



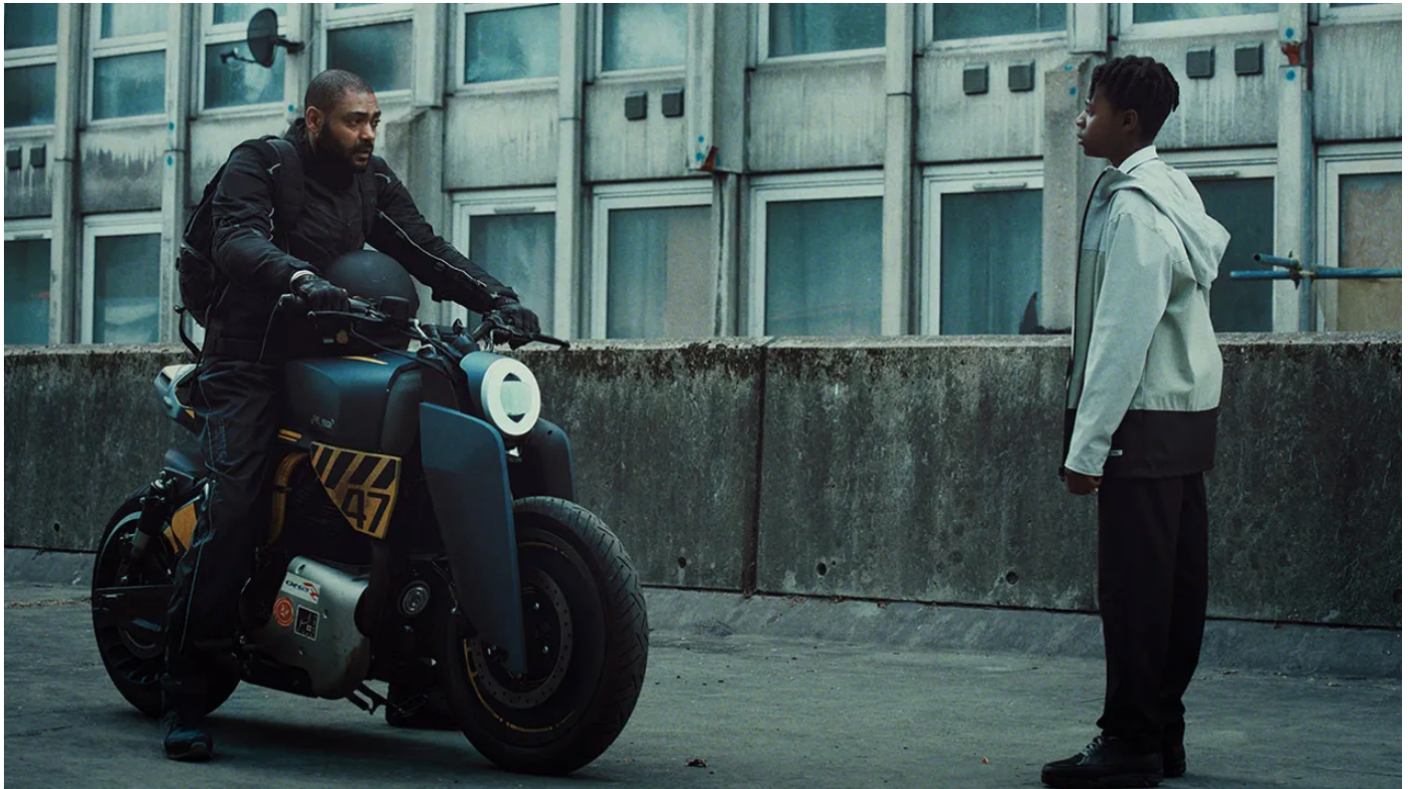
CRITICISM

‘The Kitchen’ Review: An Elegant and Timely Tale of Community in a Besieged London Tower Block

Daniel Kaluuya and Kibwe Tavares’s debut feature builds a striking and familiar dystopia.

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"The Kitchen" Courtesy of the London Film Festival

At an edition of the London [Film](#) Festival where themes spilled off the screens and onto the streets, “The Kitchen” was a prescient Closing Night choice. The directorial debut for both [Daniel Kaluuya](#) and architect-turned-filmmaker Kibwe Tavares screened to press on Sunday morning, meters away from Piccadilly Circus where, hours previously, the famous Eros statue was draped in Palestine flags during a peaceful demonstration in solidarity with people in danger of being wiped off the face of the earth.

