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‘The Kitchen’ Review: Kibwe Tavares and Daniel Kaluuya’s Impassioned Stand for Community Against Capitalism

Resourceful world-building trumps an uneven script in this vividly imagined vision of a near-future London riven by gentrification.

By **Guy Lodge** ▾



Netflix



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Arriving just as Britain's dire housing crisis is set to be a key campaign issue in next year's long-awaited general election, "[The Kitchen](#)" offers a solemnly affecting look at what might happen if it's left to fester. Zooming through a dystopian London in what seems the too-near future, this sharply accomplished feature directing debut from [Kibwe Tavares](#) and actor [Daniel Kaluuya](#) surprisingly eschews high-concept genre plotting to go with its elaborate sci-fi scene-setting, instead narrowing to an intimate, humane study of Black male bonding in a time of systemic social oppression. If the lean screenplay (by Kaluuya alongside "Calm With Horses" writer Joe Murtagh) somewhat runs out of gas by the finale, the film's persuasive world-building and fiery political ire keep it compelling. Netflix will release "The Kitchen" — a fitting, resonant closer to this year's [London Film Festival](#) — in early 2024.

Call it the exasperated payoff from 13 years of Conservative austerity, but British cinema feels in a notably pessimistic place. The fall festival season alone has seen the premiere of multiple glum snapshots of a country — and especially a capital — in social, economic and environmental crisis: Take Mahalia Belo's "The End We Start From," about a future, climate-changed Britain devolving into anarchy, or even Andrew Haigh's present-day "All of Us Strangers," its lonesome mood defined by ghostly London towers of unoccupied, overpriced new-build apartments. A more overt feat of protest cinema, "The Kitchen" is predominantly set in the opposite (but closely adjacent) kind of urban development: a sprawling south London social housing estate, long abandoned by the government, the neglect of which has engendered a fiercely communal spirit among its mostly Black, working-class inhabitants.

Sprawling and haphazardly Lego-stacked in layout, the estate is nicknamed the Kitchen — perhaps after the cooking pots that residents bang outside their windows to warn neighbors of police raids, which

happen all too frequently and violently. The place has been condemned, its utilities shut off one by one to smoke impoverished locals out, with seemingly no alternative accommodation on offer. In such desperate circumstances, a defiant air of collective pride courses through the Kitchen's shabby market lanes and heaving, low-lit nightclubs — credit production designer Nathan Parker with this microcosmic city-within-a-city completeness — and over the airwaves of its pirate radio station, where veteran DJ Lord Kitchener (soccer legend Ian Wright) bolsters spirits with vintage soul and power-to-the-people slogans.

Yet taciturn outsider Izi (a terrific Kane Robinson) isn't so sentimental about the place he's lived his entire life, bluntly calling it a "shithole" as he saves up to move to Buena Vida, a sleek, soulless high-rise development across town. He's nearly there, thanks to his joyless job as a salesman at the supposedly eco-friendly but clinically corporate funeral home Life After Life. There, the underprivileged dead are processed into nascent tree saplings, then shifted to an ominously unspecified location. (In a wittily morbid bit of location repurposing, the facility sits on the site of the Barbican Conservatory, London's beloved indoor green sanctuary.) But Izi's solitary mission is disrupted when he encounters teenage orphan Benji (newcomer Jedaiah Bannerman) at the funeral of his ex, and Benji's mother: Protectively bound to the lad for reasons he can't quite admit to himself, he takes Benji into his cramped studio, just as the authorities launch a renewed effort to destroy the Kitchen once and for all.

The question of Benji's paternity hovers through the film as these two prickly loners gradually open up to each other, though it also never seems much of a question at all: Kaluuya and Murtagh treat it less as a driving narrative mystery than as a kind of obvious, unspoken connection,

emerging as the characters learn the value of human interdependence. It makes for a poignant, slow-burning two-hander, beautifully performed by the leads in a gradually shared language of wary glances and telling sighs, while Robinson's aloof, slouchy demeanor and Bannerman's defensive swagger begin to reflect each other. The film's dramatic conflict — beyond the faceless, armored cops swarming the action in multiple claustrophobic set pieces — is less well-drawn. Benji's courting by volatile anti-authoritarian gang leader Staples (Hope Ikpoku Jr., riveting in an underdeveloped role) never quite builds to a satisfying tug-of-war for his soul, while a climactic Kitchen uprising against their tormentors is oddly rushed, even curtailed.

Even at its shakiest, however, "The Kitchen" gets by on the steam of its own fury, and on its tender depiction of a trampled underclass staving off defeat through small, everyday acts of care and empathy. It's notable that even the "dangerous" crowd here thrives on its own gentle sense of community: Staples' crew hijacks grocery vans to reallocate goods to the needy, and feeds its own with jovial pancake breakfasts.

The film's bigger picture is never less than believable: Its CGI-assisted impression of a London contorted with luxury developments while the unhoused merely rot into the ground, taunted by surveillance drones, hits home. Tavares, an acclaimed shorts director whose architecture background is felt both visually and philosophically here, and Kaluuya steer proceedings with a seductive kineticism that masks a blunter, uglier punch. Everything on "The Kitchen's" surface, from Wyatt Garfield's athletic, coruscating lensing to Labrinth's glassy, R&B-inflected score, is designed to make the future feel tangibly immediate, like it's hurtling glossily towards us. Everything underneath urges us to resist.

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Reviewed at London Film Festival (closer), Oct. 15, 2023. Running time: 108 MIN.

Production: (U.K.) A Netflix presentation in association with Film4 of a DMC Films, 59% production. Producers: Dan Emmerson, Daniel Kaluuya. Executive producers: Michael Fassbender, David Kimbangi, Ollie Madden, Conor McCaughan. Co-producers: Angus Lamont, Theo Barrowclough.

Crew: Directors: Kibwe Tavares, Daniel Kaluuya. Screenplay: Kaluuya, Joe Murtagh. Camera: Wyatt Garfield. Editors: Maya Maffioli, Christian Sandino-Taylor. Music: Labrinth, Alex Baranowski.

With: Kane Robinson, Jedaiah Bannerman, Ian Wright, Hope Ikpoku Jr., Cristale, BackRoad Gee, Teija Kabs, Demmy Ladipo.