



The Visitor

Rated PG-13. Our ratings: V- 1; L-2 ; S/N -3. Running time: 1 hour 48 min.

You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. Deuteronomy 10:19

Writer/director Tom McCarthy second film will surely make VP's Top Ten List, even as his first film *The Station Agent* did five years ago. *The Visitor* has more heart and soul than a hundred *Indiana Jones*, and it puts a human face on a hot-button issue, the illegal immigrant. The story is simple, but heart-moving. Sixty two year-old Walter Vale misses his deceased wife so much that he has withdrawn into himself, paying little heed to his teaching of economics or his students at a small Connecticut college. It has been months since he has visited the apartment that he and his wife had kept in Manhattan as a base for their once frequent visits to the City, where she performed as a concert pianist. Thus when he is forced to go to present a paper he and a colleague had written at a conference, he is surprised to discover that it is occupied.

Tarek is from Syria, and his lover Zainab from Senegal. Victims of a scam, they explain that in good faith they paid a broker for their sublease. Walter initially sends them away, but quickly changing his mind, runs after them to let them know they can stay, at least for a while. Thus begins a friendship that brings much joy, and eventually pain, into his numbed life. Zainab ekes out a living selling at a flea market the beautiful jewelry she makes, and Tarek is a professional musician playing the djembe, a West African drum played with bare hands. As they warm to each other (though Zainab remains wary) Tarek begins teaching Walter to play the drum. Both the music and his new-found friendship touches something deep within Walter's soul, lifting him out of his sorrowful solipsism. The professor often goes to the club where his teacher plays, and eventually joins him in a drum circle in Washington Square.

Thus far the film is one of resurrection or re-birth, but then when Tarek is picked up by the Immigration Service, the celebratory mood changes to a darker one—though it does bring Mouna, Tarek's mother, into Walter's hitherto solitary life. Providing lodging and support, he joins her in the effort to disentangle Tarek from his legal predicament of being an illegal alien. (Zainab cannot visit her lover in jail because she too is an illegal immigrant.) He and his mother had fled when his journalist father had been arrested and killed in a Syrian prison. For reasons known only to itself, the Immigration department had turned down their request for asylum, and so mother and son had slipped into mass of the undocumented aliens unable to return to their homelands without risking loss of freedom or life. Tom McCarthy does not preach to us about the inhumanity of our immigration policy since 9/11, but the starkness of the detention center and a scene on the Staten Island Ferry where Zainab points out the Statue of Liberty and where Twin Trade Towers used to stand readily makes his point.

The acting of the entire cast is as superb as the script, making this a memorable film experience. Indeed, if the Oscars were really based on talent, then character actor Richard Jenkins, given his first opportunity at stardom, would be nominated for Best Actor, but given the film's small box office, this is an unlikely happening. The restrained, bittersweet conclusion leaves us thoughtful and with a deep appreciation of what a good film can offer. Were enough people to see the film, perhaps we as people would be led back to consider once again the Biblical concern for welcoming the sojourner as a model for national policy—was that not the basis for the poem by Emma Lazarus enshrined on the base of the Statue that once had beckoned to so many "visitors" who came to stay in this country?.

For Reflection/Discussion

1) How is Walter like many men who have lost a beloved wife? Why do you think that his teaching of economics is not enough for him? Does he seem to have any faith that can bring him comfort

and hope?

2) Why might he be taking piano lessons? (What was the vocation of his wife?)

3) How is his discovery of the couple staying in his apartment the break in his routine needed to restart his life? What do you think of his invitation to the couple to stay on?

4) How is Tarek the agent of grace whom Walter needs? How is Walter's taking up the drum both a connection with his deceased wife and an affirmation of his own individuality? What meaning do you see in Walter's selling his piano? (A moving on? To whom did he sell it?)

5) How does Tarek's arrest enliven Walter even more? How is our Immigration Department like a machine? Did you appreciate that the usual big speech and such in opposing it were not resorted to in this film?

6) How does the sight of the Statue of Liberty and the poster on the wall of the detention center combine to convey the filmmaker's message?

7) Who in your life has been like Tarek, awakening you to the rhythmic music of life?

8) Director Tom McCarthy's first film was *The Station Agent*, a delightful film also concerned with relationships that transform lives, so you might compare the two.