

MOVIE REVIEW: CHILDREN OF MEN (2006)___8/10

Tyranny and terror in a world of the "death of birth"

Directed by Alfonso Cuarón

Screenplay by Alfonso Cuarón

Based on the novel by P.D. James

Clive Owen	Theo Faron
Julianne Moore	Julian Taylor
Michael Caine	Jasper Palmer
Chiwetel Ejiofor	Luke
Charlie Hunnam	Patric
Claire-Hope Ashitey	Kee

This is an escape thriller set in a dystopian (opposite of utopian) England 20 years into the future, where for reasons that are never made explicit women of the world stopped having children (ca. 2009). While the continents crumble into chaos, England holds on through an extreme xenophobic (foreigner-bashing) police state.

Sounds depressing, right? Well, sure. But the plot is tight and interesting, and high hopes counter the dangerous bleakness.

Londoner Theo Faron (Owen), a former peace activist with a reasonably comfortable position in the government, has a run-in with his still-revolutionary (kind of a pro-immigrant movement known as Fish) ex-wife, Julian (Moore). She wants him to use his connections to help smuggle an illegal immigrant Kee (Ashitey) out of the country.

Kee has miraculously conceived and is close to bearing her child. The Fishes are loosely associated with a sea-faring group called The Human Project, which has arranged to accept Kee with the goal of restarting the species. In addition to providing the transit papers, Theo winds up as Kee's escort.

The everpresent state cameras and police are always on their tails, then an internal Fish power struggle threatens to upend the mission. Their route to the sea is full of obstacles. Theo and Kee, with a woman serving as Kee's birth coach, make their way into the woods where Theo's longtime friend, Jasper (Caine) sets them up for the final leg.

Jasper is as positive a character as can be imagined under the circumstances, a long-haired philosopher of peace and love; he keeps his elevated niche in society's food chain because he furnishes prime ganja (marijuana) to his several contacts in the establishment.

In one tender scene, Jasper conveys to the birth coach the history behind Theo and Julian, how they had a child themselves 18 years ago who sadly didn't survive a major flu epidemic. It's a memorable role for Michael Caine, and I speculate it will resonate with the other performances into an eventual masterpiece-classic of a film.

Like Edmond O'Brien in the original 1984, some roles and some pictures stay in one's imagination forever. As for the species-wide feeling of childlessness, one poignant scene in a broken-windowed, deserted grade school says it all.

Another memorable quality of the story, despite the wholly awful surroundings, lies in the simple and often funny humanity of the characters.

Clive Owen is great in his role, looking gaunt, pale, and frail. Claire-Hope Ashitey as Kee grows from a sassy kid of low circumstance to exude a warm, quick intelligence as she begins to grasp what's riding on her life and baby.

On the social message side, I'm reminded of a statement by Paul Hawken in *The Ecology of Commerce*. He warns that if we don't change our ways we will witness the "death of birth." That's the image *Children of Men* sends up, and what most of us will surely be encouraged by such movies to avoid.