



Two days, one night

Director: Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne

Country: Belgium

Date: 2014

A review by Scott Foundas for Variety:

As much as she stood out from the crowd in her Oscar-winning turn as Edith Piaf, that's how much Marion Cotillard blends into the unfettered working-class environs of "Two Days, One Night," a typically superb social drama from directors Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne. Steeped in the Dardennes' favored themes of work, family and the value of money, and infused with the suspense of a ticking-clock thriller, "Two Days" may be dismissed by some as more of the same from the Belgian siblings who rarely stray far from the industrial port town of Seraing. Yet within their circumscribed world, the Dardennes once again find a richness of human experience that dwarfs most movies made on an epic canvas. Cotillard's presence will assure the widest exposure to date of any Dardennes effort, particularly in the U.S., where it will be distributed later this year.



Always masters of narrative economy, the Dardennes kick off "Two Days" with a ringing phone that brings Cotillard's Sandra the news that her job at a local solar-panel factory is due to be eliminated as part of a downsizing initiative. The decision was made by a vote of Sandra's 16 co-workers, who were forced to choose between saving her job or their own €1,000 annual bonuses. Only two voted in Sandra's favor. Now her only recourse is to organize a second vote by secret ballot and hope for a different outcome. It is already Friday afternoon, and Sandra has until Monday morning to rally the seven additional votes she needs.

The Sandra we meet in these early scenes is a woman visibly on the edge. She, her kitchen-worker husband Manu (Fabrizio Rongione) and their two children have only recently climbed their way out of public housing and off welfare, and the loss of Sandra's job will surely set them back. What's more, Sandra is at the end of her recovery from a bout of depression that has kept her away from work for an unspecified period of time — a fact used as ammunition by the factory foreman, Jean-Marc, who looms for most of "Two Days" as Sandra's unseen antagonist.

Norma Rae she isn't, just as the film is anything but a heavy-handed "issue" movie, right up to a deftly orchestrated conclusion that manages to affirm the Dardennes' fundamental belief in the goodness of people while suggesting that the struggle of the working class is never over. Indeed, Sandra doesn't want to start a workers' revolt but rather to maintain the status quo, and as she journeys door-to-door to seek her colleagues' help, her argument is simple: "Don't pity me. Just put yourself in my shoes."

The responses run the gamut from the cruel to the compassionate, from those who won't even give Sandra the time of day to those who beg her forgiveness and cry on her shoulder. At every step, the Dardennes, who patently refuse to pass moral judgments on their characters, evoke Jean Renoir's famous maxim that "Everyone has his reasons." One says he needs the bonus in order to pay for his daughter's tuition; another that she'd love to help but has recently left her husband and so money is tight; still another that she's building a new patio out back. And some say yes, of course, we'll vote for you.

Although Sandra isn't slowly being poisoned to death like the doomed protagonist of the noir classic "D.O.A." or facing a looming gunfight in the center of town like the beleaguered sheriff of "High Noon," the Dardennes couch her struggle in the same desperate, high-stakes terms, and the closer Monday morning

comes, the thicker the movie's air grows with a queasy anxiety. As it was in the similarly nail-biting "The Son" and "L'enfant," that mood is inexorably enhanced by the Dardennes' favored shooting style of long handheld tracking shots in which the camera hovers relentlessly around the main character as though attached by a tether.

In most Dardennes films, those roles have been played by Bressonian nonprofessionals or local character actors (like the excellent Rongione, who made his debut in "Rosetta" and has since made four additional films for the brothers) whose unfamiliarity to the audience made them that much more credible as ordinary working stiffs. But Cotillard, who is only the second established star the Dardennes have cast (after Cecile De France in their previous "The Kid With a Bike"), disappears so fully into Sandra that she becomes inseparable from the rest of the company.



Outfitted in jeans and a series of brightly colored tank tops, her matted hair pulled back with a scrunchie, the actress is onscreen in every scene of "Two Days," and yet the role never feels remotely like a star turn as she hustles to and fro, pleading her case, her wide, expressive eyes registering every quicksilver flash of doubt, fear and self-loathing. Cotillard plays Sandra as a woman who has always struggled to feel that her life has value, and little by little over the course of the "Two Days, One Night," in the most remarkably subtle of ways, she shows her coming into a new sense of self.

Pic benefits greatly from the expert lensing of regular Dardenne d.p. Alain Marcoen, the crisp editing of Marie-Helene Dozo, and the lived-in production design of Igor Gabriel. After experimenting with brief snatches of classical music as underscore in both "Lorna's Silence" and "The Kid With a Bike," the brothers return to a music-free milieu here, save for Petula Clark's 1970 hit "La Nuit n'en finit plus" emanating from a radio and, in one joyous scene, Van Morrison's "Gloria."

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