

FILM REVIEW; Charming Illegal Aliens Facing Family Upheaval - Correction Appended

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 **Correction Appended**

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Body

At the start of "In America," Sarah and Johnny Sullivan arrive at the United States-Canadian border in a swaybacked station wagon with their two daughters in the back seat. They are from Ireland, and they are coming to the United States illegally so Johnny can find work as an actor and they can start over after the death of their young son, Frankie.

With the help of their surviving children, the chirpy Ariel and the watchful, reserved Christy, they manage to **charm** their way past a suspicious immigration agent, who decides to believe that they are carefree vacationers rather than desperate migrants.

This modest, touching **film**, which opens today in selected cities, accomplishes a similar sleight of hand. The **family** drives wide-eyed through Times Square and alights in a cavernous, battered walk-up apartment that is quickly spruced up with colorful paint and scavenged furniture. The neighbors are a mostly harmless collection of addicts, hustlers and ordinary poor folk, as well as a reclusive painter named Mateo (Djimon Hounsou), who seems to be dying of AIDS and whom the girls befriend one Halloween.

Many of the elements in this **film** -- the picturesque poverty; the angelic, doomed man; the dead child; the hard-working, sorrow-afflicted parents; the cute, precocious daughters; the risky pregnancy toward the end -- seem to promise a sticky bath of shameless sentimentality. But instead, thanks to Jim Sheridan's graceful, scrupulously sincere direction and the dry intelligence of his cast, "In America" is likely to pierce the defenses of all but the most dogmatically cynical viewers.

Mr. Sheridan has accomplished this trick before, turning stories that might have otherwise foundered in maudlin excess into sharp, engrossing character studies. "My Left Foot," about the disabled artist Christy Brown, might have easily been a hectoring, smiley-**faced** treatise on the plight of the handicapped, just as "In the Name of the Father" might have been a lecture on the plight of Irish political prisoners and "The Field" a soapbox harangue on the plight of small landowners.

But Mr. Sheridan is more interested in particular people than in general plights, and what lingers in the mind after you have seen his movies is the rough, radiant individuality of his characters.

It helps that Paddy Considine and Samantha Morton, who play Johnny and Sarah, are not well-known movie stars, and that neither is much inclined toward ostentation.

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Ms. Morton, her hair cropped short and her enormous eyes stung with grief, seems to haunt the edges of the frame until you realize that the blunt, inarticulate force of her feeling is at the center of the drama.

Mr. Considine, with his gaunt, droopy features and darting eyes, guards Johnny's privacy behind a facade of genial good spirits.

That the two of them remain somewhat mysterious is fitting, because the movie, which Mr. Sheridan wrote with two of his daughters, perceives them largely through the eyes of their children.

The **family** survives through an unspoken pact of mutual protection that becomes plain to us only as it starts to unravel. The girls, played by real-life sisters, Emma and Sarah Bolger, agree not to notice how much their parents are suffering and to distract them from it as best they can.

"In America" is Mr. Sheridan's most personal movie so far -- just how personal will become clear when you see the dedication at the end -- and he is too modest to turn his **family**'s experiences into a parable of anything larger. The title of the movie sounds a little grandiose, but it is meant to evoke a postcard, or a child's diary (like the one Christy composes with her video camera): not "this is what it means to be in America" but "this is what we saw when we were there."

This movie, from moment to moment, feels small, almost anecdotal. It is only afterward that, like Mr. Sheridan's other **films**, it starts to grow into something at once unassuming and in its own way grand.

In America is rated PG-13 (Parents strongly cautioned). It has a few obscenities, one sex scene and a few moments of threatened violence.

IN AMERICA

Directed by Jim Sheridan; written by Mr. Sheridan, Naomi Sheridan and Kirsten Sheridan; director of photography, Declan Quinn; edited by Naomi Geraghty; music by Gavin Friday and Maurice Seezer; production designer, Mark Geraghty; produced by Mr. Sheridan and Arthur Lappin; released by Fox Searchlight Pictures. Running time: 103 minutes. This **film** is rated PG-13.

WITH: Samantha Morton (Sarah), Paddy Considine (Johnny), Djimon Hounsou (Mateo), Sarah Bolger (Christy) and Emma Bolder (Ariel).

<http://www.nytimes.com>

Correction

A **film review** yesterday about "In America" misstated the given name of the actress who plays Christy. As shown in the credit listing and in a picture caption, she is Sarah Bolger, not Elizabeth. In summarizing the plot, the **review** reversed details about Christy and her sister, Ariel (played by Ms. Bolger's real sister, Emma). Ariel is the chirpy sister; Christy is the watchful, reserved one. And it is Christy, not Ariel, who composes a child's diary with her video camera.

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Graphic

Photo: From left, Samantha Morton as Sarah, Sarah and Emma Bolger as Christy and Ariel, and Paddy Considine as Johnny in "In America." (Photo by Bernard Walsh/Fox Searchlight)

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