



Film

Brian McClinton

Can Love Conquer All?

In a Better World, Directed by Susanne Bier

THE 2011 Oscar winner for Best Foreign Language film, *In a Better World*, available on DVD, is a challenging and ambitious Danish movie on the ethics of violence and revenge. It deals with big issues, it asks big questions, and it does not offer neat solutions. It is a compassionate humanist film which engages both the heart and the mind.

Director Susanne Bier, who also devised the story, gives us a morality tale of two twelve-year-old boys and their parents. Elias (Markus Rygaard) is a Swede living in Denmark. He has prominent top teeth and wears a brace, leading Sofus, the school bully, and his gang to call him 'rat mouth'. Christian (William Jøhnk Nielson), comes home from a wealthy London boarding school with his father Claus (Ulrich Thomsen) following his mother's death from cancer. He blames her death on his father, whose passive acquiescence in her fate suggests to him that he wanted her to die. He arrives at the school and vents his anger on Sofus, who has been making Elias's life a misery, by beating him with a bicycle pump and putting a knife to his throat.

Elias's father Anton (Mikael Persbrandt) is a surgeon who commutes between the idyllic Danish seaside town and an African refugee camp. He is the voice of humanitarianism and reason who tries to make a difference in a world where violence often rules. In Africa, the school bully is paralleled by a sadistic local war lord called Big Man who terrorises the local people and mutilates pregnant women for fun. Anton is separated from Elias's mother Marianne (Trine Dyrholm), who left him after his affair with another woman and who is trying to cope with their estrangement.

Back home, Anton takes Elias, his younger brother Morten and Christian out for the day. In the playground near the harbour Morten fights with another boy and Anton intervenes to separate them. His father arrives, accuses Anton of hitting his son and then himself punches Anton. He turns the other cheek, telling the boys that violence only breeds violence and that words win out over physical force, but Christian (clearly an ironic name) is contemptuous of Anton's approach. He persuades Elias to help him get justice for his father. The boys make a bomb to blow up the man's car, with serious consequences for all of them.

In a Better World has been criticised by some British reviewers for its predictability and didacticism. Philip French in the *Observer* (21st August 2011) wrote that it is 'a highly schematic piece about violence, bullying, pacifism and turning the other cheek', with 'a manipulative plot'. Peter Bradshaw in the *Guardian* (16th August 2011) described it as 'a fairly preposterous cine-soap opera for haemophilic-hearted liberals'. Bradshaw would rather praise to the skies poisonous films like *Hunger* or *No Country for Old Men*, which are riddled with gratuitous violence, than appreciate one which seriously questions this male obsession. As a female director, Susanne Bier is asking fundamental questions that males must address.

Is the masculine urge for violence innate? Have human beings within themselves truly to forgive those who



harm them? Is the barbarity in some Third World countries a sign of their immaturity, as it is with the two boys? Is pacifism possible in this imperfect planet? Can feminist virtues triumph in formerly male-dominated cultures? Can love and compassion truly make the world a better place? *In a Better World* doesn't offer easy answers. Morality is a complex process and our values are often compromised by the nature of the reality around us.

Here is a powerful, intelligent film which deals with universal themes, and has a humanist core, brilliant acting, especially by Nielson as Christian – all beautifully photographed in lush colours, especially blue and orange. It deserves an infinitely bigger audience than the mindless pap that some British critics childishly seem to prefer.