

#BFIBLACKSTAR

Dirty Pretty Things (15)

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Part of: Black British Breakthroughs

Dir Stephen Frears / 2002 GB / 97 mins

Chiwetel Ejiofor, Audrey Tautou, Sergi López, Sophie Okonedo, Benedict Wong

Watching *Dirty Pretty Things* today takes us back to a time pre-Brexit, an era of optimism, booming house prices and an international outlook. You could still smoke indoors and the country was nursing a hangover post the enthusiasm of the millennium and what we thought would bring a better and fairer future for us all. A rosy glow of nostalgia is currently being thrown across this decade but Stephen Frears' thriller drags us into its neon-lit underworld and introduces us to the invisible people who are forced to keep the charade going. Trapped in anonymity we learn how illegal immigrants are literally flushing away our dirty secrets for us.

Chiwetel Ejiofor plays Okwe a Nigerian doctor who as an unregistered migrant is working as a hotel usher and cab driver. His years of training in medicine find him using his medical skills to treat his colleagues in the cab office for STDS. When not working he is resting, never sleeping, on Sennay's (Audrey Tautou) sofa herself an immigrant from Turkey who is claiming asylum in the UK. Constantly on the breadline and at the whims of bosses he chews khat to keep himself awake during his revolving door of a work life. Finding a human heart stuck in a toilet whilst working the overnight shift at the hotel he is told by his manager Sneaky that he has much to learn about this "beautiful country" and should keep quiet if he wants to get along otherwise he could be deported.

Okwe and Sennay's attempts to cling onto to their humanity and morality is what drives this story both are walking a fine line navigating daily threats of violence, blackmail, sexual assault and rape. This is not a choice in work, it is a means of survival and holding onto a dream that things may get better or least are better than what was before. As the Somali-British poet Warsan Shire says 'No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark. You only run for the border when you see the whole city running as well'. Such words remind us how 14 years on people are still running from home. Today Okwe and Sennay may have spent time in the refugee camps in Calais. *Dirty Pretty Things* is a snapshot of what those in the camps are likely to experience when or if they reach Britain, a reality of being under the abusive thumb of those who exploit and discard them.

Frears steers away from sentimentality and moral piety in this film. It could easily have depicted Okwe and Sennay as mere helpless victims and supplied the audience with a White saviour onto which they could project themselves as the 'good guy'. Instead Okwe and Sennay are smart, quick witted and determined a far cry from both the sensationalist headlines you find in the right wing and liberal press. Frears provides no opportunity for the audience to remove themselves from being complicit in the exploitation of illegal immigrants.

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The only White Middle Class Londoners you see in this film are introduced as exploiters or distant silent bodies that exist in an entirely separate world.

One of the factors that drove the UK to vote for Brexit was a concern over immigration often informed by “shocking” figures that were meant to suggest we were being “swarmed” and there was “simply not enough room”. However this country quite easily accommodates massive festivals of 200,000 people like Glastonbury who “swarm” onto 900 acres of land for one weekend without any fuss whatsoever. Yet somehow the majority of citizens seemed to believe that there is not enough room for the alleged one million illegal immigrants who are already living and working here. Britain is often accused of thinking that it’s more important than it is but it seems this fantasy does not extend to having any sense of it’s physical itself and it’s green, pleasant and spacious land.

Dirty Pretty Things also blows the belief that illegal immigrants are given access to benefits on arrival out of the water. We learn that those who have acquired false documentation have often paid a huge, life risking price for it. The suggestion that illegal immigrants are selling their organs to sign on at the dole office for a meagre £60 a week is evidence of the punitive racist and fantastical mindset that exists in Britain then and today. The government continue to let the British public create these fantasies by providing vague figures of how many people are kept in this dangerous limbo of illegal status. One has to ask the question could this be because their concern lies squarely with who will be their housekeeper, cleaner and dog walker. Who hides their dirty secrets in hotels, boardrooms and establishment buildings?

Watching Dirty Pretty Things post-Brexit reminds us how we have moved forward but in other ways we have remained static. We talk about the rise in racism and xenophobia. It has always been there. In the time since the film was released to the vote on EU membership how many people have arrived, worked, survived and died tidying our desks, building our houses and flushing away our transgressions? Whether voting to remain or Brexit we have all allowed the exploitation of others to keep our millennium eve fantasies alive.

Whilst researching the film for this article I viewed the cinema trailer and was shocked to see the erasure of Chiwetel Ejiofor whom to me is the main protagonist. As a Black cinema goer you would think he was playing a supporting role to Audrey Tatou. Now that Ejiofor is one of our top male actors in Britain his erasure from the trailer tells us a lot about how far we have come in terms of the industry believing that a Black lead, with a Nigerian name, can sell a British film. To see Dirty Pretty Things in the BFI’s Black Star festival programme respectfully affirms Ejiofor as the leading role as he always should have been.

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