

GHOSTLIGHT

Monday, August 5, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Kate Erbland | IndieWire | Rated R | 115 mins.

Kelly O'Sullivan and Alex Thompson craft another charming, funny, and very human exploration of the bonds that alter the course of our lives. Plus: Shakespeare!

Most reviews of Kelly O'Sullivan and Alex Thompson's tender dramedy "Ghostlight" are likely to start with a definition of the title (as Playbill tells us, "a single bulb left burning whenever a theatre is dark," and one that might be in place to chase away bad spirits to boot), but we'll try to subvert that expectation a bit here (after all, that's just what O'Sullivan and Thompson do).

Instead, we'll open with a quote from this publication (and this very writer) on the pair's uncanny knack for making gems that have loglines that don't (that can't) do justice to the tales they spin. The pair's first feature, the similarly winning "Saint Frances," packed what seemed like a downer of a description: "After an accidental pregnancy turned abortion, a deadbeat nanny finds an unlikely friendship with the 6-year-old she's charged with protecting." As the duo told IndieWire in 2021, "We struggled with that line too. It's so funny, every time we describe the movie, we just want to say like, 'We know, but—'" (that's O'Sullivan), with Thompson cutting in, "It's funny! It's good!"

Such is the case with the pair's follow-up "Ghostlight" (this time around, screenwriter O'Sullivan joins Thompson behind the camera for her feature directorial debut), which also sports a seemingly sad logline: "When a construction worker unexpectedly joins a local theater's production of 'Romeo and Juliet,' the drama onstage starts to mirror his own life." That's all true, but it's also, just like "Saint Frances," funny and good. And, in all that funniness and goodness and very real drama, something rare: a film that makes you marvel at the pleasure of storytelling as an actual practice, not an oft-repeated buzzword with little actual emotion behind it.

Of course, this story could not be told without players on the stage, including a real-life acting family forming the heart of the film. Keith Kupferer is Dan Mueller (the construction worker of the synopsis), with his wife Tara Mallen starring as Dan's wife Sharon (a theater teacher and the soul of the family), plus their daughter Katherine Mallen Kupferer (who some may recognize from last year's charming "Are You There, God? It's Me Margaret") as their troubled daughter Daisy.

We know things aren't right in the Mueller family long before O'Sullivan and Thompson ever-so-delicately dole out the details of a tragedy that still pulls at the trio. It involves a looming lawsuit, the sense the family is incomplete, unsaid feelings, and an ultimate reveal too artfully handled to be spoiled here. O'Sullivan and

Thompson are aces at tucking themes, concepts, and ideas into their films that, in other directors' hands, might feel a bit cheesy or chintzy. Instead, the duo handles them with the utmost respect and care. Audiences may eventually start to see where this is heading and how it will all braid together, but that doesn't dilute the joy of seeing it actually unfold.

It's that tragedy that haunts Dan, making him volatile, mad, and sometimes outright mean. After an on-the-job outburst is witnessed by a local community theater group (led by a delightful Dolly De Leon, who plays the spiky and outspoken Rita), Dan finds himself unexpectedly pulled into their orbit. He doesn't know much about the production they are putting on (even if it is the most famous Shakespeare play), a detail that takes on added resonance when we learn about Sharon's job and Daisy's own theatrical streak. Dan could have been a theater buff this whole time, just like the ladies in his life, but he's been too stuck in his ways (and his pain) to see the magic of one of our oldest art forms.

But Rita and her "Island of Misfit Toys" compatriots — a motley crew who all get their moments to shine — change that, slowly intriguing Dan enough that the man just keeps showing up at their rehearsals. One day, he's barely able to get out a line; the next, he's gotten the hang of iambic pentameter (Daisy has, unknowingly, helped). But while that might sound a little too easy, it's not. Dan struggles. Sharon struggles. And Daisy? Well, Daisy feels everything, times two (Mallen Kupferer is just delightful as a potty-mouthed teen with a heart of gold). Yet, as Dan starts to slip more deeply into the magic of the theater, even the ramshackle type of community theater Rita and her crew embody (hell, maybe because of that ramshackleness), he can't help but change, evolve, grow. Turns out, being around people can be... nice?

O'Sullivan and Thompson gently fold their story together, finding humor and heart at every turn (even a subplot that briefly hinges on Sharon and Daisy believing Dan is having an affair with Rita is handled with the utmost grace), leading to the kind of ending that somehow inspired the film's very first audience at Sundance to laugh and cry. Again, we know how this sounds, but — it's funny! and good! And a reminder of how bright a light one story can shine on everyone.

