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Outlanders

Film Review by Magdalena Tulaza, October 2008

Director: Dominic Lees; Release date: 24 October

Emigration has become a huge part of Eastern European reality as thousands of people have decided to leave in search of a better life. Most people in Eastern Europe have friends or family members abroad they are waiting to hear from. Many young people leave for education, experience or simply lifestyle. But most emigrants leave their secure, familiar neighbourhoods "za chlebem" (literally "for bread") to provide their families with money to fulfill their basic needs. Lack of language, inability to adjust and, most of all, fear of the unknown make this group vulnerable and susceptible to abuse.

Surprisingly, few writers and filmmakers have expressed interest in the subject. Is it not important enough, or too difficult to handle? After having heard about Dominic Lees' new film I was glad that a British director took the challenge, and was curious to see if he could successfully introduce the subject to an international audience. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

The film is based on a true story of two Polish brothers, Adam (Jakub Tolak) and Jan (Przemyslaw Sadowski). After the death of their father Adam comes to London to join his older brother. He quickly discovers a business run by Jan and becomes involved in his criminal activities. Jan is in charge of hiring and supervising illegal workers on an east London construction site. Problems begin when one of the workers dies in a workplace accident.

After watching the film one cannot stop wondering who the "outlanders" are supposed to be. Are they the illegal workers from places like Russia and Lithuania who work illegally for Jan? If yes, why are we so vaguely introduced to them? We see the workers run away from the site when police arrive; we can see them being transported by boat across the English Channel and having their passports taken away; we see one of the Russian workers die at the construction site; but that is still not enough. These workers are not "humanised" enough and their part in the film seems to be just a backdrop for the brothers' story. We do not witness their fear. We cannot see them fight or surrender.

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Is *Outlanders* about the two brothers, incompetently played by two Polish TV soap opera actors? They are definitely not typical Poles coming to Britain and don't represent the group. From the first time the brothers reunite in London they decide to speak English exclusively, which makes it all the more unrealistic. Maybe they would be better characters if we understood Jan's path to becoming a "bad guy", or if we were better introduced to Adam's moral dilemma: to protect his brother or not.

This film is an attempt to tackle the very important topical issue of illegal workers and the conditions under which they work. Instead we are offered a shallow TV soap opera story lacking strong characters and suspense. I look forward to seeing other attempts to tackle this subject, because this certainly did not satisfy.

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