The threat of an already dispossessed community losing their homes and lives undergirds the near-future North London-set dystopia of “The Kitchen.” If the relationship drama at its core doesn’t fully connect with the elegant brutalism of its visual language, there is, nevertheless, a lot to admire in both aspects.

Special mention must go to the central performances by British rapper/actor, Kano, and newcomer, Jedaiah Bannerman, for their understated chemistry which maintains its tension while never fully being explicated. When we meet Izi (Kano) he is pinning all hope onto a chance to leave The Kitchen, a vast and partially caved-in tower block modeled on Paris's Damiers Complex where water is frequently out, food can't get in and police are prone to violently raiding with the goal of permanently expelling its predominantly Black population.

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Izi has a mercenary outlook. “When shit gets real, I’m saving myself,” he tells a colleague at their lush green workplace, Life After Life – a funeral home with an ecological twist. Izi has just made commission by selling a future client on their special package: to have a plant named for him after he dies. Despite a seemingly sincere pitch, invoking their shared experience of deprivation in The Kitchen, it turns out that Izi’s motive is to line his pockets ahead of relocating to a luxury apartment block named Buena Vida. After eight months on the waiting list, his apartment is nearly ready.

Then he meets Benji (Bannerman) as the 12-year-old boy silently observes a pod-based electronic memorial service for mother Toni. Kaluuya and Tavares’s vision of the near-future is close enough to feel familiar and distant enough to seem eerie. Images of a smiling Toni swim around a giant screen while underneath it her head peeps out of a coffin that will whirr back into the wall once the service is over. If the technology of this world has the flavor of “Minority Report” then its streets have something of a “Mad Max” vibe. Motorbikes are the dominant mode of transportation. DOP Wyatt Garfield captures the speed of mask-clad riders and their fleeting adrenaline rush of pure freedom.

A motorbike ride sets in motion Izi’s relationship with Benji, as this lone ranger reluctantly lets the boy climb aboard, after initially fleeing a line of questioning on the identity of Benji’s father. Kano lets the smallest glimmer of tenderness animate his terse and tough demeanor and Bannerman returns serve with a dogged nothing-to-lose mentality born of grief. All we are told about Toni’s death

is that it was sudden enough that she had a chance to wrap her son a birthday present. Lo, he unwraps a red bicycle the day after her funeral, and cycles off to The Kitchen, using the gift of a deceased mother to find an absent father.

Production designer Nathan Parker – art director on Wes Anderson’s “The Grand Budapest Hotel” – goes to town on the creation of another sprawl of a building with different-yet-equal faded majesty. For all its dilapidation, husklike apartments and physical craters, The Kitchen is dotted with bubblegum pops of color – pink lights flashing, a fiery orange strip light, neon blues and bright greens. Weimer-esque dances take place underground, while the outdoor communal space is home to barbershops, food kiosks, and kids dashing around playing 40/40 home.

The warm voice of The Kitchen, flowing from speakers morning-to-night, belongs to Lord Kitchener who in an ingenious touch of casting is played by the pride of North London, former Arsenal-and-England footballer, Ian Wright. Serving as DJ, newswire and spiritual counselor, Lord Kitchener fuels morale. A soundscape that runs to his records and one very beautiful acapella recital of How Great Thou Art by Stuart K Hine serves as a consistent story spine, anchoring subplots that snake out of the main relationship. These include hang-time with the resistance fighters that compete with a hot-and-cold Izi as a father figure for Benji.

Sometimes the vignette-driven story lags in the dramatic stakes, however a sound design by Labrinth and Alex Baranowski keeps the pulse alive during these weaker stretches. Indeed, the screenplay by Kaluuya and Joe Murtagh (“American Animals”, “Calm With Horses”) avoids sentimentality by pulling the expected emotional punches in favor of a sober dignity that settles on characters during moments of crisis.

Crisis, as one might expect, is systematically brought on by the arrival of the police who pull up in black vans topped with pale blue sirens that gleam like sapphires in the dark. The residents sound the alarm by beating pans together, yet there are always casualties as batons rain down and those heartbreaking words, “I can’t breathe” go unheeded.

This is an assured debut that sketches the relationship to state power that the marginalized contend with in London and the world beyond. Too muted in emotional effect to bring home a flirted-with theme of solidarity, the world-building still brings to life in the spirit that animates even the most besieged communities.

Grade: B+

“The Kitchen” premiered at the 2023 [BFI London Film Festival](#). It is expected to stream on Netflix later this year.

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