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## **Dheepan (France 2015. Cert 15)**

*dir:* **Jacques Audiard**

*Starring:* **Antonythasan Jesuthasan, Kalieaswari Srinivasan, Claudine Vinasithamby**

*Sponsor:* **Special Edition Chocolates**

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**Synopsis:** Dheepan, a Tamil Tiger fighter, escapes from war-torn Sri Lanka in the company of a woman, Yalini, and a 9 year old girl Illayaal, passing them off as his wife and child. They make their way to France where they find a home of sorts in a stark neighbourhood on the outskirts of Paris. They struggle to adjust to their new surroundings at first but gradually begin to fit in: both adults find work and start a relationship while Illayaal resumes her education. But the appearance of a Tamil commander in his life and an outbreak of drug related gang violence on the estate destabilise Dheepan and he finds himself drawn back to violence, to defend himself and those close to him.

In spite of the esteem in which its director Jacques Audiard (*A Self-Made Hero, Read My Lips, The Beat That My Heart Skipped, A Prophet, Rust and Bone*) is widely held, the award of the Palme d'Or to Dheepan at the 2015 Cannes festival was controversial, and it's easy to see why. This tense social drama about three Sri Lankan refugees living on a French sink estate suddenly turns into a vigilante movie, before confusingly concluding as an English suburban idyll.

The beginning suggests economically the horrors of the Sri Lankan civil war. In order to claim political asylum, Dheepan (Antonythasan Jesuthasan), a former Tamil fighter, hastily assembles a pretend family with 'wife' Yalini (Kalieaswari Srinivasan) and nine-year old 'daughter' Illayaal (Claudine Vinasithamby). The trio embark on the voyage to France, where, after various odd jobs, Dheepan finds work as a caretaker on a nightmarish suburban estate abandoned to local drug trafficking gangs. 'Run-down' doesn't even begin to describe the place, which is endowed with an ironically bucolic name - 'Le Pre' (The Meadow) - as are so many similar concrete housing projects in the French suburbs. Le Pre is on the edge of vast fields but, rather than promoting closeness to nature, the location simply enhances the sense of isolation; the unfolding scenes on the estate will confirm this sense of living apart from the mainstream of French society.

It's an unpromising start, but gradually Dheepan, Yalini and Illayaal come to terms both with their new environment and with each other. Until the last half hour of the film, Audiard brilliantly walks the line between documentary and fiction, keeping us on the edge of our seats while observing the mundane yet tense unfolding of Dheepan, Yalini and Illayaal's daily lives. Slowly the three members of the false family bond, and Dheepan and Yalini's relationship, eventually and predictably, becomes sexual.



Another of the film's achievements is to redefine the notion of the outsider. We quickly come to share the three migrants' view of a society they barely understand; none of them speaks any French at first, and for a while they have to rely on Illayaal's budding proficiency acquired at school. To them, the environment itself is outlandish. As Yalini tells Dheepan one night, while they covertly watch the local youths' noisy antics from their darkened room, "it's like being at the cinema."

As if on cue, events then turn not just nasty but spectacularly so, as gang violence escalates. Dheepan tries to distance himself from it, literally drawing a 'no-fire zone' between his block and the one occupied by the gangs. Simultaneously, his past catches up with him, as Tamil colonel Cheran (Vasanth Selvam) brutally orders him to help the fight at home. These events seem to unlock some primeval, violent urge in Dheepan. But rather than addressing the Sri Lankan conflict, the tragedy of migrants or the French social malaise, the final bloodbath nods towards Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* (1971) and macho heroics, à la Sylvester Stallone.

Even putting aside the generic about-turn and the implied equation between the Sri Lankan civil war with the Parisian suburbs, the depiction of the latter rankles. Audiard has claimed that he wanted to avoid a 'sociological approach to the *film de banlieu*'. That may be so, but in offering such an extreme, dysfunctional portrayal of the estate, where there appear to be virtually no 'normal' inhabitants (such as women and children), *Dheepan* reinforces the clichéd notion of the Parisian suburbs endlessly recycled in the French media - a hellish habitat populated with testosterone-fuelled and violent delinquents from North African backgrounds (and it beggars belief, given the almost civil war climate depicted in the film, that the police are not once seen on the estate.) The vision offered by *Dheepan* reduces the complexity of working-class suburban estates - including Les Coudraies in Poissy, north-west of Paris, where the film was shot. While not entirely problem-free, Les Coudraies is quiet - one inhabitant who worked as an extra declared, 'There has not been a single gunshot in 20 years.' The estate was recently saved from demolition by residents, who pleaded with the mayor to renovate it instead.

Dheepan's violent turn also toxifies the film's hitherto subdued gender politics. From the start, Yalini subtly but persistently resists

Dheepan's efforts at integration in a particularly gendered way. At first, she refuses to work, sulks and reads Elle in secret, prompting Dheepan to exclaim that he "is looking after two children."

Reluctantly she agrees to work as a cook for a disabled older man and makes some success of it, despite her inability to communicate in French. The theme of Yalini's girlish immaturity is pursued, however, in her naive fascination with her employer's son, Brahim (Vincent Rottiers) when he comes out of jail, even though he is clearly a psychopath. Ultimately this is what involves her and Dheepan in the final bloody mayhem. As she lingers on after work is finished one day, she finds herself caught in the crossfire when gun-toting hoodlums come to seek revenge on Brahim, and this in turn provokes Dheepan's killing spree as he comes to rescue her in the 9th floor apartment. And then, jarringly, we find ourselves in a quintessentially leafy English suburb for the film's coda. Yalini and Dheepan (who has somehow become a black cab driver) and their new baby as well as Illayaal enjoy an alfresco lunch, surrounded by other happy Sri Lankan families: their normalisation is complete.

