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The Unknown Girl (15)

dir: Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne

Starring: Adèle Haenel, Olivier Bonnaud

Sponsor: Marilyn Tompkins

This review contains plot details. It is reproduced with the kind permission of Sight and Sound magazine

Synopsis: Liège, the present. Dr Jenny Davin works as a locum in a medical practice in the city. One evening, after the surgery is closed, she refuses to answer the door when the bell rings. Sometime later the police arrive, asking to see footage from a security camera. Jenny learns that the person who called at the surgery has been found dead. She is concerned by this and vows to find out who the patient was. She discovers that the victim was an African migrant who was being forced to work as a prostitute. She is threatened by a stranger. Determined to atone for her error, Jenny finally tracks down both the person responsible for the girl's death and the girl's sister.

"A good doctor has to control his emotions," marks Dr Jenny Davin (Adèle Haenel) sternly informs her cowed intern Julien (Olivier Bonnaud), providing an ironic prologue to a sequence of events that will see her tap into her own somewhat repressed feelings in order to fully serve her responsibilities as a medic. It's the following irritable exchange with Julien - he wants to open the door to a patient, she insists it's too long after surgery hours - that kicks off the Dardenne brothers' latest moral thriller, this time framed as a modern *noir* with Jenny as self-styled gumshoe and the shiftless, shifting world of Belgium's immigrant populations as the context.

The late caller turns out to be a prostitute of African descent who dies in mysterious circumstances soon thereafter, and whose identity is unknown when the police find her body. Jenny's stunned realisation that "If I'd opened the door, she would still be alive", prompts a rethink of her own professional path - having just accepted a job in a fancy private clinic, she U-turns to take one running a public practice for uninsured punters instead - as well as about of amateur sleuthing. Jenny's investigative gaze falls not only on the identity of the deceased woman, but also the aspects of her own character that played into the tragedy. "I stopped you from going (to answer the door) just because you wanted to," she tells Julien. "To get the upper hand."

There's something breathtaking about this moment, both in terms of what it recognises about human interconnectedness - that an impulsive moment of mean-spiritedness can have monumental consequences - and what it reveals about the Dardennes' storytelling. Jenny's state of mind at the beginning of the film - stressed, hectoring, slightly sadistic towards her mild-mannered charge - is explained in terms of its specific spurs, but wholly familiar nonetheless: we've all been there. Part of the Dardennes' rarity as storytellers is their capacity to recognise not only basic moral character and social circumstances but also *mood* as pivotal in how things pan out for people. Jenny's life is derailed and another's ended in part by a bad mood, so fragile is a influence on what happens to us and what are actions set in motion. Jenny's crusade to find out more about the dead woman is an attempt to assuage her own trauma, and also a moral awakening to her capacity to affect



change.

This awareness of one's impact on the world, positive or negative, deliberate or accidental, is shadowed in Jenny's ongoing interactions with her patients. Her cool, stoical behaviour is clearly the result of years of practised professional *froideur*, but this is no clichéd case of a chilly female scientist having traded in an emotional life for a professional one. Her patients love her: they give her gifts; one composes a song in celebration of her. Her coolness is part of what is valued about her; earnest attention to rules is how she demonstrates care.

This complexity is given full expression by Haenel's subtle performance, which delicately expresses Jenny's smallest flickers of concern, fear or pleasure, and gradually turns an initially unprepossessing character into a figure of intense sympathy. Unusually for any protagonist, and particularly for a female one, Jenny is not categorised in terms of her personal relationships; we're told nothing of her family or any love life she might have. Her relationship with Julien clearly exceeds than merely professional, but the precise nature of the feelings between them - maternal, fraternal, platonic, would-be romantic? - is kept obscure to the viewer, as perhaps it is to them. Once more, this awareness of life's indistinctness is what elevates *The Unknown Girl* above both its genre context and its socio-political agenda. The dead girl is not the only unknown; Jenny is also an enigma, to herself and to us.

Inescapably, this is a film in which the death of a prostituted woman from an impoverished black community provides emotional catharsis for an educated and financially secure white woman, through whose perspective the entire story is filtered. That the dead woman's sister eventually thanks Jenny for her investigation, reveals the woman's real name (misidentified by the police) and admits her own part in the disappearance will sit ill with some, as an improbable and overly convenient offer of absolution of white guilt. But the discomfort stirred by this scene can also be read as part of the film's moral challenge. That the police have complacently closed a file with the wrong name on it leaves us with the troubling awareness that other unknown girls and untold stories abound, without becoming anyone's private quest.

