



PREVIEW

The Old Oak

The Old Oak

Director: Ken Loach

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Production Company: Sixteen Films, Why Not Productions, Wild Bunch International, BFI, BBC Films, Les Films du Fleuve, France 2 Cinéma, Canal+, France Télévisions, Le Pacte, Cinéart, Ciné+, Casa Kafka Pictures, VOO, Be tv
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International Sales: Wild Bunch International

Executive Producers: Pascal Caucheteux, Grégoire Sorlat, Vincent Maraval

Producer: Rebecca O'Brien

Line Producer: Eimhear McMahon

Production Manager: Lloyd Lawson

Production Accountant: Habib Rahman

Unit Manager: Emily Turnbull

Location Manager: Mark Valentine

Assistant Director: Jamie Hamer

Script Supervisor: Susanna Lenton

Casting: Kahleen Crawford

Screenplay: Paul Laverty

Photography: Robbie Ryan

Stills Photography: Joss Barratt

Editor: Jonathan Morris

Production Designer: Fergus Clegg

Art Director: Lili Lea Abraham

Prop Master: Paul Campbell

Costume Designer: Joanne Slater

Title Design: Martin Butterworth

Composer: George Fenton

Recordist: Ray Beckett

Sound Editor: Kevin Brazil

Stunt Co-ordinator: Paul Heasman

Cast:

Dave Turner (T.J. Ballantine)

Ebla Mari (Yara)

Claire Rodgeron (Laura)

Trevor Fox (Charlie)

Chris McGlade (Vic)

Col Tait (Eddy)

Jordan Louis (Garry)

Chrissie Robinson (Erica)

Chris Gotts (Jaffa Cake)

Jen Patterson (Maggie)

Arthur Oxley (Archie)

Joe Armstrong (Joe)

Andy Dawson (Micky)

Maxie Peters (Tommy)

Rosa Crowley-Bennett, Bobby Meldrum
(union supporters)

Amna Al Ali (Fatima)

Yazan Al Shteivi (Bashir)

Diyaa Al Khalid (Salim)

Rahaf H (Nadia)

Neil Leiper (Rocco)

Micky McGregor (estate agent)

Rhys McGowan, Reuben Bainbridge, Jack Staples
(boys with dogs)

Ruby Bratton (Linda)

Michelle Bell (Molly)

Alex White (Max)

Debbie Honeywood, Mandy Foster,

Joanne Hague, Debbie Cook (hairdressers)

Christine Braxton (Sadie)

Jake Jarratt (Tony)

+ Q&A with director Ken Loach and writer Paul Laverty

If at any time in the last 60 years you were asked the question, 'Where do I look to find British political cinema?', the quick, if reductive, answer was one name: Ken Loach. That the long stretch of Loach's illustrious career was coming to an end was rumoured during the making of *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) and again with *Sorry We Missed You* (2019) and is once more with the release of *The Old Oak*. Happily, that means we now have a trilogy of 'last' films set in the north-east of England. The difference this time is that Loach is 87 years old and of waning stamina, so we can be more certain that a directorial career encompassing more than 50 films, documentaries and television dramas, right back to episodes of the police procedural *Z Cars* in 1964 and his feature debut *Poor Cow* in 1967, really is at the finish line – at least in terms of shooting drama films.

No other director can claim a more consistent and substantial body of work in political, and sometimes comic, cinema, one that takes in such reverberant titles as *Kes* (1969), *Hidden Agenda* (1990), *Raining Stones* (1993), *Land and Freedom* (1995), *Looking for Eric* (2009) and his two Cannes Palme d'Or winners *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* (2006) and *I, Daniel Blake*. Since 1996's *Carla's Song*, Paul Laverty has been Loach's main screenwriter and together, through 14 features, they've applied a focus of tender outrage to small, communal stories that most often enliven and illustrate the dire effects of political iniquity, usually here in the UK. *The Old Oak* is no exception.

The film begins with Syrian refugees arriving by coach in a former mining village by the sea in the north-east, to be barracked by a drunken racist. Seeing that one young Syrian woman, Yara (Ebla Mari), has a professional-looking camera, the drunk snatches it from her and it gets damaged in the scuffle. T.J. Ballantyne (Dave Turner), the landlord of The Old Oak, the last surviving local pub, offers to get it mended. He shows Yara photographs from the 1984 miners' strike hanging on the wall of the pub's unused back room. This is the first of several acts of kindness from this quiet, dog-owning divorcee towards the Syrians, gestures that anger those of his regulars more inclined to blame immigrants for their troubles, including his bitter former best friend Charlie (Trevor Fox). Others in the community, however, prove more welcoming and a gradual symbiosis develops alongside the festering rancour.

