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Friday February 5th, 7.30pm

Two Days, One Night (Belgium 2014. Cert 15)

dirs: **Jean-Pierre & Luc Dardenne**

starring: **Marion Cotillard, Fabrizio Rongione**

sponsors: **Andrew Howard**

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Although it doesn't look or behave like a Hollywood feelgood movie about personal growth, *Two Days, One Night* is in essence just such a film. Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, who created the character for Marion Cotillard after meeting her during the shoot of *Rust and Bone* (2012), focus their film on Sandra Bya, a working-class mother who has had a nervous breakdown. Returning to her husband and kids from the hospital, she finds that she's lost her job in a small factory making solar panels. Her boss Dumont has given her 16 workmates the choice between having her back or working longer hours and receiving a bonus (the underlying problem is the company has discovered it can make do without her, although competition from Asia is also a factor) and most of them have opted for the cash. She learns that the workshop foreman Jean-Marc lobbied against her.

Egged on by her saintly husband Manu and her more than supportive workmate Juliette, Sandra asks Dumont to ballot the workers again, in secret this time, and spends a weekend canvassing her colleagues one by one, hoping to win them over to her side. Some of them refuse to budge and the setbacks threaten Sandra's mental equilibrium, but there's enough good news to keep her going. No spoilers here (don't read the synopsis if you don't want to know how things pan out), but the film ends with Sandra at her happiest, seemingly on the road to recovery at last. Feelgood or what?

The directors dramatise Sandra's highs and lows across the weekend, rather dubiously using the tight timeframe and the threat of a relapse into breakdown to generate low key suspense. Predictably, her mood upswings follow encounters with workmates who promise to vote for her: these episodes climax after a particularly heartwarming 'yes' on the Sunday evening when she, Manu and newly single workmate Anne sing along with Them's 'Gloria' on the car stereo. Equally predictably, her downswings follow refusals: three in a row on Saturday morning prompts a return home to rest and a nightmare in which her son drowns, and three more on Sunday morning prompt a Xanax overdose and a race to hospital to get her stomach pumped. The setbacks, though, are easily overcome - perhaps a little too easily since she's back on the trail of elusive workmates just an hour after leaving the hospital.

As usual in Dardenne films, such melodramatic contrivances are softened by their integration into the naturalistic flow of incidents, by the overall sensitivity to social and economic realities and by the generally credible performances. (Their trademark realism is hard won in this case, we're told; there was a



full month of rehearsals with the cast, following two months of location familiarisation exercises, all recorded on video to be minutely picked over. Their insistence on filming in sequence probably also helps, although this particular script is by definition so episodic that it could not have made much difference either way. Cotillard is anyway integrated into a Dardenne 'stock company' which has been through these paces before.

Synopsis: Seraing, Wallonia, Friday. Sandra Bya, recently home from hospital where she has been treated for depression, wants to return to her job at Solwai, making solar panels. But her boss Dumont has balloted her 16 workmates in her absence, offering them the choice between having her back or working longer hours and receiving a bonus of up to €1,000 - and the majority has voted for the bonus. On the grounds that the foreman, Jean-Marc lobbied against her, Sandra asks for a second, secret ballot on Monday morning. Dumont agrees. Urged on and encouraged by her husband Manu and helped by her supportive workmate Juliette, Sandra spends Saturday and Sunday visiting her workmates in their homes, explaining how much she needs the income from the job and asking them to back her. Some refuse outright, usually explaining how much they need the bonus, but others agree: the only violent response comes from Jérôme who punches her and her workmate Yvon. On Sunday morning, three successive refusals upset the still-fragile Sandra so much that she takes an overdose of Xanax; Manu rushes her to hospital to have her stomach pumped, but news that Anne has left her brutal husband and switched her vote revives Sandra, and she makes two more housecalls in the evening. On Monday morning the vote splits evenly for and against Sandra. Dumont proposes a compromise: he will take Sandra back after a rest, but lay off fixed-term Alphonse instead. Sandra declines this offer and leaves happy.

