

Monday, July 10, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Blake Goble / Consequence of Sound Rated R 100 Mins.

Have you ever seen an older person left flummoxed by modern technology? A parent or grandparent, fidgeting while staring at a monitor, perhaps trying to fill out a form or make a purchase online. They're near the point of whipping a mouse at the screen. Seems kind of funny, right? Almost makes you feel superior, if you're young enough. But here's the deal: don't be a tool.

Take a minute and help them. Don't write them off as inept. Because as obvious as it might sound, it bears repeating: you will all get older. You'll all be Daniel Blake (Dave Johns, a middle-aged comic in his feature film debut) at some point, just trying your damndest to maintain your lifestyle. You might need help. You might get sick. You might be royally screwed by a rapidly accelerating and unsympathetic system. So give your older neighbor or your bumbling uncle a second. Give people like Daniel Blake a chance.

I, Daniel Blake is a wonderfully humane drama, and it's by way of this humbling, sympathetic reciprocity that director Ken Loach and his central character flourish. Loach's film is a plea for common courtesy, filled with an affectionately lived-in humanity. When health and wages and common courtesy are treated at arm's length, a guy like Daniel Blake reminds us of our better selves. Blake does not quit. He doesn't defer. And nor should you on this film or this man. This is a kitchen-sink hymn for the indomitable spirit of the common man.

Johns is the titular Blake. He's a widowed, 59-year-old carpenter in northeast England who suffers a heart attack on the job. His doctors fear that Daniel will develop an irregular heartbeat, which could evolve into life-threatening arrhythmia. Loach stages moments in plain, understandable terms – Daniel, alone in the frame against cold, natural light, is practically confined to his phone like it's his IV, and the frustration of trying to get through to a customer service rep is wholly relatable. It's hard to judge him when he swears at the operator.

Blake's cardiologist says he can't work until he's well. That's a death sentence for a paycheck-to-paycheck guy like Blake. How can he afford to heal? Daniel applies for sickness benefits (or specifically, Employment and Support Allowance in the UK). But thanks to the mathematics of evaluating a human life, he's deemed well enough to be denied aid, and ironically, fit enough to work. Red tape, bureaucratic mazes, and callow decision-making constantly stand in Daniel's way. But the man has the fire in him to keep fighting. He just wants to live his ordinary life, and he can't.

Daniel stumbles through online applications. Paperwork. Affectless government employees. And Johns' surprisingly flappable demeanor makes for a supremely likable lead. Daniel's only solace comes from befriending a younger mother, Katie (Hayley Squires), who's in the same dire straits. I, Daniel Blake's narrative is one of

small, yet impossible, wishes. Katie just wants to feed her children, but can't on welfare. Daniel's neighbors, a pair of punky teens, just want some killer shoes while living in the same kind of poverty. And Daniel just wants to be treated with some human decency.

In Loach's sensitive hands, the film's tale of the working class citizen's plight doesn't feel exploitative. A more callous filmmaker would hone in on cheap sentiments or big speeches, whereas Loach shoots in calm, lengthy takes. His distance feels self-aware, as though taking care not to fake his characters' feelings with an invasive approach. Yet Loach is unafraid to let a moment run its course, whether it's Daniel asking people to go away because he feels unwell, or watching Katie's temper rise as she's shooed away by government employees. This is a film of impatient interactions and unseen places: waiting rooms, food banks, and the constant apathy of government workers toward Daniel and his neighbors.

And the victories are small, but so hard-fought and familiar that they feel almost too good to be true. Loach observes scenes of hunger. Scenes about the dread of pending medical results. Scenes revolving around empty bank accounts. The disappointment is felt when basic rights like health and happiness are so hard to come by. A small moment like Daniel spray-painting the outside of an aid center with his name, just looking for some acknowledgment, might be the feel-good moment of the year. And Daniel represents a sort of keep-on-keeping-on willness that's galvanizing.

The film's best quality is its honesty. As fly-on-the-wall character portraiture goes, Loach, his longtime writing partner Paul Laverty, and Dave Johns have created something perfect with the figure of Daniel Blake. Johns is the film's backbone, its piss-and-vinegar spirit. It's a rich and substantial role, without a shred of posturing or "actorly" inclination. He's not too proud to ask for help, and he's kind enough to try and reciprocate. He's willing to give his spot in line for the single mother with two kids. He grouses at the muzak played while he's put on hold. Dave Johns embodies a sort of universal annoyance, and he magically offsets it with crass charm, smiling in disbelief all the while. Tired, but determined to figure out the next step.

Loach, a historically dry but socially critical filmmaker, envelopes his main character in apathy, and I, Daniel Blake harangues against the faults of the system in a minor key. But the strokes are confident, and Loach's style works wonders in sketching this kind of struggle. The director simply asks that the viewer be patient, without letting go of the problems in Daniel Blake's hands. And Dave Johns is the perfect representative for that helplessness. It's a struggle to aid, with the constant reminders that assistance may never come. But Loach and Johns have made a call for change and understanding that is empathetic, conscientious, and magnificently moving.

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GRADUATION

Monday, July 24, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Justin Chang / LA Times Rated R 128 Mins.

