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# ‘The Kitchen’ Review: Daniel Kaluuya’s Directorial Debut Is a Compellingly Dark Futurist Vision of London

Co-helmed by Kibwe Tavares, the closing night gala selection for the BFI London Film Festival is an absorbing study of survival.

BY **LESLIE FELPERIN**  OCTOBER 17, 2023 9:34AM



‘The Kitchen’ COURTESY OF NETFLIX

*The Kitchen* imagines a near-future London where gentrification isn’t achieved just by subtle shifts in planning policy and infrastructure adjustments, but by outright violence from the police. Wait ... isn’t that happening already? Perhaps, but right now not with the same brazen

brutality in Britain's capital as is seen in this striking directorial debut for short filmmaker Kibwe Tavares (*Jonah*) and actor Daniel Kaluuya (*Get Out*, *Black Panther*).

Admittedly, there are not-quite-square corners in the script, by Kaluuya and Joe Murtagh (*Calm With Horses*), which makes the material feel like it was constructed from a screenwriting flatpack kit, the kind issued from vast, quality-controlled narrative warehouses run by screenwriting workshops and producers keen to plant predictable emotional beats and add "relevance." But *The Kitchen* also has plenty of inventive ideas, creates heady atmospheres in both its dark and lighter moments, and features vivid performances with a large ensemble. Above all, kudos are due to leads Kane Robinson and adolescent Jedaiah Bannerman for bringing delicacy and nuance to their performances as two strangers who might or might not be father and son.

When *The Kitchen* takes place is never specified. Still, judging by the blend of real locations (specifically housing estates in London and Paris) and visual effects (some structures were based on slums in Venezuela), and the fact that people are still driving petrochemical vehicles, it would seem this is maybe a not-far-off 2025, when the U.K. government plans to ban the sale of gas-powered cars. That, or the powers that be failed to honor their own pledges, which, judging by the form of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's current waffling on the date, is quite likely, too. Either way, it's notable that climate catastrophe is not the problem here, which makes a change from most dystopian fiction these days. Instead, the engine of conflict is the scarcity of affordable housing, certainly a problem many Londoners and other city dwellers today will recognize.

An early traveling shot following protagonist Isaac "Izi" James (Robinson)

as he drives to work captures the way one scruffy London neighborhood like the titular Kitchen gives way abruptly to the gray uniform soullessness of newly built work-live complexes. A lifelong resident of the Kitchen's sprawling housing estate, which the authorities now want to tear down entirely, if only they could get the remaining residents — now effectively squatters — out of the buildings, Izi feels no loyalty to the place he calls a "shithole." He's been offered a chance to get a single-occupancy apartment run by the corporation Buena Vida if he can raise the deposit in the next three weeks.

Judging by the way he keeps hitting "pay later" when asked by the AI computer interface, Izi is clearly not earning a lot of bank at his job at high-tech funeral home Life After Life, where he tries to upsell services to the bereaved as much as possible. The basic budget package at least turns the recently deceased into soil for little trees that are kept on display in Life After Life's nursery for a limited period, allowing the bereaved to visit until the trees are taken away to unspecified locations. (It's implied that the company just throws them away.)

One day at work, Izi notices a funeral taking place for a woman he used to know back in the day. There are hardly any mourners there apart from the woman's 13- or 14-year-old son, Benji (Bannerman, beautifully directed to maximize his potent screen presence). Now orphaned and abandoned in a Buena Vida flat with only the bicycle birthday present his mum left for him, Benji comes back a day later to talk to the plant that she's growing into, and Izi and he get chatting. It becomes clear that Izi might be the man who fathered Benji, a possibility that sits silently unspoken between them, the paternity elephant in the room.

Demonstrating that he's not entirely callous, Izi takes Benji in when the latter shows up at the Kitchen looking for him.

However, another potential father figure emerges in the shape of Staples (Hope Ikpoku Jr.), a Robin Hood-type figure who leads his band of merry men and women in raids to steal food for distribution among the Kitchen's poor and hungry. Some of that gets cooked up in the ramshackle maze of street stalls that looks a lot like Brixton's market but sprinkled with *Blade Runner*-style neon and holograms. The Kitchen also has, deep in the basement of one building, its own roller disco. That's where Izi, Benji and seemingly everyone who's still ambulatory goes on a weekend night to bop to a delicious mix of hip-hop, grime, classic R&B, Afrobeats and, at one glorious point, Cameo's floor-filling 1986 hit "Candy" that prompts a synchronized collective performance. like the Slide or the Hustle.

The sequence is glorious, partly because of the song itself and partly because of the warmth of Wyatt Garfield's cinematography and the obvious fun the ensemble is having with the moment, evoking the sensual celebration of bodies in motion and communal dance experience captured so beautifully in fellow Brit filmmaker Steve McQueen's *Lovers Rock* recently. Indeed, the shared enjoyment of music is an integral part of the story here, especially since throughout the Kitchen scenes everyone is always listening to the estate's resident pirate DJ Lord Kitchener (retired footballer and certified national treasure Ian Wright). Although we don't get to know much about the backstory of "the Lord," as he likes to call himself, his role as quasi-narrator, voice of wisdom and conduit of defiant spirit comes across forcefully.

That guidance is needed, given that the community often must recover from the repeated violent raids by the police, incursions heralded by residents banging pots and pans out their windows, an angry inversion



of a custom that developed during COVID-19 lockdowns as a tribute to national health service workers. But even though it's meant to signal a warning here, it still works as a symbol of a community coming together despite atomization imposed by the state. Elsewhere, scenes in which Staples and his crew ride around on bikes and motorcycles, popping wheelies and having fun, are similarly strong.

Those kind of thoughtful, resonant small details add potency, though some viewers may be more moved than I was by the rocky evolution of Izi and Benji's relationship. Their interactions have genuine warmth, especially in scenes that allow Bannerman to show off a dry comic timing. But the constant hither and yon of Izi abandoning Benji and then coming back gets a little tired over the long haul and feels jerry-rigged to add conflict. Still, they are interesting enough together to make a sequel, possibility hinted at in the last minutes, feel like a welcome next step.

## Full credits

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Venue: London Film Festival (Closing Night Gala)

Cast: Kane Robinson, Jedaiah Bannerman, Hope Ikpoku Jr, Teija Kabs, Demmy Ladipo, Ian Wright

Distribution: Netflix

Production companies: Netflix, Film Four, DMC, 59%, Factory Fifteen

Directors: Kibwe Tavares, Daniel Kaluuya

Screenwriters: Daniel Kaluuya, Joe Murtagh

Producers: Daniel Emmerson, Kibwe Tavares, Daniel Kaluuya

Executive producers: Michael Fassbender, David Kimbangi, Ollie Madden, Conor McCaughan

Director of photography: Wyatt Garfield

Production designer: Nathan Parker

Costume designer: PC Williams

Editors: Maya Maffioli, Christian Sandino-Taylor

Music: Labrinth

Music supervisor: Jumi Akinfenwa

Casting: Aisha Bywater

1 hour 34 minutes

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