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The Breadwinner (12a)

dir: **Nora Twomey**

starring: (the voices of) **Saara Chaudry, Soma Chhaya**

sponsor: **Paul Hancock**

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Synopsis: Parvana, a young girl, her parents, sister and baby brother live in Kabul, under Taliban control. They make ends meet by selling possessions on the street. When her father is arrested, the family face starvation but Parvana disguises herself as a boy in order to provide for everyone. She befriends Shauzia, another girl also in disguise. She is recognised by one of the Taliban who arrested her father, but escapes. When war breaks out, the family decides to move to Masar-e-Sharif, to live with the family of her sister's boyfriend. Parvana wants to find her father. She makes her way to the prison and manages to get her father out. Meanwhile her mother decides not to go to Masar-e-Sharif. The family faces separation but are finally reunited. The story is intercut with scenes from an Afghan fairy story in which a young boy defeats an evil elephant king.

Parvana, the young lead of Nora Twomey's *The Breadwinner*, tells her father that she has outgrown the stories she used to love. The trouble is not that she is too old for stories, but that the difficulties of her day-to-day life are too pressing for her to believe in happy endings anymore. Parvana lives in Kabul; her father is disabled, her family is poor and she is regularly harassed and threatened with violence. As a female in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, she is unable to work, go out in public without a male relative or even shop at the market, let alone attend school. When, later in the film, she is coaxed to start telling her baby brother a fairy story, her narrative absorbs all the terrors of her real life: her hero is followed by a mysterious evil at every turn, and unless he completes a series of seemingly impossible tasks, the people in his village will starve.

The film is a loose, animated adaptation of Deborah Ellis's award-winning children's novel of the same name, which was inspired by a series of interviews with Afghan refugees. Parvana is an endearing and courageous heroine, but the protagonist of the fairy story is a boy, because in Kabul women are confined to domestic lives rather than daring adventures. When Parvana's father is arrested by the Taliban, however, she decides to become the hero of her own story and save her family from starvation, by cutting her hair and wearing her deceased brother's clothes. In disguise, she can work, shop and keep the wolf from the door. Although the risks of discovery are terrible to contemplate, she gains confidence from another crossdressing, hard-working companion: Shauzia, who is saving up to escape her abusive father. Engagingly, *The Breadwinner* weaves Parvana's fairytale in and out of her real travails, which are infinitely more horrific, despite being more prosaic.

The film is clearly intended for a juvenile audience, but the material is relentlessly harrowing and offers little relief from the atmosphere of oppression, savage violence and fear. Parvana



witnesses a firing squad at her father's prison; her frail mother is brutally beaten. The promise of a traditional-happy-ever after is also denied Parvana: while an arranged marriage might save the family finances, or provide provide and escape from war-torn Kabul, the characters in *The Breadwinner* darkly hint that married life is another nightmare of its own.

An opening sequence sardonically sketches the history of Afghanistan as continually torn between rival empires, and the outbreak of war in 2001 provides a backdrop for its second half, but *The Breadwinner's* main theme is the Taliban stifling of female liberties. Indeed, this engrossing film, written and directed by women and executive produced by Angelina Jolie, hits extremely hard in depicting the life of women under extreme oppression.

The animation goes some way to making the material more palatable. The adults have stylised features, long faces and sharply hooked noses, while the younger characters are snub-nosed cuties, especially Parvana's baby brother. Twomey's previous credits include co-directing *The Secret of Kells* (2009), and the animation here is even more ambitious. In the brilliantly executed fantasy and history sequences, colourful 3D paper cuts expand on the style of Lotte Reiniger, while recurring circular geometric patterns record Islamic decorative art.

There are brief, welcome moments of comedy, such as when Shauzia hijacks Parvana's story, and fleeting respites in the tone, as sparse as the raisins scattered over the family's frugal meals of rice and lentils. Emboldened by their male drag, the girls sneak into a confectioners and snaffle fallen sweets from the floor, or dream of a new life on the coast. The most touching moment of levity is when Parvana, passing as a male for the first time, is mocked by a shopkeeper and fails to hide her delight - he can't understand why this boy is so happy to be teased.

The terrific ending sequence cross cuts between Parvana's hellish attempt to free her father from prison, her mother's astonishing defiance of an aggressive male relative and the climax of the fairy story. In the frenzy of her own heroics and the act of storytelling, Parvana uncovers the buried truth about the death of her older brother. To defeat the villainous Elephant King, her hero repeats this distressing truth out loud. *The Breadwinner* adopt the same strategy: describing the injustices of a cruel regime in terms that children can easily understand, in order to topple it.

