



Monday, February 23, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by A. O. Scott - NY Times Rated R 95 Mins.

I was an easily frightened child, and nothing scared me more than certain picture books. Something about the static images, the simple words and the unseen menaces hidden between pages made books much more sinister than, say, movies, and quite a few volumes that now seem perfectly innocuous were banished from my bedroom shelves. I had forgotten about this youthful phobia until I saw “The Babadook,” the debut feature by the Australian director Jennifer Kent. Or rather, until I came home from the screening, went to bed and woke up in the throes of the kind of nightmare that was the reason I had shunned those books in the first place.

The Babadook is a black-hatted, long-taloned, snaggletoothed figure — a sort of monochrome, pen-and-ink Freddy Krueger — who lives between the bright red covers of a story that shows up in the house of Amelia (Essie Davis) and her 6-year-old son, Sam (Noah Wiseman). Their household is a creepy place, even before the visitor arrives. Amelia, who works in a nursing home, is a sad, frazzled woman, still reeling from the death of her husband some years earlier and increasingly distraught by Sam’s erratic behavior. Looking a little like a kindergartner dressed up for Halloween as AC/DC’s Angus Young, Sam swerves from cowering terror to uncontrollable rage. He causes trouble in school, attacks his cousin and turns his mother’s days and nights into a gantlet of anxiety, embarrassment and worry.

Or so it seems. The brilliance of “The Babadook,” beyond Ms. Kent’s skillful deployment of the tried-and-true visual and aural techniques of movie horror, lies in its interlocking ambiguities. For a long time, you’re not sure if the Babadook is a supernatural or a psychological phenomenon. Once you’ve started to figure that out — or to decide that you’re too freaked out for it to matter — another, more disturbing question starts to arise. Maybe the monster is all in someone’s head, but if so, whose? Sam’s? Amelia’s? Yours?



Ms. Kent twists the possible answers around, scrambling your sense of standard horror-movie rhythm. Nighttime brings the usual terrors — noises just out of frame, shadowy corridors, flickering lights — but daylight offers no particular comfort. When Amelia and Sam leave home, bad things happen, and their fear is compounded by humiliation. When they return, traumatized and tired, their unwelcome guest is lying in wait. The world outside is a cold, grotesque place, especially when Amelia has to endure the pitying, judgmental company of her sister and other moms. Home is haunted by the memory and the apparent threat of death.



As “The Babadook” proceeds, ratcheting up both the suspense and the odd, surreal comedy that accompanies but does not diminish it, every boundary in Amelia and Sam’s world seems to collapse. When a demon runs wild, uncontained by the walls of houses or the pages of a book, its origin hardly matters. But Ms. Kent has enough of a Freudian streak to know that the familiar is scarier than the alien, and that nothing is more fraught with dreadful possibility than the bond between parent and child.

That bond is also freighted with tenderness, longing, resentment and all kinds of other emotional baggage. Somehow, Ms. Kent has folded all of this into a highly effective little ghost story, one that is as simple and austere as the Babadook book itself. The off-kilter camera angles, echoing sound effects and lurid cinematography (by Radek Ladczuk) certainly help, and so do the two lead actors. Noah Wiseman has a demonic sweetness that recalls some of the evil children of ’70s scare-cinema. And Ms. Davis’s performance is a tour de force of maternal anguish. At times, she seems as fragile and addled as Mia Farrow in “Rosemary’s Baby,” as Ms. Kent pulls Polanskian strings of helplessness and paranoia. But then all of a sudden, the mood shifts and you wonder if you should be afraid for Amelia or afraid of her.

In any case, you will be scared. And also, perhaps even more scarily, moved.

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Two Days, One Night

Monday, March 9, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Ty Burr - Boston Globe *Rated PG-13* *95 Mins.*

What's the cost of solidarity — of sticking up for another human being? In "Two Days, One Night," it carries a very specific price tag: one thousand euros.

