

ALI & AVA (15)

GENRE: COMEDY DRAMA | **DIRECTOR:** CLIO BARNARD | **STARRING:** CLAIRE RUSHBROOK, ADEEL AKHTAR | **DURATION:** 95 MINUTES | **LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH | **RELEASE DATE:** 4 MARCH 2022 | **DISTRIBUTOR:** ALTITUDE FILM ENTERTAINMENT



This warm and gentle romance from Clío Barnard (*The Arbor*, *The Selfish Giant*, *Dark River*) is firmly rooted in its Bradford locale, addressing love in later life and undercutting the divisiveness we hear in contemporary politics.

Ali (Adeel Akhtar) is a genial landlord, full of bonhomie, offering a helping hand to his tenants (though still, presumably, collecting their rent) and engaging with their children. He used to be a DJ, “Bangla by day, Electro at night”, and music is still his passion and his escape. The film opens with Ali, standing on his car on a misty morning, dancing to the beats in his headphones.

Ava (Claire Rushbrook) is a classroom assistant, loving mother and grandmother; her home is always ready to welcome her children and grandchildren and she keeps a gentle eye on the kids in her classroom. She also escapes into music, listening to country and folk songs on her bus journeys to and from work, and she is steeped in the Irish music of her background.

Ali is separated from his wife, but they are still living together and he still loves her and hasn’t yet told his close-knit family, while Ava has given up on love after several failed relationships and the death of her ex-partner. But when they meet at the school gates and find joy in each other’s humour, gentle compassion and love of their community, their mutual attraction builds. They help each other find their deeper desires: for Ava, to be seen as a

whole person, beyond her maternal, nurturing persona; for Ali to share joy and an engagement with children to be accepted in his ‘0-70’ chaos.

Set over a few weeks in wintery Bradford, the film is largely set in chilly mornings and crisp or rainy evenings. Working days roll around but we see the characters at the beginning or end of the school day. It is a film which takes joy in the daily roll of life: the lights of the city, fireworks, a passing pony and trap, and always music. The colours of the film are wonderful – it is suffused with cold blue light, with touches of warmth, from Ali’s red cap or mustard jumper, the primary colours of kids’ toys or the lights of Bradford.

This is a film which quietly confronts perceptions of race and class, who belongs and why. Ava comes from immigrant stock just as much as Ali, even if her whiteness and northern accent belie her Irish heritage. Ava’s daughter loves dancing to Bolly-robics although her son has taken on his father’s racism, Ali’s family are middle class and look down on the ‘chavs’ who live in Holme Wood (Ava’s estate). But the kindness of most of the characters shine through as they react to each other as humans, not categories. With a desire to confront the uglier parts of our national narrative spun since 2016 and a rootedness in the reality of warm communities and love across divides, the film shares DNA with Francis Lee’s *God’s Own Country* (as well as views of the sparkling lights of Bradford) and the anthology *The Uncertain Kingdom*.

DID YOU KNOW?

The characters of Ali and Ava are based on two people Clio Barnard met when she was working in and around Bradford on her previous films *The Arbor* and *The Selfish Giant*. While working on *The Arbor* she met actor, DJ and landlord Moey Hassan and, while making *The Selfish Giant* she met Rio, a mother and teaching assistant. She worked with Bradford-based writer Kamal Kaan as script consultant to develop a story spun from these real people. Barnard refers to this as 'bio-fiction' (as opposed to 'autofiction'). Barnard says: "What would happen if you took melodrama as a genre and applied it to a social-realist version of Bradford that's based on real people? It's an opportunity to think about what it means to be part of a community. There's a lot of kindness, generosity and support in Bradford and I wanted to see that writ large on the big screen."

DID YOU KNOW?

Shaun Thomas, who plays Ava's son Callum played Swifty, one of the two lead youngsters in Barnard's *The Selfish Giant*.

AUTHOR BIO

Rebecca led the team which set up and ran Saffron Screen, an independent cinema in Essex screening a broad range of film from mainstream to art house. She programmed the cinema for over 10 years and ran successful film festivals and seasons as well as hosting many Q&As with industry talent. She is now a film freelancer taking on roles in exhibition, audience development, writing and Q&As, alongside roles in production including locations and assisting with producing. She is also a trustee of Refugees at Home and TIC Box Theatre.



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