See over for credits.

Credits

Parvana	Saara Chaudhry
Shauzia	Soma Chhaya
Fateema/old woman	Laura Sadiq
Soraya	Shaista Latif
Nurullah/Talib security man	Ali Badshah
Razak	Kawa Ada
Idrees/Sulayman	Noorin Gulamgaus
Zaki	Patrick McGrath
Lily Erlinghäuser	Finn Jackson Parle
Director	Nora Twomey
Screenplay	Anita Doron
Screen story	Deborah Ellis
Director of Photography	Sheldon Lisoy
Editor	Darragh Byrne
Art directors	Reza Riahi, Ciaran Duffy
Music	Mychael Danna Jeff Danna
Sound design	J R Fountain
Animation director	Fabian Erlinghäuser
	Ireland/Canada 2017
	93mins

Another view

With films like *The Secret of Kells* and *Song of the Sea* on their production roster, it was clear that Ireland's Cartoon Saloon were an animation house on the make. Nora Twomey's heartbreaking *The Breadwinner* seals their status as a word class player in the eld of thoughtful, poetic and idiosyncratic feature animation.

Their mode is social realism tinged with folkloric fantasy, though this film dials back the faeries and magic and drops us in the politically unstable hellhole of Kabul, Afghanistan circa 2001. It follows a family scraping together a meagre living in which every grain of rice and every raisin are essential for survival. Doltish Taliban enforcers swagger around the streets and impose their tyrannical rule, which is bad news for everyone, but especially the women.

The film's title refers to Parvana, the family's tenacious middle daughter who concocts a crafty scheme of resistance when their father is jailed on a trumped up charge. With the man of the house out of the frame, and women banned from wandering the streets without a male chaperone, even to purchase food, it appears as if a death sentence has been passed by proxy. But Parvana has a plan that is so seditious it verges on the unthinkable – just what she needs to get around the arrogant men in charge.

More than a pitched battle of enlightenment versus ignorance, Twomey's film chips away at the absurdity of religious extremism while making a plea for a society which updates its laws in line with natural cultural evolution. It also suggests that the tighter the stranglehold of power, the more prone the people are to embrace subversion to ensure their freedom.

The atrocities of 9/11 aren't mentioned, even though the early rumblings of conflict are teased throughout. These characters have little interest in the world beyond their local border – and for good reason. *The Breadwinner* doesn't depict the Afghan people as victims of western aggression, even though that's where its story inevitably leads. The micro-scale civic victories take on an even more bittersweet hue when it becomes clear that everyone will be punished for the Taliban's crimes. Parvana dutifully reads a story to her toddler sister in which a boy faces his manifold fears to bring prosperity back to his village. Even though this tall tale offers a handy continuous commentary on the brutal realities, it also operates as a celebration of art as cosy refuge from life's torments.

The animation style is bold, crisp and unshowy, and serves the modest desert-village setting nicely. The film avoids wacky humour and demographic-targeting stereotypes, but never feels too po-faced or downbeat as a result of that. It also offers a careful and unromantic depiction of Central Asia, working as a necessary corrective against works which exoticise the region and culture. The constant looping back to the story-within-the-story becomes a little tiresome after a while, especially in the film's dramatic final stretch where the reality is now more absurd than the fiction.

Yet the blunt-force power of the film is undeniable, even as it climaxes on a note of hopeful resignation. And while its message of female empowerment is wrought from a highly specific time and context, it goes without saying that it has much to say about the treatment of women from all walks of life.

David Jenkins: Little White Lies

Our next screening: Friday January 4th, 2019, 7.30pm Happy End (France 2017. Cert 15)

Michael Haneke returns to the Society with another exquisitely pointed, blackly comic dissection of 21st century middle class life, in a tale about a well-off family from Northern France who are obsessed with their business and personal issues and oblivious to the levels of disfunction inside and outside the home. With a fantastic cast that includes Isabelle Huppert, Jean-Louis Trintignant (both reunited with Haneke after *Amour*) and Toby Jones, *Happy End* provides a caustic reality check on the idea that the family unit and the achievement of wealth represents the height of human social development.

We'd like to thank all our members, guests and supporters, especially sponsors, for their contribution to making 2018 such a fine year of films and a fitting celebration of our 65 years as a Society.

We hope you all have a Happy Christmas and look forward to seeing everyone again when we return on January 4th