



I, DANIEL BLAKE

UK 100 MIN

KEN LOACH

Ken Loach's latest Palme d'Or winner, his second after 2006's *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*, packs a hefty punch, both personal and political. On one level, it is a polemical indictment of a faceless benefits bureaucracy that strips claimants of their humanity by reducing them to mere numbers – neoliberal 1984 meets uncaring, capitalist *Catch-22*. On another, it is a celebration of the decency and kinship of (extra) ordinary people who look out for each other when the state abandons its duty of care.

For all its raw anger at the impersonal mistreatment of a single mother and an ailing widower in depressed but resilient Newcastle, Paul Laverty's brilliantly insightful script finds much that is moving (and often surprisingly funny) in the unbreakable social bonds of so-called "broken Britain". Blessed with exceptional lead performances from Dave Johns and Hayley Squires, Loach crafts a gut-wrenching tragicomic drama (about "a monumental farce") that blends the timeless humanity of the Dardenne brothers' finest works with the contemporary urgency of Loach's own 1966 masterpiece *Cathy Come Home*.

We open with the sound of 59-year-old Geordie joiner Daniel Blake (standup comic Johns) answering automaton-like questions from a "healthcare professional". Having suffered a heart attack at work, Daniel has been instructed by doctors to rest. Yet since he is able to walk 50 metres and "raise either arm as if to put something in your top pocket", he is deemed ineligible for employment and support allowance, scoring a meaningless 12 points rather than the requisite 15. Instead, he must apply for jobseeker's allowance and perform the Sisyphean tasks of attending CV workshops and pounding the pavements in search of nonexistent jobs that he can't take anyway

Meanwhile, Squires's mother-of-two Katie is similarly being given the runaround, rehoused hundreds of miles from her friends and family in London after spending two years in a hostel. "I'll make this a home if it's the last thing I do," she tells Daniel, who takes her under his wing, fixing up her flat and impressed by her resolve to go "back to the books" with the Open University. Both are doing all they can to make the best of a bleak situation, retaining their hope and dignity in the face of insurmountable odds. Yet both are falling through the cracks of a cruel system that pushes those caught up in its cogs to breaking point.

A scene in a food bank in which the starving Katie, on the verge of collapse, finds herself grasping a meagre tin of beans is one of the most profoundly moving film sequences I have ever seen. Shot at a respectful distance by cinematographer Robbie Ryan, the scene displays both an exquisite empathy for Katie's trembling plight and a pure rage that anyone should be reduced to such humiliation. Having seen *I, Daniel Blake* twice, I have both times been left a shivering wreck by this sequence, awash with tears, aghast with anger, overwhelmed by the sheer force of its all-but-silent scream.

"They'll fuck you around," China tells Daniel, "make it as miserable as possible – that's the plan." For Loach and Laverty, this is the dark heart of their drama, the use of what Loach calls the "intentional inefficiency of bureaucracy as a political weapon", a way of intimidating people in a manner that is anything but accidental. "When you lose your self-respect you're done for," says Daniel, whose act of graffitied defiance becomes an "I'm Spartacus!" battle cry that resonates far beyond the confines of the movie theatre. Expect to see it spray-painted on the walls of a jobcentre near you soon.

Mark Kermode, The Observer

WRITERS: Paul Laverty **CINEMATOGRAPHY:** Robbie Ryan **MUSIC:** George Fenton

CAST: *Daniel* Dave Johns | *Katie* Hayley Squires | *Sheila* Sharon Percy | *Daisy* Brianna Shann

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