

The Visitor

Cert 15 USA 104 mins

Crew

Director	Tom McCarthy
Screenplay	Tom McCarthy
Cinematography	Oliver Bokeberg
Music/Score	Jan A P Kaczmarek

Cast

Prof. Walter Vale	Richard Jenkins
Mouna	Hiam Abbas
Tarek	Haaz Sleiman
Zainab	Danai Gurira
Barbara	Marian Seldes
Jacob	Richard Kind

Synopsis

Connecticut, present day. Withdrawn university professor Walter reluctantly agrees to speak at a New York conference. When he arrives at his New York apartment, which he hasn't visited for 25 years, he finds illegal immigrants Tarek and Zainab living there. The couple leave, but Walter feels guilty and lets them stay until they can find another flat. Tarek, a musician, teaches Walter to play the African djembe drum. When busking with Walter one day, Tarek is arrested and taken to a detention centre. Walter visits him and arranges for a lawyer to defend him. Zainab moves out of Walter's apartment. Tarek's mother, Mouna, arrives from Michigan, where she and Tarek lived for five years after they left Syria following Tarek's father's imprisonment.....

Abridged from Sight & Sound, July 2008



Review

Just two projects into his filmmaking career, writer-director-actor Tom McCarthy is already establishing himself as the best friend of the veteran character actor. His breakthrough debut, *The Station Agent*, gave Peter Dinklage a star-making lead role after a string of scene-stealing supporting turns. McCarthy's follow-up, *The Visitor*, does the same for Richard Jenkins, a Coen brothers fixture and ubiquitous supporting player with a pasty complexion and the hangdog face of a depressed mid-level bureaucrat.

In a rare lead performance, Jenkins stars as a melancholy professor sleepwalking glumly through his life and career. His terminally beige existence begins to change when he encounters a vibrant international couple living illegally in an apartment he keeps in New York: an ebullient Arab drummer (Haaz Sleiman) and his understandably skittish African girlfriend (Danai Gurira). Jenkins begins taking percussion lessons from Sleiman, and as they give in to the rhythm, an unlikely friendship develops, though in American independent films, unlikely friendships tend to develop with more frequency than in the real world. Just when the film threatens to devolve into a variation on *Shall We Dance*, it takes a sharp political turn once Sleiman is arrested and placed in a detention center for illegal immigrants. Jenkins jumps to action on his new friend's behalf and develops a tentative, unsteady acquaintance with Sleiman's beautiful mother that threatens to turn into something more.

As with *The Station Agent*, *The Visitor* is a low-key, naturalistic, beautifully observed character study about the quiet angst of the buttoned-down soul. It's an actors' showcase characterized by subtlety and restraint rather than flashy histrionics; like Dinklage in *The Station Agent*, Jenkins maintains a great stillness at the core of his finely modulated performance as he undergoes a gradual emotional thaw. McCarthy imbues a hoary old staple of low-budget American film—an unlikely conglomeration of misfits who come together to form an unlikely family—with sensitivity and grace. Like few of his filmmaking peers, he understands and respects the power of quiet, and how a whisper can be as explosive as a shout.

Nathan Rabin The Onion AV Club 10 April 2008