



In a Better World

(Danish: Hævnen, "Revenge")

Autumn
Season
2011

Release: 2010
Cert (UK): 15
Runtime: 119 mins
Directors: Susanne Bier

Cast: Mikael Persbrandt, Trine Dyrholm and Markus Rygaard



This well-acted, well-made Danish movie was the unexpected winner of the latest Oscar for best foreign language movie in a year that saw such films submitted as the French *Of Gods and Men*, the Algerian *Outside the Law* and the Thai *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* – not that we thought much of that last one in Keswick as I recall.

The film is structured around the parallel existence of two men. Anton (Mikael Persbrandt) is a doctor at an African refugee camp; he is away from home a lot and his marriage is in crisis. Claus (Ulrich Thomsen) is a businessman whose wife has just died of cancer, a catastrophic event which burdened his teenage son Christian (William Jøhnk Nielsen) with anger and unresolved grief. At school, Christian befriends Anton's son Elias (Markus Rygaard), a victim of bullies. With almost psychopathic insistence, Christian persuades Elias that the only true course of action is revenge. The movie's most disturbing and shocking scene is a little reminiscent of Christos Tsiolkas's novel *The Slap*: Anton intervenes in a petty playground quarrel involving Elias's little brother; the other parent furiously smacks Anton's face. Burning with humiliation on his father's behalf, Elias confides in his protector Christian, and things take their course from there.

Patterns of coincidence and correspondence are traced. Anton finds the tackling-the-bully dilemma relevant in his refugee camp; Anton and Claus both find that they are not sufficiently present in their sons' lives – but also that they cannot necessarily be blamed.

Some have felt this film is a useful and important comment on post-riot northern Europe.

However, the film has not been universally praised in spite of its Oscar. Derek Malcolm is more positive than some of his colleagues

'It's beautifully shot, especially in Africa, by Morten Soborg, and the two children are remarkable, which is often as much a tribute to the director as to them. It is strong and powerful in many ways but in the end what it tries to say seems less convincing than how it actually says it.'

Peter Bradshaw is much more damning 'Like a faintly preposterous cine-soap opera for haemophiliac-hearted liberals'