It should be no surprise that Loach and Laverty have zoned in on immigration, the 'hot button' issue of the current Tory government, to pose the question what happens when you put two traumatised communities together in a severely depleted environment. Everything revolves around the last pub standing, particularly the back room, where a food-sharing scheme devised with the Syrians exacerbates tensions. In poignant cultural contrast to the pub comes a moment when Yara visits Durham Cathedral during a choir rehearsal and ponders the fate of her homeland.

The Covid emergency and a drawn-out casting process meant that Laverty has called *The Old Oak* 'the toughest one we've made together'. It took six months to negotiate the casting of Syrians from the local community and a while to find the right Yara – Ebla Mari, a theatre teacher from the Golan Heights, came recommended by Palestinian director Annemarie Jacir. Former fireman Dave Turner was promoted to a lead after his small roles in *I, Daniel Blake* and *Sorry We Missed You*.

Nick James, *Sight and Sound*, October 2023

Ali Mohamed (*Syrian boy in video*)
Lola (*Marra the dog*)
Sasha (*3 legged dog*)
UK-France-Belgium 2023©
113 mins

A StudioCanal release

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Ken Loach, veteran of a formidable six-decade career in British film and television, has stated that *The Old Oak* may well be his last film. It is also the concluding part to a loose north-eastern trilogy of films in which middle-aged Geordies are bullied by Tory Britain and late capitalism. In *I, Daniel Blake* (2016), the austerity benefits system dehumanises the eponymous hero. In *Sorry We Missed You* (2018), delivery jobs and zero-hours contracts prove a tyranny rather than an opportunity. *The Old Oak* is a film about a man who has come to the end of his tether; he has lost his family but is hanging on to his livelihood and his community by a thread. Deprivation has bred division in his local streets and in the boozer he runs in a dying pit village in County Durham. In a community weakened by hostility and opposition, this is a film about giving up as much as fighting back. It sometimes feels like a melancholy warning against hope, the false promise of a better future.

Early on, as Dave Turner's T.J. sighs in exasperation and attempts once again to reposition the 'K' wobbling off the end of the sign on the titular pub, it's impossible to forget that this may be Loach's last cinematic statement. The desaturation of a final image that might otherwise signify the rebirth of collective spirit suggests at least a return to origins. Here, as in Loach's campaigning Wednesday Play *Cathy Come Home* (1966), housing is the heart of the matter, but these concerns are very different – when Syrian refugees are bussed in, and terraces sold to developers for a pittance, the locals are roused to malevolence. T.J. washes his hands of the fight, until a local community organiser and one of the refugees, a young photographer named Yara (Ebla Mari), remind him of how the village broke bread together during the 1984 miners' strike, in another lifetime. But can solidarity heal the bigotry that breeds online and in bellies full of bitter(ness)?

This is a sobering film indeed. While Loach's films typically offer some relief in levity, there's precious little humour here. T.J.'s dog Marra gambols on the beach, a splash of cheer, but narratively speaking, Loach taught us not to get too attached to pets as long ago as *Kes* (1969). *The Old Oak* seems to promise a moment of transcendence as Yara and T.J. attend an afternoon choir rehearsal at Durham Cathedral, but Loach purposefully swerves it, and Yara is reminded of the ruins of Palmyra. Cinematographer Robbie Ryan denies us a healing beam of light through the stained glass; the angelic choir is kept at a distance.

There is a glimmer of optimism: while the older men of the village are stuck in the past, mulling over the mining days as they drift towards prejudice (the most virulent bigot is, pointedly, the son of a scab), the women and children are more tolerant. The paragon of the younger generation is Yara, an exceptional photographer, fluent in English, who fearlessly attempts to bridge social divides. Her pictures capture the violent rage of her new neighbours on her first arrival, and then, once she has settled, more intimate images of friendship. She emphasises that this is by design: she tells T.J. that she framed her Syrian photographs in a way that emphasises hope and strength, after she had witnessed the horrors of war without a filter. Similarly, old pictures in the pub romanticise the strike, while its failure is evident everywhere else.

Is the unity that the villagers find in *The Old Oak* more than fleeting? Many come together to eat at T.J.'s community kitchen, or for a rare night of revelry at the pub, or in a gesture of shared grief, and again at the Durham Miners' Gala, but the saboteurs remain in place. The film is set in the summer of 2016: the Brexit vote that also overshadowed these months is not mentioned, though a 'Take Britain back' slogan is exposed for its essential racism on an online chatboard. This film, backed by a mix of British, French and Belgian funds, is already as stark a portrait of a broken, divided UK as you'll find. If this is Loach's last word, it is a damning one.

Pamela Hutchinson, *Sight and Sound*, October 2023