

THE VISITOR

US, 2008, d. Thomas McCarthy



A fine film to be recommended. It is small-budget and modest but it has a strong impact emotionally and is a challenge to the audience's sense of humanity.

Thomas McCarthy is a full-time actor but he made his first film, again one with great humane appeal, *The Station Agent*, in 2003. Now he has written *The Visitor*, a screenplay that is often understated but is intelligent and rings true in its attention to character detail as well as directing it.

McCarthy says that he had actor Richard Jenkins in mind while he was writing the character of Walter. Jenkins is a frequent supporting actor but this is his opportunity for a leading role, one that he fully justifies. It is a well-rounded performance. He is a sixtyish widower who lectures at a Connecticut college, but who has withdrawn into himself and into the stale routines of academia. His main attempt to come out of himself, to learn to play the piano, comes to nothing.

Actually, music is a key factor in the drama. Walter's wife was a concert pianist. When he finds two illegals occupying his New York apartment, he is shocked but offers them some temporary refuge. He is rewarded by finding that Syrian Tarek (a charismatically genial Haaz Sleiman) plays drums. It is wonderful (and encouraging for those who are not as young as they used to be and who sometimes feel stuck in their ruts) to watch Walter open up as a person as he shares the life of the two and learns to play the drums himself.

But Tarek and his Senegalese companion (Danai Gurira) are continually wary about being picked up by the authorities and subject to detention or, even worse, deportation. When Tarek is suddenly detained, it has a profound effect on Walter who makes many efforts on his behalf. Tarek's mother (the dignified Hiam Abbass of *The Syrian Bride*, *Free Zone*, *Lemon Tree*) comes to New York and, as she is helped by Walter as they go to a lawyer and as Walter visits Tarek, Walter warms to her and is introduced to a completely different world.

In a post September 11th 2001 America, authorities are necessarily wary but overly suspicious – and many officials seem to assume that rudeness and rough treatment is a way of combating terrorism. The treatment of Tarek neglects some basic human rights and Walter is shocked at this. So, there is a pervading melancholy at the end of the film.

It is a pity that so many moviegoers' budgets are eaten up by the big blockbusters which they enjoy when they could also invest in a moving and satisfying film like this one.