"Graduation," a film of gripping moral suspense from the Romanian writer-director Cristian Mungiu, opens with a rock being hurled through the window of a middle-aged doctor named Romeo (Adrian Titieni). It is the first of several attacks that take place over the course of the movie, including a second act of vandalism and an attempted sexual assault. Mungiu's purpose here is not to identify the guilty (which would take a while), but rather to establish an atmosphere of ambiguous unease.



Bleak, naturalistic and flawlessly acted, "Graduation" distills the mood and moral decay of a place whose gray skies and nondescript housing blocks feel like permanent reminders of its dark history. Unlike Mungiu's 2007 masterpiece, "4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days," which unfolded in the final days of Nicolae Ceausescu's Communist dictatorship, the new film is set in the present, but the past continues to cast a long shadow. A sense of desperation, mostly venal but sometimes violent, seems to hover in the very air these men and women breathe.

And while Romeo is a mild-mannered, outwardly respectable contributor to society, his own sins — far more than those committed against him and his family — are what seem to interest the movie most. "I have this feeling someone's following me," he says, and that someone might as well be the filmmaker himself, whose hyper-alert camera stays fixed on the good (and sometimes not-so-good) doctor as he navigates a labyrinth of personal and professional corruption.

The drama is set in motion when his teenage daughter, Eliza (Maria Dragus), fends off a would-be rapist on her way to school one morning — a senseless attack that disturbs Romeo for reasons beyond the initial shock and lingering trauma. Eliza is about to take the final exams that could secure her a scholarship to Cambridge, and the attack comes as an ill-timed blow to her academic future, rattling her nerves, shattering her wrist and forcing her to wear a heavy cast that, the exam proctors worry, might be concealing a cheat sheet.

Their suspicions turn out to be thoroughly justified, not because Eliza is a cheater but because just about everyone else is. Over the course of two sharply plotted, grimly absorbing hours, "Graduation" becomes a steady accrual of petty vices, under-the-table exchanges and quiet betrayals. Some of these have been

happening for a while, like Romeo's affair with a single mother, Sandra (Malina Manovici) — a detail foreshadowed here by his chilly estrangement from his long-suffering wife, Magda (Lia Bugnar).

The love that Romeo and Magda might have once felt for one another — perhaps before they returned to Romania from exile in 1991, hoping for a better life post-Communism — has long since been displaced entirely onto their daughter, along with what remains of their hopes and dreams. That Eliza might escape this dreadful place is all that matters to Romeo, even if it means calling in favors with an old friend at the police station (Vlad Ivanov), a tight-lipped exam board official (Gelu Colceag) and an ailing politician (Petre Ciubotaru) who might benefit from his professional attention.

Romeo, like some of his conspirators, tries to reassure himself that these machinations are necessary, a last-minute deviation from an otherwise strict ethical code that he prides himself on upholding. But "Graduation" gives the lie to such self-serving reassurances. No less than "4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days," which similarly used a compressed time frame to shed light on a condition of long-term malaise, this is a movie about the moral cost of survival — the negotiations and compromises that each character must continually make with others, and with his or her own conscience.

Mungiu, who shared the directing prize at last year's Cannes Film Festival (with Olivier Assayas for "Personal Shopper"), is a master of concentration. Working for the first time with the cinematographer Tudor Vladimirescu, the director invests his characters' mundane conversations with a hushed, almost conspiratorial intensity. At its best, Mungiu's style achieves the clarity of the confessional: His characters may deflect and dissemble, but the camera, with its restless following movements and unblinking long takes, gives them no room to hide.

At times Titieni, with his fine-grained Everyman schlumpiness, brings to mind Olivier Gourmet, the great Belgian actor often cast in the restless, relentlessly compassionate films of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne (who happen to be credited among "Graduation's" co-producers). But Romeo's failings are held in check, and to some extent corrected, by Eliza, a sensitive child who finds herself caught between obedience, disillusionment and her own desire for freedom — including the freedom to continue seeing her boyfriend, Marius (Rares Andrici), whom Romeo can't abide.



Art-house audiences may recall the gifted Dragus as one of the young children in "The White Ribbon," Michael Haneke's 2009 portrait of a pre-World War I town in the grip of an eerily pervasive evil. There is something of Haneke's steely observation in "Graduation," but there is also a warmer, more hopeful vision of humanity — a grace born of the film's toughness and clarity of vision.



Monday, August 14, 7:30

A. O. Scott / NY Times Rated PG-13 125 Mins.

New England in the mid-19th century was a literary hothouse, overgrown with wild and exotic talents. That Emily Dickinson was among the most dazzling of these is not disputable, but to say that she was obscure in her own time would exaggerate her celebrity. A handful of her poems appeared in print while she was alive (she died in 1886, at 55), but she preferred private rituals of publication, carefully writing out her verses and sewing them into booklets.

Though she had no interest in fame, Dickinson was anything but an amateur scribbler, approaching her craft with unstinting discipline and tackling mighty themes of death, time and eternity. She remains a paradoxical writer: vividly present on the page but at the same time persistently elusive. The more familiar you are with her work, the stranger she becomes.