Credits

Sandra	Marion Cotillard	Directors Jean-Pierre & Luc Dardenne
Manu	Fabrizio Rongione	Screenplay Jean-Pierre & Luc Dardenne
Estelle	Pili Groyne	DoP Alain Marcoen
Maxime	Simon Caudry	Editor Mari-Hélène Dozo
Juliette	Catherine Salée	Sound mix Thomas Gauder
Dumont	Batiste Somin	
Yvon	Phillipe Jeusette	
Jean-Marc	Olivier Gourmet	
Anne	Christelle Comil	
Alphonse	Serge Koto	

Belgium/France/Italy/The Netherlands 2014. 95 mins

Further individual contrivances underpin the narrative: the solar panel workshop is small enough not to have a unionised workforce, so the issue of solidarity or non-solidarity with Sandra becomes strictly personal and isn't complicated by labour politics; and the workforce Sandra has to plead with represent a precise cross-section of the Belgian small-town demographic, including a young black immigrant, an Arabic family, those struggling with the weekly bills, those looking to upgrade their patio and a couple of vicious and seemingly misogynistic men. There may well be small factories with this range of workers in provincial Belgium, but it's more important to the directors that their characters should be fully representative of wage-slave society.

The film's sociological aspect underpins its core fable of the vulnerable individual who gains strength and confidence by fighting her corner, greatly abetted by Cotillard's very committed performance as a woman on the verge of another nervous breakdown. But you could equally read the film the other way round, with the feelgood thrust of the narrative serving to highlight the problems of competitiveness and lack of solidarity in present-day society. The Dardenne brothers are not exactly 'old Labour' nostalgists in the Ken Loach vein, but they are politicised moralists who want their films to deliver op-ed analyses as well as sentimental kicks. In terms of the British political spectrum, the way they finesse social commentary wrapped up in feelgood drama makes them not so much 'New Labour' as left-leaning Lib-Dems.

Luc Dardenne speaks to Isobel Stevens (Sight and Sound)

IS: Who came first, the character of Sandra or Marion Cotillard?

LD: The character. The screenplay, we talked about it and we started to write it at the beginning of 2000. We had heard about similar stories - well, situations rather than stories - where people working for a company had been pushed to become very competitive with one another by their bosses, who asked them to decide between their bonuses and the fact that a less well-performing worker could be given the sack, and those workers voted to keep their own bonuses. That happened in France in the 1990s. And then later on, there were other situations like this, in areas of Italy, the US and Belgium.

At that point, we tried to write a story. And it was always a woman as the protagonist, but we weren't thinking of Marion. It was a woman, and when she was going round visiting and talking to all her colleagues (she) met someone - a man or another woman, we played with the idea of both - and once we had come up with this meeting with another person, we couldn't continue, because we felt obliged to give this person their own story, and to tell a new story between them. And so the original idea got sidelined. We lost the essence of the story, the suspense that was linked to the vote, and to all these other people that

she met, and the emphasis shifted to this new person. So we abandoned the idea.

IS: What made you return to it?

LD: There was the 2008 financial crisis in Europe and the US and it became a social crisis. And we said, "Well, what if this other person was her husband?" He will provide backstory, he's lived through her depression. He will let very concrete details surface, that are also very intimate, for example, the fact that they don't make love any more. And at the same time, he will also write a story of solidarity with her. He is going to help her, to be a little bit like her coach.

Once we had that idea in place, we were able to write the screenplay. And at that point, when we knew it was going to be the story of her and husband, that's when we thought of Marion Cotillard. Because we had met Marion the year before for another project, to do with a young doctor in the suburbs. We changed screenplays, and we went back to her in Paris and said, "Well, we've had another idea, are you still interested?" And she said, "Yes, absolutely. I like the story and I'd like to work with you." When we met her the year before, there was a *coup de foudre cinématographique* between us. We wanted to film her. We *desired* to film her. That need lasted a year and a half, and when we started writing the screenplay that became the film, we had her in mind all the time.

Extract from a longer interview with the Dardenne brothers (Woman on the Verge), Sight and Sound, September 2014

Our next screening - February 19th, 7.30pm

Leviathan (Dir: Andrey Zvyagintsev. Russia 2014. Cert 15)

Leviathan, according to Wikipedia, is the title of a book by the 17th century writer Thomas Hobbes about the structure of society and legitimate government and is considered 'a classic western work on statecraft comparable with Machiavelli's *The Prince*.'

It is therefore a completely apt title for Andrey Zvyagintsev's film which takes a look at the current state of Russian society filtered through the experiences of Kolia, a middle-aged man who lives with his wife and son in the family home (theirs for generations), overlooking the Barents Sea. But the local mayor has his eyes on the land on which the house sits, which he considers ripe for development.

Leviathan is a devastating portrait of contemporary Russia. It exemplifies the adage that 'power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely' and the unflinching and unflattering portrait it paints of the Russian state leaves one wondering - apart from anything else - quite how the director managed to make the film at all.