

Low-key, anti-Prison-Planet film will shake you

Written and Directed by Thomas McCarthy

Richard Jenkins ... Prof. Walter Vale
Haaz Sleiman ... Tarek Khalil
Danai Jekesai Gurira ... Zainab
Hiam Abbass ... Mouna Khalil
Marian Seldes ... Barbara

*Professor Walter Vale: [Upon learning Tarek has been deported... from the facility in Queens]
Guard: He is no longer with us.
Walter: Was he moved to another facility, to another state?
Guard: All I know.
Walter: Would you please find someone who does know?
Guard: Hold on.
Walter: Appreciate it. Thank you, thank you very much.
Guard: He's been removed.
Walter: Removed to where?
Guard: Deported.
Walter: Deported when?
Guard: Deported this morning.
Walter: No, how can that be? Is there uh, um, any way that I can contact him?
Guard: I don't think so.
Walter: You don't think so. What kind of an answer is that?
Guard: I'm sorry, sir, that's all the information I have. Now, please step away from the window. You can contact IC if you want to, number's on the wall. Now, step away from the window. Sir, for the last time, step away from the window.
Walter: [Walking away, then slowly coming back, tremor in his voice, tears of anger and pain in his eyes] You can't just take people away like that, do you hear me? He was a good man. A good person. It's not fair. We are not just helpless children. He had a life. Do you hear me? I mean, do you hear me? What's the matter with you?*

If there's a word to describe *The Visitor*, it's helpless... and unjust, and sad, and inhuman, and totalitarian, etc. Also completely unnecessary. So this is a message movie, and you can tell from the quote (patiently transcribed from the DVD) that the message is there is no more pressing need than to liberate all our political systems—particularly the United States—from their perverse, mindless bonecrushing aggression upon peaceful, nonaggressive people the law brands as "different."

In this case the "visitor" Tarek Kahlil (Haaz Sleiman) is different because some government paperwork got lost in the mail and he didn't show up at an immigration hearing. In other cases, the different are individuals who prefer various unapproved pharmaceuticals—check out my own modest story in that realm here. The list of the several consensual activities the state brands different is virtually endless:

...gambling; drugs: opiates, cocaine, crack, amphetamines, psychedelics, marijuana; misuse of legal drugs; religious and psychologically therapeutic use of drugs; regenerative use of drugs and other unorthodox medical practices; prostitution; pornography, obscenity, etc.; violations of marriage: adultery, fornication, cohabitation, bigamy, polygamy, same-sex marriage; homosexuality; unconventional religious practices; unpopular political views; suicide and assisted suicide; the Titanic Laws: public drunkenness, loitering, vagrancy, seat belts, motorcycle helmets, public nudity, transvestism...[1]

And for every one of the exercises of difference, the government(s) exacts a penalty—usually involving incarceration and a lot of general inconvenience. And in light of movies such as *The Visitor*, we need to add the crime of not having government papers that entitle you to stand foot inside the ol' US of A. There are several other excellent films that document the plight of the undocumented: in the blockbuster category,

check out Tom Hanks' 2004 *The Terminal*. In fact both movies are set in the New York City ecosystem with its large passage of immigrants.

Professor Walter Vale (Richard Jenkins) is a dull, seemingly passionless widower who teaches an economics class at a college in Connecticut. Although he retains a wistful inclination toward musical expression—his wife was an accomplished pianist—you get the impression he's in the preliminary phases of shutting down his system. An example of how he's plugging himself out emotionally is when he refuses to accept a student's late paper... deciding instead to follow the rules slavishly.

One day another professor from his department comes into Vale's office and informs Vale that Vale needs to attend a conference in New York City in the place of one of a colleague, with whom Vale authored a major paper on third world economics. Nah, says Walter, and even confesses that he is coauthor in name only. Doesn't matter says the other professor, the dean will insist. So off Walter heads into the city where he and his wife, when she was alive, have maintained an apartment for several years.

Lo and behold someone has illegally sublet the apartment to a young couple: the girl, Zainab (Danai Jekesai Gurira) from Senegal and the guy, Tarek Khalil (Haaz Sleiman) from Syria. They both have immigration issues and are technically illegal though not through any faults of their own. This genuine individuality is what strikes you in any decent movie bearing on persons being on the unlawful side of a geographical boundary (e.g. *Dirty Pretty Things*, 2002, or even one of my top 10s, *Lone Star*, 1996). And it comes through loud and clear in *The Visitor*.

THESE ARE HUMAN BEINGS, THESE ARE HUMAN BEINGS!

Vale, who beneath the unhappy surface is caring, comes to sympathize with the couple, first by letting them continue living in his place then by opening up with Tarek and having Tarek teach him the African drums. I love Tarek and Zainab, the simple pleasures and the commonality of their struggle to make a living, hoping against hope that they may someday flourish in America as others do, and even have a family of their own.

Alas, a freak incident at a subway gate, where Tarek gets stuck then finally climbs thru without the turnstile sequencing properly—he has a paid-for ticket—brings the attention of the boys in blue. Tarek's papers are not in order and the Homeland Stupidity-empowered morons haul him away to the 10th precinct, then later to a detention center for undocumented in Queens. Walter is there at the subway; naturally all hell breaks loose when Walter returns home to tell Zainab. Then Tarek's mother Mouna (Hiam Abbass) shows up from Michigan.

Well, I suppose that tells as much of the setup as needs to put out there. Obviously, the story is how to achieve justice for Tarek, what his support system needs to do to free him from the clutches of a system whose only real purpose seems to be to grind helpless, voiceless people into fine sand. It's practically a documentary on the soulless quality of the immigration enforcement juggernaut... getting it exactly right when it portrays the drones who staff the offices and facilities responsible for crushing the bones of alien life forms... who look a lot like you and me.

The parallel story is how Walter Vale grows as an advocate, now having a cause and a friendship, experiencing emotions with Zainab, with Tarek, and now with Mouna that he's never had before. This is definitely Richard Jenkins—a veteran character actor with dozens of credits, you may remember him as the father from HBO's *Six Feet Under*—finest hour as an actor. Walter begins to reexperience true life, it waxes in him just as it seems to be waning for his new young friend.

There's a scene I simply must mention: some days after Tarek's detention, the two women and Walter take a trip on the Staten Island Ferry. Zainab and Tarek love to simply ride back and forth on the ferry when they get the chance—it's free of charge—to give them the feeling of coming to America and freedom. Zainab tells Walter how Tarek points excitedly at the Statue of Liberty and the view of Lower Manhattan, it's everything he's ever dreamed of.

You'll be saying to yourself, "and this is how we treat the people whose only crime is they want to worship at our altar." One of the best movies you'll see, and one hopes a cornerstone for recovering liberty... for everyone.

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[1] From Peter McWilliams superlative work of art, Ain't Nobody's Business if You Do: The absurdity of consensual crimes in our free country.

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