tolak), the younger of two Polish siblings, who comes to London after the death of their father. He is young, naïve, enthusiastic and soft hearted, a quality that will get him into trouble. His brother Jan (Przemyslaw Sadowski) has been in the city for two years, but is not at the address where Adam has been forwarding mail. Eventually, he finds him, employed as a fixer on a building site, in charge of a team of illegals. His ruthless attitude towards the men is excused (partially) by the treatment he received when first he came over.

The joy at being reunited with his brother is quickly dashed when a series of incidents open Adam's eyes to the reality of what Jan has become, a ruthless operator in a criminal underworld of squatter labour crews, where a man's life is worth as much as his ability to finish the job. The emotional tie between brothers, manipulated by Jan and suffered by Adam, is expressed with an absence of sentimentality, genuine feeling and increased tension.

Adam's character might be criticised for being too nice, although Tolak plays him with a subtlety and understanding that adds a layer of decency to a film so harsh. He brings humanity back to the circus of horror that is an illegal immigrant's lot. Even his tenuous love affair with a Russian girl (Alexis Raben) is given the benefit of hope.

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Lees has made a docu-drama of sorts, in which his knowledge of the milieu feels entirely genuine. The personal story is recounted against a cityscape that leaves bare the warmth of human kindness and yet, as a film, it is not too dark to see, nor too hard to weep, nor too violent to watch. The future lies with Adam. As a rites-of-passage, his is well worth sharing.

Reviewed on: 25 Oct 2008

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The fate of illegal immigrants on a