This apparently unironic vision of England's green and pleasant land may of course be interpreted as fantasy, as it answers Yalini's dream of settling in Britain. But the abrupt geographic and sociological rupture from everything that has come before is grating and implausible, given the film's investment in realism up to this point. (These somewhat improbable narrative turns may have been brought about by Audiard submitting an unfinished print in time for Cannes and them deciding to keep that version after winning the Palme d'Or.) Still, given the context of the refugee crisis in Europe, to jettison the story's political potential in this manner seems at best provocative and at worst careless.

With these reservations, *Dheepan* remains a powerful and memorable film. Dheepan is a complex, flawed and yet sympathetic hero who, like the character played by Tahar Rahim in the prison drama *A Prophet* (2009 - shown by LFS in 2011), credibly metamorphoses from underdog to winner. One may regret that, yet again, this takes the route of caricatured macho violence.

Nevertheless, except in the shootout scene, the characters remain believable and affecting, thanks to superb performances by the three leads, despite their lack of film experience. In the relatively small role of Brahim, Rottiers also gives a brilliantly sinister performance.

*Dheepan*, a film almost entirely in Tamil and with no known stars, was a potentially risky project, but Audiard has succeeded in reaching a wide audience. His ability to combine social drama with stylish film-making further secures the unique place he has carved out for himself within French cinema, as an auteur open to topical issues; no doubt, it is this overall achievement, rather than a gripping but uneven film, that the Palme d'Or recognised.

#### Credits

<b>Dheepan</b>	Antonythasan Jesuthasan
<b>Yalini</b>	Kalieaswari Srinivasan
<b>Illayaal</b>	Claudine Vinasithamby
<b>Brahim</b>	Vincent Rottiers
<b>Youssef</b>	Marc Zinga
<b>Monsieur Habib</b>	Faouzi Bensaïdi
<b>Azziz</b>	Bass Dhem
<b>Colonel Cheran</b>	Vasanth Selvam
<b>Director</b>	Jacques Audiard
<b>Screenplay</b>	Noé Debré, Thomas Bidegain, Jacques Audiard
<b>Director of Photography</b>	Éponine Momeceau
<b>Editor</b>	Juliette Welfling
<b>Art Direction</b>	Hélène Klotz
<b>Original Music</b>	Nicolas Jaar
<b>Sound Recording</b>	Daniel Sobrino

**Costume**

C Bourréc

France 2015. 114 mins

#### Another view

*Dheepan (Jesuthasan) is a Tamil Tiger who flees the Sri Lankan civil war, taking with him two strangers – posing as his wife (Srinivasan) and daughter (Vinasithamby) – in the hope they will make it easier for him to claim asylum in Europe.*

*The makeshift family unit find work and accommodation in a violent Parisian banlieue, where their attempts toward domesticity are disrupted by language difficulties, post-traumatic stress and gun-slinging hooligans.*

*Jacques Audiard's new film was – we are told – inspired by Persian Letters, a 1721 proto-novel by Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, recounting the experiences of two Persian noblemen journeying through France. In this spirit, the viewer is never too sure about the politics underlying the gang warfare on display. Unhappily, we're not too sure about many things: it's unclear what transpires when Dheepan visits his former commanding officer; it's uncertain why a local kingpin (Vincent Rottiers) takes a shine to Dheepan's wife, Yalini, and it's equally baffling when, in the final act, the film suddenly turns into Rambo II.*

*The same director is often seen to juggle many themes and narrative arcs: it's hard to think of another filmmaker that could have brought together Rust and Bone's amputee whale trainer and a brawling deadbeat into a plausible romance. Dheepan's elements remain just that: they hang there for perusal, a periodic table with recognisable blocks and trends, but no real application.*

*Terrific central performances and fine camerawork from Éponine Momeceau add much-needed grit to the coming shoot-'em-up (and an utterly bizarre coda), yet Dheepan lacks the gravitas and coherence of Audiard's best-loved works. For all the melodramatic eventfulness of A Prophet and Rust and Bone, those films were tonally consistent. Dheepan may revisit the director's pet preoccupations with masculinity and violence, but it fails to land any significant punches.*

*To be fair, it was always going to be hard to keep pace with Audiard's recent run of movies. Comparatively, Dheepan feels like a doodle: engaging enough for the duration but muddled and ill-conceived. No wonder heads were scratched when this film took home the Palme d'Or from Cannes last year. Consensus choice, ahoy.*

**Tara Brady: The Irish Times**

**Our next screening: Friday March 17th, 7.30pm**

**Men and Chicken (Denmark 2015. Cert 15)**

**Dir: Anders Thomas Jensen**

Nordic black comedy carves another memorable notch into the record with this darkly hilarious film starring Mads Mikkelsen. Two very dissimilar brothers discover that the person they thought of as their father is not so. The search for their real father takes them to a remote Danish island where they meet a very odd selection of siblings and learn the strange family secret that binds them together. This inventively bizarre film is by acclaimed Oscar winning writer-director Anders Thomas Jensen.