That's how much the employees of a small solar-panel factory in eastern Belgium have been promised as a Christmas bonus. The trade-off, says management, is that they'll have to agree to let go one of their own, a worker named Sandra (Marion Cotillard). A vote is hastily held and the employees opt for the bonus — except that Sandra has never been notified. Petitioning the owner (Baptiste Sornin), she convinces him to hold a second vote, and this time she has a weekend — the time period of the film's title — to visit each of her co-workers, one by one, and beg them to reconsider.



So "Two Days, One Night" is a suspense film of sorts, with that countdown ticking in the back of Sandra's head and ours. More than anything else it's about the democracy of day-to-day struggle. This is a small, compassionate gem of a movie, one that's rooted in details of people and place but that keeps opening up onto the universal. The directors are the Dardenne brothers, Jean-Pierre and Luc, who habitually film in their hometown of Liège, among the underclass and the marginalized, yet whose movies are entirely free of cant. They specialize in the drama of the ordinary, and they impart to their characters a dignity that often eludes them in life.

A Dardenne film can be tragic ("Rosetta," 1999) or it can glimmer with hope, like "The Kid With the Bike" (2011). "Two Days, One Night" falls somewhere in the middle; it begins in desperation but, like its heroine, starts to glow with a resilience that no one — least of all her — believes is there.

The film opens with Sandra being woken on a Saturday morning with news of the first vote, and her distress is hard to watch. We come to understand that she has been absent from work battling depression, that she has only recently begun to find her feet again. Losing the factory job means that she, her husband, Manu (Dardenne regular Fabrizio Rongione), and their two young children will have to move

from their rental home to a housing project: a step or two back into the poverty they have been slowly raising their heads above.

"Two Days, One Night" charts the possible answers as Sandra travels around the city, from apartment complexes to soccer fields to grocery stores where colleagues toil in weekend jobs. The Dardennes want us to understand what one thousand euros means to these people: a windfall to pay off mounting bills, to educate a child, to hold it together for one more year. Some are sympathetic to Sandra's situation but just can't do it; others refuse outright, their guilt enflaming them with self-righteousness. Coursing underneath the film's calm, observant surface is a fury at a system that sets people in the same leaky boat at each other's throats.

We see cruelty, kindness, fear, courage. One woman (Catherine Salee), pushed around by her husband, finds herself empowered by Sandra's stressed-out courage. A Russian immigrant (Timur Magomedgadzhiyev) bursts into tears as soon as he sees her, shamed by his self-interest. A part-time worker from Benin (Serge Koto) seesaws between doing the right thing and putting his own neck on the block. The Dardennes convey the vast and varied individuality of people but their filmmaking style, attentive yet unfussy, inevitably leads a viewer to consider the things we have in common.

Despite one melodramatic miscalculation about two-thirds of the way in, "Two Days, One Night" unfolds in a quasi-documentary style that lulls an audience into empathy. No music on the soundtrack unless Sandra and her friends are singing to a Van Morrison oldie on the car radio, grabbing what sweetness the universe bothers to dole out. The performances are so good they're invisible — it's only after the movie's over that you realize Rongione's Manu is a saint — and so it's even more remarkable that the Dardennes are working for the first time with a global movie star.

Ironically, Cotillard's Sandra is the most invisible character of all when the movie opens, crawling back into bed in panic and popping anti-depressants like breath mints. The real drama of this movie is in watching Sandra find her balance and her pride once more, and at no time do you feel you're watching a glamour girl playing at being one of the little people. The Oscar nomination is deserved: Cotillard and the Dardennes convince us of both this woman's fragility and the strength that, through her own nerve and the support of others, comes slowly flooding back.



Only then can Sandra cast a vote of her own, in an ending that is both realistic and absolutely satisfying. The phrase "triumph of the human spirit" has been overused to the point of meaninglessness. "Two Days, One Night" freshly reminds us what it means, in ways both small and large. In French with English Subtitles.

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post screening discussions!*

Mr. Turner

Monday, March 23, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Michael Phillips Rated R 149 Mins.

Some films assert their rightness and sureness in the opening shot. Mike Leigh's excellent "Mr. Turner" is one of them, though Leigh and his inspired cinematographer, Dick Pope, are less concerned with conspicuous camera movement than with a charged sort of stillness. It's a beautiful film, and not merely that. When it's over you feel as if you have been somewhere, to another century, peering at the world through a different set of eyes.

