



Grow Your Own

97 minutes, 2007, UK

Director: Richard Laxton

Screenwriter: Frank Cottrell Boyce, Carl Hunter

Cast: Benedict Wong, Eddie Marsan, Omid Djalili, Philip Jackson, Olivia Colman, Diveen Henry

Gardeners at an English allotment are shaken up when a group of refugees are given plots there. Home-grown British comedy co-written by Frank Cottrell Boyce (24 Hour Party People, A Cock And Bull Story)

Review, Tom Hawker, Total Film

The allotment holds a curious place in Englishmen's hearts. A haven from home, where people can toil, relax or commune with nature. Trouble is, being more greenhouse than Grindhouse, *Grow Your Own* has a whiff of something uprooted from Sunday-night telly. In other words, your mum would love it. But Richard Laxton's comedy-drama also has a real heart and charm that defies cynicism, batting away the spectre of Alan Titchmarsh for an hour and a half.

It's loosely based on a real-life Liverpoolian allotment, where traumatised Balkan Civil War refugees were given plots of land as a source of both sustenance and therapy. The story tracks a year in the lives of the various plot-holders of Blacktree Road Allotment, whose quiet world is ruffled by two new arrivals: Diveen Henry's widowed Zimbabwean émigré Miriam (with son in tow) and broken, Chinese mute Kung Sang (Benedict Wong, who recently caught a similar case of mental sunstroke in *Sunshine*), who's unable to care for his two kids. As the seasons pass, the elder tenants and their new neighbours begin to connect and, inevitably, grow along with their produce.

Given such gentle subject matter, the director – whose *Life & Lyrics* was a taut and racy affair – loses an uphill battle to inject a sense of urgency. Plying his pen for the first time since his split with Michael Winterbottom, screenwriter Frank Cottrell Boyce also eschews the flights of fancy that dusted *A Cock And Bull Story* and Danny Boyle's *Millions*. Instead, he and co-writer Carl Hunter (formerly of '90s Scouse also-rans *The Farm*) lace their comic whimsy with the ever present – and brutally real – threat from immigration officers.

A strong cast of instantly recognisable TV faces infuse their stock characters with warmth and humour, with Eddie Marsan – taking time out from his stealthy rise in Hollywood flicks like *The Illusionist* and *Mission: Impossible III* – winning first prize as shy Little John, slowly flowering out of his Parka. But it's the film's good-natured optimism towards humanity that'll harvest many satisfied viewers along the way: a shiny, happy movie that doesn't lay it on with a trowel.

Verdict:

Grow Your Own has about as much edge as a prize melon, but even if the land's been well filled, there's still plenty of fertile soil here. Occasionally melancholy, often funny, this is touching, lyrical home-grown fare

Cultivating Grow Your Own

From the blog by screenwriter Frank Cottrell Boyce (2007)

Our 10-minute promo about an allotment scheme for asylum seekers blossomed into a full-length feature but can our film actually help the project?

Grow Your Own did not begin - as most of my films have done - with a round of pitches and commissions in film company offices. It grew from a seed that was planted and nurtured in "Art in Action" - a long-established community arts project based in Bootle. Carl Hunter - who helps the project - was approached by Margrit Ruegg and asked to make a short video to promote and help raise funds for an extraordinary enterprise. Margrit is a psychotherapist and the director of the [Family Refugee Support Project](#) in Liverpool. The people she works with have had terrible experiences in their home countries, and were trying to cope with the physical and mental aftereffects of those experiences in the sometimes inhospitable atmosphere of their adopted city. Under Margrit's scheme, these people were given - not drugs - but allotments.

The theory was simple. Many asylum seekers have difficulty sleeping and are vulnerable to bouts of depression and lethargy. Gardening provides structure, social contact and a drug-free path to total exhaustion. Many refugees had been very productive in their home countries (we met headteachers, engineers, even a leading clothes designer on the scheme), so they found the enforced idleness of asylum seeking (applicants are not allowed to do paid work) hard to take. Producing fruit and veg for the family table helped with that. Margrit had £2,000 with which she hoped Carl could make a 10-minute video presentation to help her raise funding. From the moment I heard about it, I could barely contain myself.

An inspiring story, epic in scope, was unfolding under our own noses. Carl wanted to make a feature documentary - something in the tradition of [Etre et Avoir](#). He planned to visit the allotments every week for a year, charting their transformation from virtual rubbish heap into productive plots. The audience would also see the participants' self-confidence blossom and their spoken English change. It would be a ready-made fable.

Over several months, Carl shot wonderful material but also ran into a big solid (garden) wall. Asylum seekers are not French schoolchildren. They don't want to be in the movies. Or sometimes they do and sometimes they don't, depending on how their cases are progressing. They live in an atmosphere of fear and suspicion that makes them unwilling to be filmed. Sometimes they even suspected that Carl was working for Immigration. He eventually managed to salvage three very short, humane, funny documentaries from this emotional wreck, which aired in [Channel Four's Little Wonders](#) slot. But they weren't enough. We decided to try and make a fictional feature film together.

Our original plan was to shoot it ourselves on a microscopic budget, calling in favours and using non-actors. That way we'd still be able to shoot footage over the course of a whole year - and see the transformation of the allotments. We wrote to our hero, [Bill Forsyth](#), asking for advice. He wrote back, memorably, "Barbra Streisand has directed two movies - how hard can it be?" Well, quite hard actually. It quickly became clear that our punk-rock do-it-yourself attitudes would get us nowhere. For instance, you can't shoot a film on an allotment without destroying the allotment. We would have to build a fake allotment and this would cost money. We would also have to boss people around, and we are rubbish at that.

So we took the project to the BBC, who gave us money, expertise and Richard Laxton, the director, brilliant at bossing people around. Suddenly we were making a movie with proper actors, schedules, budgets and catering. It was as though we'd planted some watercress seeds on blotting paper and come home to find it'd sprouted a rainforest. The film's original purpose was to help win support and funding for the Family Refugee Support Project. In the course of filming various journalists - including the television gardener Monty Don, and the brilliant Telegraph film critic David Gritten - visited the set and also Margrit's original project. So we definitely got more publicity for it.

But the trouble with political art is that art takes longer than politics. Think of Beethoven writing the *Eroica* for that progressive humanitarian Napoleon. By the time he'd finished, Napoleon had half of Europe under military rule and was crowning himself Emperor. Beethoven crossed out the dedication so violently he made a hole in the manuscript.

While we've been making our movie, the outlook for refugees has worsened considerably. The Family Refugee Support Project was supported by the Lottery but that funding runs out this autumn and three other major potential funders have already turned down Margrit's applications. She's waiting to hear from others but it seems mad that something so obviously worthwhile - and so inexpensive - should have a question mark over its future.

Last summer we were so chuffed and puffed with pride that Margrit had asked for a 10-minute video promo and that we had somehow come back with a full length BBC feature film. Now I realise that it makes no difference - unless the film is a massive hit. Can a film ever make a difference? Indeed, has any film ever made a difference?