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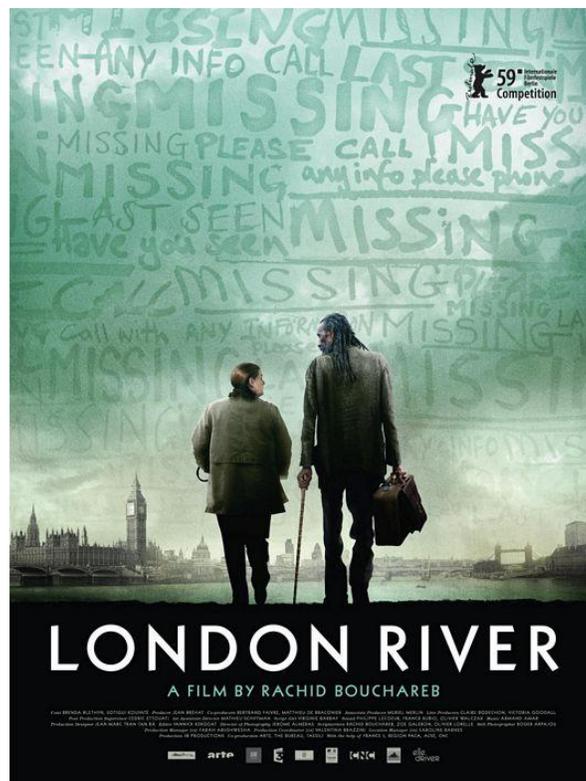
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REVIEW: LONDON RIVER

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Among the most heart-warming films made internationally on the theme of terror is Franco-Algerian director Rachid Bouchareb's award-winning *London River* (2009), a UK-France-Algeria co-production. It revisits the London bus and train bombings of July 2005 but shuns the carnage. Its focus is on the frantic search by parents for their missing children. Two

ordinary, very different individuals comb the streets of down-market London, afraid and alone. Bouchareb's gripping drama claws at the heart but ends with the most gentle of touches.

Veteran British actress Brenda Blethyn is the quintessential middle-aged Englishwoman in the role of Elisabeth Sommers, pleasant-faced, matronly, working on her farm in Guernsey. Sotigui Kouyate (he won the Silver Bear for Best Actor at the Berlin Film Festival), the dignified, elderly Malian actor who has worked with Peter Brook for over twenty years, is Ousmane, an African working in France. One a middle-class Christian, the other a poor Muslim. Both hear of the attack and head for London, Elisabeth in search of her daughter, Ousmane of his son. Their paths cross through a stench of fear and uncertainty.

Elisabeth's first shock is to see her daughter's lodgings: a tiny flat above an ordinary store run by an Arab in a crumbling Muslim neighbourhood. But the Arab landlord—to her surprise—is helpful, letting her in with a spare key. Elisabeth now begins the rounds of police stations, hospitals, morgues...

French-speaking Ousmane holes up in a cheap hotel, looking lost. When they meet, the Englishwoman is struck by a civilizational blow. Ousmane is so 'different'! Could he be a con man? Could he know something about her daughter? Gradually, her daughter Jane's story unfolds: she has been living with Ousmane's son, even attending Koran classes in a mosque. "Why should she learn Arabic?" cries a devastated Elisabeth as her small, world falls to pieces. "Who speaks Arabic?"

There is a moment of relief when the two learn that their children had planned a holiday in Europe and are perhaps safe after all. They laugh, even hug, Elisabeth invites Ousmane to Jane's flat, they share a meal, he sleeps on the sofa. The ice is broken.

But the children are gone. Ousmane must return to France and Elisabeth to Guernsey. Both have changed irrevocably. Elisabeth, unwilling initially to even acknowledge Islam and Muslims, has sunk her head into Ousmane's chest, allowed the winds of another culture to flow into her heart.

Bouchareb brings out uplifting performances from his actors (Kouyate won the Best Actor award at the Berlin Film Festival) in this simple, moving tale. With a tense script, fluent un-intrusive camera work, finely-honed dialogues and well-chosen locations that avoid clichéd images of London, *London River* is less about the attack and all about the enriching transformation in individuals who collapse, are reborn and triumph over racism and bigotry, themes that the renowned director had handled with aplomb but no optimism in his earlier film, *Days of Glory* (2006) that had charted his road to success.

Acknowledgment

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About the Reviewer: Latika Padgaonkar has taught at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi and has worked as a foreign correspondent for the Indian news daily *The Telegraph*. She was the executive editor of *Cinemaya*, The Asian Film Quarterly and the Director of the Osian's Cinefan Festival of Asian and Arab Cinema. A member of the Editorial Board of *Wide Screen*, she writes on cinema and literature for various newspapers, journals and websites, and is a regular at film festival juries as a member of the NETPAC team. She has translated two books and edited four, including two on Asian cinema and one on Kenji Mizoguchi.

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