Now for that first shot. In 1820s Holland, a windmill dominates a pastoral landscape. The sun looms low on the horizon. Two women, chatting, enter the frame from the right and follow a path along a canal as Leigh's camera meets them, and then pivots to capture a lone man in a tall hat in the distance. He is sketching, head up to catch the sun, head down to interpret it on his notebook.

In this one simple image we are seduced into believing all we need to believe. This is the past brought to life, and Timothy Spall — whose first close-up as J.M.W. Turner follows the opening shot — makes the act of seeing and sketching a quietly compelling one.



"Mr. Turner" covers a quarter-century in Turner's life. After his travels abroad, Turner returns to London, to his doting father (Paul Jesson) and to his near-mute housekeeper (Dorothy Atkinson). The reunion talk is of the rising cost of paint and other workaday matters. Only when Leigh lingers for a second or two on Atkinson's face, and then on Turner's averted glances, do we sense the sexual current running between employer and employee.

Turner's life is willfully messy. He has a bitter ex-lover and two grown daughters he barely acknowledges, and soon Turner flees to the solace of a country estate. Then it's off to Margate and the seaside, where he grew up. Setting up shop with his easel and paint, he lodges with Mrs. Booth (Marion Bailey, superb in her dogged good cheer), whose husband is a retired seafarer. Turner offers an assumed name, Mallard, to conceal his somewhat famous identity.



From there, urged on by Gary Yershon's vital, astringent musical score, "Mr. Turner" reveals a bit more of the artist at its center in each scene. There are, however, no explanations and thesis points to be made. There's not a single speech in Leigh's improvisation-borne script gumming up the works with expressions of artistic intent. Spall never delivers an "Oscar speech"-y declaration of inner torment or creative passion. This is a procedural and a historical re-creation of a high order. It glides from home to Margate, from work to diversion, and new industrial marvels appear in Turner's life in their own good time.

One of the wittiest scenes brings the daguerreotype into Turner's life. As Turner and Mrs. Booth (now his domestic partner) sit before this strange camera, intimidated into a frozen posture and a fixed, profoundly uncomfortable expression, Leigh's instincts as a writer and a director prove unerring. The film runs 21/2 hours, and I wouldn't cut any of it. It's an eagle-eyed vision of a male-run universe that is nonetheless dominated by women. The housekeeper, Hannah, becomes the story's tragic figure, and it's to Leigh's and Atkinson's credit that the pathos is fully earned.

Spall, often grunting in displeasure, brings his performance right to the brink of caricature but backs away, always. At one point, Turner's 1838 painting "The Fighting Temeraire" comes to life on screen, as Turner floats by with some mates on his own craft. It's the end of an era, he notes, as a steam-powered tugboat ushers the old ship to its next life. Is this an image of defeat, or progress? Happy, or sad? It's too complicated to say, and without a speck of pomposity Leigh's film — one of the year's best — honors its subject in all his tetchy ambiguity.

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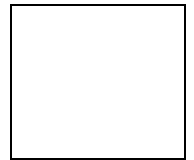
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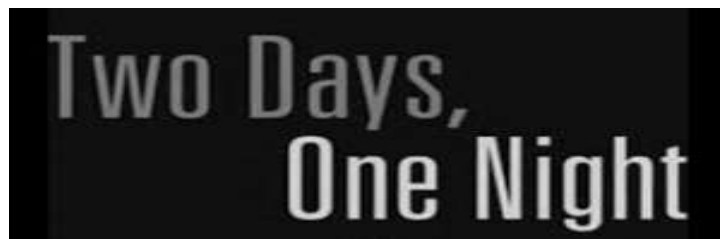
"One of the strongest, most effective horror films of recent years. — with awards-quality lead work from Essie Davis, and a brilliantly designed new monster who could well become the break-out spook archetype of the decade."

Kim Newman - Empire

"A career-high performance from Oscar-winner Marion Cotillard".

Dave Calhoun - Time Out

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"Timothy Spall has always been terrific. This is the performance of his career."

Stephanie Zacharek, Village Voice

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