Credits

Dr Jenny Davin	Adèle Haenel
Julien	Olivier Bonnaud
Bryan's father	Jérémie Renier
Bryan	Louka Minnella
Cybercafe cashier	Nadège Ouedraogo
Bryan's mother	Christile Cornil
Lambert son	Olivier Gourmet
Lambert father	Pierre Sumkay
Dr Habran	Yves Larec
Inspector Ben Mahmoud	Ben Hamidou
inspector Bercaro	Laurent Caron
Dr Riga	Fabrizio Rongione
Little Ilyas	Sabri Ben Moussa
Little Ilyas's mother	Hassiba Halabi
Diabetic patient	Jean-Marc Balthazar
Lucas	Thomas Doret
Felice Koumba the unknown girl	Ange-Déborah Goulehi
Directors	Jean-Pierre & Luc Dardenne
Screenplay	Jean-Pierre & Luc Dardenne
Director of Photography	Alain Marcoen
Editor	Maie-Helene Dozo
Art Direction	Igor Gabriel
Sound	Jean-Pierre Duret, Julien Sicart
Costume	Maira Ramedhan-Levi
	Belgium/France/Italy 2016
	106 mins

Another View

At their best, the Dardenne siblings construct compelling dramatic puzzles which don't appear to be constructed at all. Instead their stories mark some inevitable destiny set in motion by their hard-pressed characters' agonising decisions. Films like *The Son* and *L'Enfant* generate a palpable moral force precisely because they don't appear to be pushing our buttons, just showing us a drama so real it doesn't need any music or fancy camerawork.

The Dardennes' genius though, is to conceive and stage these confrontational everyday tales in a way that's so persuasive we rarely even conceive of the machinery and endeavour which has put them in place. True, the casting of marquee actresses like Cécile de France in *The Kid with a Bike* and Marion Cotillard in *Two Days, One Night* has made their recent stuff a little more conventional, but even then the material has remained strong enough to impact at almost the same level as their earlier high-fibre fare.

Actually, Cotillard was due to return in this latest offering, about a young doctor in a rough canal-side corner of Liège, haunted by the fate of a young prostitute who'd buzzed after closing time on the surgery door and been ignored. The girl was then murdered nearby, leaving the medic ravaged by guilt and keen to do something, anything to make amends. It's certainly a poser of a set-up, and with Adèle Haenel replacing Cotillard in the central role, the fact she doesn't bring the same cinematic baggage with her (she's best known as one of the aquatic ensemble in Céline Sciamma's *Water Lilies*) makes her already sharply focused performance all the more convincing. She's a good doctor. She cares. She's also, however, a bit of a control freak. So is she driven by inner goodness to try and find the girl's killer, or is it just that she can't allow anything in her ordered little world to spiral without her control?

So far, so absorbing, but somehow the old chestnut of the doc who turns detective just belongs to the world of afternoon TV, and, uncharacteristically, the Dardennes falter when it comes to their artful way with plotting. The machinery here is all too obvious, since the unfolding of the story essentially depends on various individuals confessing their knowledge of events. The dogged physician is certainly a determined woman but carries no physical threat or legal authority, making progress only too convenient. What's more, every time the buzzer goes at the surgery, we start thinking, 'Oh, that'll be another nugget of exposition then', underlining the loss of credibility crucial to the Dardennes' familiar mastery. We keep watching, of

course, but it's all just slightly ordinary.

What registers most strongly, in fact, is a moment outside the creaky plot mechanics, where the stressed-out Haenel has to drive somewhere in a hurry, and the camera keeps her profile in tight focus as she screeches round the streets. Her performance is so on-it, we're there with her. Believing, hoping, caring for her. Shame the rest of the movie never hits the same peak of intensity.

Trevor Johnston: Little White Lies

Our next film: Friday May 4th, 7.30pm
Call Me By Your Name (Italy 2016. Cert 15)

Nominated for 4 Oscars this year (and winner of the award for Best Adapted Screenplay), *Call Me By Your Name* explores the developing relationship between 17-year old Elio and Oliver, who arrives at the Italian villa where Elio and his family are spending the summer, as research assistant to Elio's father. Director Luca Guadagnino has a deserved reputation for the sensitive way his films explore the complexities of love: here, he charts the growing pains of a first love with great sensitivity. Graced by fabulous locations and top quality performance, *Call Me By Your Name* is one of the great romantic films of our time and has wowed audiences and critics alike.

Programme News

Members' nominations for the new season of films have now closed. However there is still time to vote for your choice of members classic to be included in next season's program voting ends this weekend.

During the summer we will be joining forces with The venue to support to film events in the city. On June 8th and 9th, two films will be screened as part of the commemoration of the RAF centenary. In early July we are holding the 2nd Cinemathèque festival, to celebrate the work of Lincolnshire school children in film 4 days of events are being arranged, 3 of which include screenings that are open to the public.#

Full details of each programme will be announced next month.

Membership news

Details of the process for joining the society for the 2018-19 season will be made available to members from next Monday. Please watch out for emails, posts on social media and announcements on our website and in film notes. Membership opens for next season on May 14th and will remain open throughout the summer.