An admirer can be forgiven for approaching "A Quiet Passion," Terence Davies's new movie about Dickinson's life, with trepidation. The literalness of film and the creaky conventions of the biopic threaten to dissolve that strangeness, to domesticate genius into likable quiriness. But Mr. Davies, whose work often blends public history and private memory, possesses a poetic sensibility perfectly suited to his subject and a deep, idiosyncratic intuition about what might have made her tick.

To Dickinson — played in the long afternoon of her adult life by Cynthia Nixon — the enemy of poetry is obviousness. (It is a vice she finds particularly obnoxious in the work of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the reigning poet of the age.) "A Quiet Passion" refuses the obvious at every turn. The romantically disappointed recluse of "The Belle of Amherst," William Luce's sturdy, sentimental play, has been replaced by a prickly, funny, freethinking intellectual, whose life is less a chronicle of withdrawal from the world than a series of explosive engagements with the universe. The passion is not so quiet, really. Dickinson muses and ponders, yes, but she also seethes, scolds, teases and bursts out laughing.

Solitude is part of Dickinson's birthright — the taste for it links her to Henry David Thoreau, another odd duck plying the waters of Massachusetts — but so are social and familial ties. The first time we see young Emily (played by Emma Bell) she is about to be kicked out of Mount Holyoke College, branded a "no-hoper" for her heterodox religious views. The description is wrong, of course. ("Hope is the thing with feathers," she would write.) Her skepticism about God was more personal than metaphysical. She didn't doubt his existence so much as question his intentions.

In tracing the flowering of her vocation, Mr. Davies pays scrupulous attention to the milieu that fed it. Her formal education complete,

Dickinson returns to Amherst to live with her parents (Keith Carradine and Joanna Bacon); her brother, Austin (Duncan Duff); and her sister, Vinnie (Jennifer Ehle). On the way, there is a trip to a concert with an uptight aunt who is disgusted by the spectacle of a woman singing and disdainful of music in general. What about hymns?, her niece asks. "Hymns are not music."

But the Protestant hymnal was the metrical trellis on which Dickinson wretched blossoms and thorns of musical invention. "A Quiet Passion" suggests that the mixture of austerity and extravagance in her verse was shaped partly by an environment in which religious severity coexisted with aesthetic and intellectual experimentation. (That aunt may have disapproved of the performance, but she still went.)

This is a visually gorgeous film — full of sunlight and flowers, symmetry and ornament — that also feels refreshingly plain. The smooth, almost lyrical movement of the camera conveys lightness and gravity, much in the way that some of Dickinson's poems do. Like her voice, it seems to have been set loose in time, to rush forward or to linger as the meaning and the meter require, to turn time itself into a series of riddles. The movie lasts for two hours, or 37 years, or the difference between now and forever, or the span of an idea.

It is dominated by a single voice: Ms. Nixon's, reciting stanzas instead of voice-over narration and cracking impish, sometimes impious jokes with the marvelous Ms. Ehle. A novel of family life writes itself between the lines, full of memorable characters and dramatic scenes. Parents grow old and die. Austin marries and then has an affair, a transgression that enrages Emily. She and Vinnie seem to exist in precise, kinetic counterpoint, like the left and right hands of a piano étude.

Not everything is harmony. If one of the film's threads is the existential conundrum that most directly informs Dickinson's poetry — what it is like to live from moment to moment with the knowledge of eternity — another is the dialectic of freedom and authority that defined her life. Ms. Nixon's Dickinson is a natural feminist, but she also naturally submits, as her siblings do, to their father's will. When she wants to write late at night, she asks his permission, noting later that no husband would have granted it. She is submissive and rebellious in ways that defy easy summary. Like the other great American poet of her century, Walt Whitman, she contradicts herself.

And though "A Quiet Passion" is small — modest in scope, inward rather than expansive, precise in word and gesture — it contains multitudes. It opens a window into an era whose political and moral legacies are still with us, and illuminates, with a practiced portraitist's sureness of touch, the mind of someone who lived completely in her time, knowing all the while that she would eventually escape it.

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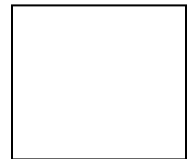
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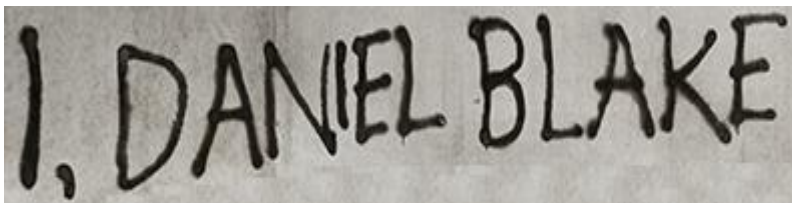
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Harvard Crimson

Monday, July 10 at 7:30 pm

"An excoriating, gripping, intricately plotted morality play."

Jessica Kiang - The Play List

Monday, July 24 at 7:30 pm

GRADUATION



"A richly idiosyncratic portrait of Emily Dickinson."

Justin Chang / Los Angeles Times

Monday, August 14 at 7:30 pm