Children Australia
Volume 42 | Number 4 | pp. 287–288 | © The Author(s) 2017

Film Review

I, Daniel Blake (2016)

Director: Ken Loach
Script: Paul Laverty

Reviewed by Professor Chris Goddard, Adjunct Research Professor, University of South Australia, and Visiting Professor in Social Work, University of Hertfordshire.

doi 10.1017/cha.2017.42

This film is the story of Daniel Blake, a widowed 59-year-old carpenter. Daniel suffered a heart attack at work, on scaffolding, and nearly died. He has been told by his doctors that he is unfit for any strenuous work. The bureaucracy has decided, however, that as he can raise his arms, he should be spending 35 hours a week seeking work.

The film opens with Daniel, beautifully portrayed by Dave Jonas, wrestling with an arm of the bureaucracy in Newcastle in the UK:

> Good morning, Mr Blake. My name's Amanda. I've got a couple of questions for you today to establish your eligibility for Employment Support Allowance . . . can you walk more than 50 metres . . . ?
>
> Yes
>
> . . . Can you raise either arm to the top of your head as if you are putting on a hat?
>
> I've told you, there's nowt wrong with me arms and legs . . . Can we just talk about me heart?

The questions continue:

> Do you have any significant difficulty conveying a simple message to strangers?
>
> Yes! Yes!. It's me f . . . ing heart. I am trying to tell you but you'll not listen.

In another memorable scene, a worker tries to help Daniel Blake as he tries to complete a form online. She shows that some people in the Department of Work and Pensions do care. She is, however, told off by a more senior staff member for going beyond the call of duty.

The film is directed by Ken Loach who started his career directing the acclaimed *Wednesday Plays* for BBC television. One of his earliest was the now legendary *Cathy Come Home.* As Allan wrote on the 50th anniversary of the play, it is a:

> . . . drama about a young mother caught in an impossible, inhuman system, which leaves her homeless, destroys her marriage and ultimately robs her of her children . . . (Allan, 2016)

Cathy Come Home was shown to social work students when I was at university, and I was reminded of the play when Daniel Blake befriended a desperate single mother who was also at the mercy of the bureaucracy.

Loach has taken every opportunity to push the message. After winning the prestigious Palme d'Or award in France, he was quoted as saying:

> The most vulnerable people are told that their poverty is their own fault. If you have no work it is your fault that you haven't got a job. (York, 2016)

Some were not happy that the film won the French award, however, believing it not of sufficient quality compared to its competitors; while Jacob Stolworthy (2016) acknowledging that 'everybody's upset' wrote in *The Independent* that deserving films were frequently left without awards. Nevertheless, after winning the French award under controversy, the film went on to win a further one for outstanding British film. When he accepted the award, Ken Loach again took the opportunity to criticise the British government, this time for cutting its child refugee programme:

> The most vulnerable and poorest people are treated by this government with a callous brutality that is disgraceful. (Demianyk, 2017)

The film has also had notable off-screen events surrounding it. First, there were 'protests' of an unusual kind in London at the premiere. There were placards on the red carpet:

> 'One in 4 mothers go to school hungry,' read one placard. '1 in 5 children go to school hungry,' read another. Unusually the placards were being held up . . . not by protesters, but the leading actors. (Wynne Jones, 2016)

There have also been many opportunities around the UK to see the film through free screenings and free tickets, even in genteel settings like Bognor Regis (Leal, 2017).

When I watched *I, Daniel Blake,* Australia was in the midst of what Mike Secombe (2017) in *The Saturday Paper* later called 'Centrelink's debt-recovery disaster'. A 'new automated compliance system' had been introduced, that was described by a Centrelink worker as 'error-prone', and

https://doi.org/10.1017/cha.2017.42 Published online by Cambridge University Press

'particularly harsh' on those who receive sickness benefits (Knaus, 2016). Stories about 'robo-debt letters' (Knaus, 2017) continue, and those on the receiving end:

> In a reversal of the usual onus of proof, . . . were guilty and sentenced until later proven innocent. (Martin, 2017)

As I was completing this review, a Senate estimates hearing was informed that, in the first 10 months of the current financial year, more that 42 million calls to Centrelink received the engaged signal (Woodley, 2017). There are – and these are my very rough figures – more than 4 million unsuccessful calls a month. As there are about 44,000 minutes in a month that is more than 100 unsuccessful calls every minute, 24 hours a day, every day. And that is not all. The average waiting time, the Senate hearing was told, was 30 minutes for unemployment services.

Daniel Blake spent 48 minutes on the telephone waiting in one scene alone. There are probably as many Daniel Blakes in Newcastle, Australia, as there are in Newcastle in the UK.

I, Daniel Blake should be compulsory viewing for anyone working in the health and welfare sectors.

References

Allan, C. (2016, August 1). In the 50 years since *Cathy Come Home* things have got much worse. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/jul/31/cathy-come-home-50-years-homelessness-mental-health-problems.

Demianyk, G. (2017, February 12). Ken Loach damns government over child refugees after *I Daniel Blake* BAFTA win. *Huffpost UK*. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/ken-loach-bafta-child-refugees-i-daniel-blake_uk_58a0d95ae4b094a129ec2a20.

Knaus, C. (2016, December 23). Centrelink officer says only a fraction of debts in welfare crackdown are genuine. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/dec/23/centrelink-officer-says-only-a-fraction-of-debts-in-welfare-crackdown-are-genuine.

Knaus, C. (2017, April 12). Almost half of all Centrelink robo-debt cases sent to private debt collectors. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/apr/12/almost-half-of-all-centrelink-robo-debt-notices-sent-to-private-debt-collectors.

Leal, N. (2017, February 28). Award-winning film *I, Daniel Blake* to be shown for free in Bognor. *Bognor Regis News*. Retrieved from https://www.bognor.news/entertainment/award-winning-film-i-daniel-blake-shown-free-bognor/.

Martin, P. (2017, January 4). Centrelink's robo-debacle is a litany of inhuman errors. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved from http://www.smh.com.au/comment/centrelinks-robodebacle-is-a-litany-of-inhuman-errors-20170103-gtl77k.html.

Secombe, M. (2017, January 28–February 3). Centrelink's debt-recovery disaster. *The Saturday Paper*. Retrieved from https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/politics/2017/01/28/centrelinks-debt-recovery-disaster/14855220004164.

Stolworthy, J. (2016, May 23). Why everybody's upset that Ken Loach's *I, Daniel Blake* won the Palme d'Or. *The Independent*. Retrieved from http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/cannes-2016-ken-loachs-i-daniel-blake-won-the-palme-dor-toni-erdmann-paterson-american-honey-a7043031.html.

Woodley, N. (2017, June 2). More than 42 million calls to Centrelink receive engaged signal senate estimates hears. *ABCNews*. Retrieved from http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-06-02/42-million-calls-to-centrelink-received-the-engaged-signal/8581966.

Wynne Jones, R. (2016, October 20). Ken Loach reveals why he felt he had to make moving film *I, Daniel Blake*. *Daily Mirror*. Retrieved from http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/ken-loach-reveals-felt-make-9093260.

York, C. (2016, May 14). Ken Loach's new film *I, Daniel Blake* Reduced Cannes Film Festival critics to tears. *Huffpost UK*. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/ken-loach-i-daniel-blake_uk_573775eae4b01359f686f390.

https://doi.org/10.1017/cha.2017.42 Published online by Cambridge University Press