

Dheepan (2015)

Tamil & French with English subtitles

Rated R. Running time: 1 hour 50 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 4; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 3.

Our star rating (1-5): 4.5

How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

Psalm 137:4

Make sure foreigners and orphans get their just rights.

Deuteronomy 24:17 The Message

French director Jacques Audiard's new film immerses us in the world of immigrants so that we can feel their confusion and fears, as well as their hopes and dreams. The refugees this time are fleeing the little-known (to Americans) but bloody conflict in Sri Lanka that raged for over 30 years on the island nation. The armed conflict led by the group branded as terrorists, The Tamil Tigers, has ended with their defeat by government forces. This film deals with the aftermath by focusing upon three survivors, a Tamil soldier, a widow, and an orphaned girl. Winner of the coveted Palme d'Or at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival, the film joins others such as [Sin Nombre](#) and [The Good Lie](#), in showing those displaced by conflict, though it is more stark and violent than either of these.

The film opens with rebels setting fire to a pyre on which are laid out the bodies of their fallen comrades. One of them, Sivadhan (Antonythasan Jesudhasan), changes into civilian clothes and burns his uniform in the blazing pyre. With his

wife and child dead, he devises a scheme that will enable him to escape from the island.

Meanwhile Yalini (Kalieaswari Srinivasan) is going through a crowded bazaar to discover if the children she sees belong to any of the adults. At last coming upon a woman and two girls, she learns that Illayaal (Claudine Vinasithamby) is not the woman's daughter, so she takes the girl in hand, later joining with Sivadhanan to obtain papers from a dead man named Dheepan so that their fake family can leave the battle-scarred island.

In Paris Sivadhanan, now Dheepan, tries vainly to sell silly tourist items that light up, but finds few takers. The "family" manages to con welfare officials into sending them to work at a huge public housing development a little distance from Paris. At first because neither adult speaks French the girl proves her value as an interpreter because she does possess a rudimentary knowledge of the language. The project manager Youssouf (Marc Zinga) takes the three around to introduce Dheepan as the new building and grounds caretaker and show the new employee the basics of the job. Part of this is to sort the mail for several of the buildings, which leads to some confusion when Dheepan and Yalini sort it by first rather than last names. Illayaal is not at all happy at being left at the special ed class because the other children refuse to accept her. Dheepan gently talks with her, revealing a long suppressed parental skill by convincing her to return to the class.

At first the shy Yalini stays at home to cook and clean the apartment. She wants to go to London where she has a cousin, but Dheepan convinces her to stay. She reluctantly takes a job as cook and caregiver for a disabled elderly man after Dheepan compalsins that she should be contributing to their meager income. Her food is so good that the man's son, Brahim (Vincent Rottiers), recently released from prison but still wearing a tracking bracelet around his ankle, pays her extra

money. Although not a Muslim, she starts wearing a headscarf in order to blend in more with other women in the project.

Dheepan also is doing well, carefully following instructions not to enter the building used by the gang selling drugs until they have left late in the morning. At night he gazes out the window at the nightlong activity of the gang, cars and motorcycles coming and going as the thugs sell their drugs, drink and carry on. Though they share the apartment, the adults sleep in different rooms. As the days pass they begin to talk with each other, Yalani commenting once that it is nice that they are having a conversation like a real family. Still, as she talks with Brahim, she refers to her family as "fake."

With the return to the projects of Brahim, rivalry with another gang erupts into violence. Yalani and Illayaal, caught returning from a shopping trip, drop their bags and take cover behind one of the buildings as bullets whiz around them. Dheepan tries to set up a no-fire zone around his building, but the thugs ridicule his attempt and threaten the family. He intercepts the fed-up Yalani when she leaves with the girl (whom once she would have left behind) to catch a train for the coast. When she is feeding her charge, the rival gang peppers the apartment with gun fire, injuring Brahim, who then forces her to call her husband to come and rescue them. Dheepan reverts back to Sivadhasan, the Tamil Tiger soldier, taking up a machette and a pointed scwdriver as he sets forth to deal with the arrogant thugs who attempt to come between him and the woman he now loves.

As a peacemaker I was saddened by the film's resolution, though find it understandable. The desperate man, now fully embracing his new family, defends them in the only way he can, with his training and skill learned during his years of service to his cause. Even Gandhi said that he preferred a man of courage who reverted to violence in defending his own to the cowardice of a man who runs away to safety. Were this an

American film I would write that it is an updated Western—you know, the ones where a gunslinger is trying to hang up his gun belt and settle down to a peaceful life, but then circumstances arise that force him to take up his gun again, cause “a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do.”

Despite the violence, the film excellently introduces us to still another group of “the least of these, my brothers” whom we ought not to ignore. The importance of immigrants finding solidarity with others is depicted in the beautiful sequence in which Yalani takes the girl to worship in a Hindu temple, after which the three of them enjoy a picnic with other refugees, all of them showing that they can sing the song of their lord “in a foreign land.”

This is an informative and inspiring film worth the trouble of tracking it down. Its authenticity is affirmed in the following note about the lead actor on IMDB: “Antonythasan Jesuthasan, a former child soldier with the Sri Lankan militant group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, who fled the country in the late 1980s and eventually made his way to France, where he became an acclaimed playwright, essayist and novelist. “Dheepan” marks his first leading role in a film (after a supporting part in the 2011 Indian film “Sengadal”), but his commanding screen presence suggests it will not be his last.” Amen to that last sentence!

For more information on the film’s background see the Wikipedia article “Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam” at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_Tigers_of_Tamil_Eelam

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the August issue of VP.

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