

Blu-Ray Review: Dramatically Satisfying, Oscar-Winning ‘In a Better World’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on September 11, 2011 - 11:07am

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CHICAGO – Susanne Bier’s “In a Better World” has stuck with me. After seeing it in theaters five months ago, I was a little hard on the film due to the fact that it beat out so many great ones for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, including “Dogtooth,” “Incendies,” and the film that most people thought would win, “Biutiful.” I still question that decision, but this is a stronger film than I first gave it credit for — a bit more shallow and cut-and-dry than it should have been but a dramatically satisfying rental, now available on Blu-ray and DVD.



Blu-Ray Rating: **3.5/5.0**

Bier is a talented director (I would argue that her underrated “Things We Lost in the Fire” and spectacular “Brothers” are superior films to this one) with a gift for performance — drawing complex, interesting performances from her cast. She does so again here with excellent work from the great Mikael Persbrandt (“Everlasting Moments”), Ulrich Thomsen (“Brothers”), and Trine Dyrholm (“Troubled Water”) along with child actors Markus Rygaard and William Johnk Nielsen.

Written by Bier and regular collaborator Anders Thomas Jensen, “In a Better World” is an ambitious piece that draws moral lines from Africa to London to Sweden to Denmark...and gets a bit lost along the way. This is a quality film that just loses a bit of focus as it delves into complex themes in a way that reduces them a bit too simplistically. I admire Bier’s award-winning film almost purely for its performances, but wish the story had the power to match what the actors are bringing to it.



In a Better World

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

Part of the problem is that "In a Better World" sometimes feels like it grafts adult emotions and behaviors on to its two child protagonists – the headstrong and possibly sociopathic Christian (Nielsen) and the awkward-and-shy Elias (Rygaard). Christian just lost his mother and he has moved to a small town in Denmark from London with his distant father Claus (Thomsen) after her death. At school, Christian becomes partnered with the bullied Elias, a young man who has clearly taken abuse for some time. Elias' family life has crumbled as his father Anton (Persbrandt) and mother Marianne (Dyrholm) seem on the verge of a divorce and are living apart. Anton spends weeks in Africa serving as a doctor at a Sudanese refugee camp where he sees the kind of true horror most of us cannot even imagine.

A bullying incident at school pushes the increasingly-hostile Christian to the breaking point and he commits a vicious assault, becoming accomplices with the terrified Elias when people start asking questions. Not long after, the boys are witness to another incident of bullying and the desire for more revenge boils up. The parents of the children are virtually absent. Claus has no idea how to talk to his son and feels that he blames him for his mother's death while Anton is on another continent. One could easily read "In a Better World" as a commentary on the importance of active parenting. If Claus and Anton were there for their boys more consistently, the drama of the final act would never take place.

"In a Better World" is a thematically intriguing film about issues of humanity that can span different age and social demographics, most notably bullying and vengeance. It's about power — taking it, having it, wanting it, and realizing it's not what you think it is. I wish it didn't wrap itself up so neatly and was more thematically consistent and defined but it's a movie designed to get people talking and it certainly did that for Academy members. Five months after seeing it, I'm still thinking about it and that's a sign of a strong narrative feature. Even if it's flawed, it's a conversation starter, and we could always use more of those on the cinematic landscape.

Special Features:

- o Deleted Scenes
- o Commentary with Director Susanne Bier & Editor Pernille Bech Christensen
- o Interview with Susanne Bier

"In a Better World" stars Markus Rygaard, William Johnk Nielsen, Mikael Persbrandt, Trine Dyrholm, and Ulrich Thomsen. It was written by Susanne Bier & Anders Thomas Jensen and directed by Bier. It is not rated and opens in Chicago on April 15th, 2011.



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