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Monday, August 26, 7:30 pm With Special Guest Host, Sara Varon

Reviewed by Karen Gordon | Original Cin | Not Rated | 103 Mins.

*Robot Dreams: Animation about Unlikely BFFs
Explores Connection, Tenderness, Resilience*

Every movie is a leap of faith.

You can have the greatest director and screenwriter and then cast the most respected actor of her generation in the lead, and the result is still not guaranteed. So, I find it especially wonderful when a movie that sounds odd on paper blooms on the screen into a supremely touching and joyful way.

Such is Robot Dreams, an animated film with no dialogue about a dog and a robot. It's a wistful, beautiful, and tender movie that works across generations, yet another feat accomplished. It's not just clever storytelling, dammit! There's heart and magic at work here.

The film — directed by Spain's Pablo Berger and based on a 2007 comic book by Sara Varon (Dog's last name is Varon) — debuted at last year's Cannes Film Festival, played at the Toronto International Film Festival among others, and was nominated for an Oscar. It has won several awards, including best animated film by the Toronto Film Critics Association. (Read our interview with Pablo Berger).

The film is set in the East Village in a 1980s-era Manhattan populated by anthropomorphic animals. Dog lives alone in a tidy little apartment but recognizes he is lonely. Inspired by a TV ad, he orders a robot companion and carefully assembles him.

The two hit it off. Dog takes Robot around and shows him his favourite spots in his city. The two become good friends, and very happy. We watch them dance joyfully to "September" by Earth Wind & Fire, which becomes their song.

At the end of the summer, Dog takes Robot to the crowded beach where they walk along the boardwalk, frolic in the water, and then fall asleep on their blankets in the sand. When they wake up late to a deserted beach and prepare to go home, they discover that Robot has rusted in place and can't move.

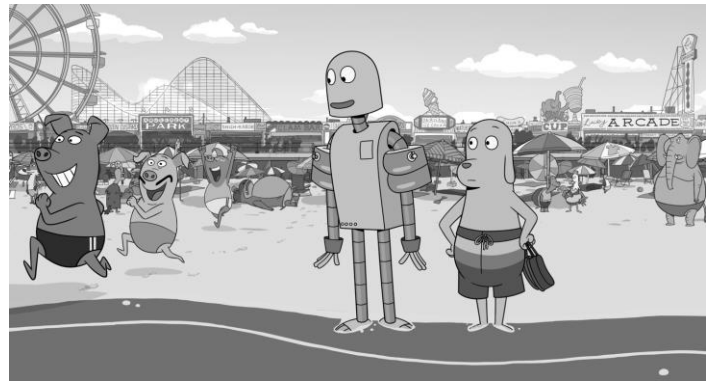
Dog can't lift him, so he heads home alone. The next morning, he picks up his toolbox, hits the hardware store to get what he needs and goes back to the beach. But there's a big problem. The city has

closed the beach down for the summer and Dog's attempts to break in are stymied by security. Permission to get in legally fails.

He now must wait until the beach reopens on June 1. Now they both have to spend the long fall, winter, and spring months alone, pining for each other, with Dog watching the world go by from his neat little apartment as Robot lies on the beach, stuck in place. Both dream, sometimes with anxiety, about the other.

For each of them, there are good days and bad ones. Their encounters are sometimes sweet and sometimes disappointing, even heartbreaking. Life is not always kind.

This is such a simple movie, easy to watch, appropriate across a range of ages, so how does it lead to such a deeply felt emotional film? Spare as it is, it is never dull, with little visual grace notes along the way that are delightful. There's magic here in Berger's telling of the story. How does an animated dog taking the hand of a robot evoke such farklemt feelings in the viewer?



In the end, Robot Dreams is a lovely story about so many things: the yearning for connection, and the joys of love, friendship, and resilience. Most of all it's a movie of such sublime tenderness that it's a little salve for the spirit.

About Sara Varon: Sara Varon has been drawing graphic novels and picture books for children since 2006. After publishing her first graphic novel, *Sweaterweather*, with Alternative Comics in 2003, her graphic novel *Robot Dreams* took the kids industry by storm, being named a Kirkus Best Book of the Year, a Publishers Weekly Best Book of the Year, an ALSC Notable Children's Book, and a YALSA Great Graphic Novel – as well as being featured on Oprah's Kids Reading List. The book has now been adapted into an Oscar-nominated animated feature film, which is releasing in wide distribution around the United States this summer – along with her new graphic novel, *Detective Sweet Pea*.

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THE OLD OAK

Monday, September 9, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Ty Burr | Substack | Not Rated | 113 Mins.

After 87 years and 28 feature films, the great British director Ken Loach has announced that this is likely his final movie, and attention must be paid. But “The Old Oak” demands to be seen not because it’s the last Loach but because it feels like a condensed fractal of his entire body of work, or maybe a conscious (but not self-conscious) career summation. Like almost all his films – and, like many of them, scripted by Paul Laverty – “The Old Oak” is a flinty social-realist portrait of Britain’s underclass, the people who always and forever have gotten the pointy end of the stick. Beneath the dispassionate kitchen-sink observations and finely detailed characters boils a class rage that few other filmmakers have mustered or been able to sustain over the long haul.



The people in a Ken Loach movie – union men (and women), recovering alcoholics, impoverished children, teenage boys tempted by crime, slaves to the gig economy – are complicated mixtures of good intentions and dodgy results, but they’re all struggling under a system that stacks the odds against them from far-off cabinet offices in London and elsewhere. Loach may be the most committed anti-capitalist moviemaker in the history of the medium (the Dardenne brothers are nearly his equals), but his films, at their best, are the opposite of polemics. They play as real stories about actual people muddling through the day, trying to push back against dehumanizing bureaucracies, sectarian hatreds, and soul-crushing economic forces they can only partly glimpse. But a movie like “The Old Oak” – or “My Name Is Joe” (1998) or “Kes” (1969) or “I, Daniel Blake” (2016) – makes sure we see those systems and their effects in all their ruin.

Which sounds like a cosmic bummer, and I’ve always tended to approach Loach by bracing myself for the bad news. And then I watch his movies and am transported, often to tears, by the communion that never fails to spring up like a hardy winter plant through cement. Even when things end badly for his characters, he and we prize them for their choices, good and bad, kind and foolish, and for the endurance they share with each other as a way to stay alive and recognize each other’s humanity. Which, in the end, is the only way to survive a system that insists we’re only figures in a ledger.

Hope, in fact, is one of the themes that raises its head from subtext to text in “The Old Oak,” stated as a life philosophy by Yara (Ebla Mari), a Syrian refugee who with her family has been deposited in a small, dying village in the Northeast of England. (The movie takes place in 2016 but feels as painfully relevant as today’s headlines.) The coal-mining industry that was the life blood and death sentence of the locals was shut down following the 1984 miners’ strike, and the newcomers, fleeing a civil war that has bombed them out of their homes, are greeted with hard stares and hostility. The Old Oak is not a tree but the pub where angry men gather to grouse about the hand-basket the country is going to Hell in and where the owner, T.J. Ballantyne (Dave Turner, an occasional Loach player in a quietly heartbreaking lead role), has settled his many demons into a resigned kindness toward anyone else who has it hard.

Which in Loach-land is everyone but no more so than the refugees, who we see receiving charity and stiff kicks in equal measure, sometimes from the same people. Yara, who’s in her late 20s and speaks English well, strikes up a friendship with T.J. – with this filmmaker we know there’ll be no question of a cooked-up romance – and through that friendship we see the entire town start to choose sides in a kind of interior moral battle in which everyone wins or everyone loses.

It’s not that there are no villains in “The Old Oak,” but, instead, there are degrees by which characters have or have not given into hatred and become defined by it. The chief quartet of rabble rousers at T.J.’s pub run the gamut from virulent racists like Vic (Chris McGlade) and Gary (Jordan Louis) to secret pot-stirrers like Charlie (Trevor Fox) and sycophants like Eddy (Col Tait), but at the same time Loach makes sure we understand their fury at having lost control over their own lives and livelihoods. There are the irredeemable, like the lout who smashes Yara’s camera at the start of the film, and there are the redeemed, like T.J., who sells off two of his estranged son’s cameras to pay for repairs to Yara’s.

There are also lessons in judging others that we in the audience would do well to heed. Watching “The Old Oak,” I uttered a very bad word (although one quite common in England) when one of the local women violently shoves Yara out of her house after the latter has brought the woman’s sick daughter home; a few scenes later I ate my curse in shame when the same woman apologizes and offers Yara and her camera an entry into the community. We’re all hard up against it, Loach reminds us, and turning against each other is exactly what those in power want us to do, rather than turning our fury, rightfully and righteously, on them.



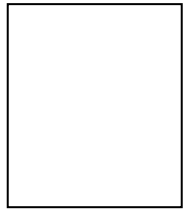
Which is why the final scene of “The Old Oak” reduced me, once again and for the final time, to tears. For some critics and audiences, it’s the hardest scene in the movie to believe. For a man making the last sequence of possibly his last movie, I think, it’s a final claim for concord – the we that are the only answer to anything.

Please join us for our thought-provoking post screening discussions!



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