



**NEW RELEASES**

# Ali & Ava

The romance of Clio Barnard's fourth feature *Ali & Ava* has a naturalism rarely captured in cinema. Instead of the lovers existing in a bubble, apart from other people, multicultural Bradford is woven into the story. The two leads – drawn from real people Barnard met while making *The Arbor* (2010) and *The Selfish Giant* (2013) – are lived-in, with baggage and responsibilities pulling them back to their families and pasts.

Ali (Adeel Akhtar, buzzing with jocular energy) is a Bengal-British Muslim, a local DJ and property manager who treats his tenants like mates. He is estranged from his wife Runa (Ellora Torchia), but they still live together, masquerading as a couple to his family.

Ava (Claire Rushbrook) is of Irish descent and her small house is always open to her abundant children and grandchildren. Ava's surroundings (skilfully devised by production designer Stéphane Collonge) tell the viewer who she is. Two sofas are pushed together to form a boat 'because the children like it'. For Ava, nurture is second nature. It's a trait that feeds into her work as teaching assistant at the local school, where she'll eventually cross paths with Ali.

One rainy day, Ali gives his tenant's young daughter a lift home from school and ends up driving Ava too.

Their dialogue is exquisitely written, full of the push-and-pull of flirtation; that dance of beckoning someone in, then showing them a boundary. Their main subject is music: she likes folk, he likes electro. He takes the piss out of her and she gives as good as she gets.

But this is no contrived Hollywood meet-cute, it's a chance encounter that simmered up out of nowhere and could simmer down just as easily. Barnard sets her romantic drama in territory too mired in the chaos of life for any of the usual romcom signposting to exist.

Ava invites Ali inside for something very innocent: they listen to each other's music by switching earphones, pressing play at exactly the same time, while sitting on the sofa boat. Music is used diegetically, switching between the characters to elevate the emotional beats of the scene and add to our growing sense of who these people are. Ali chooses the electronic duo Sylvan Esso – big squishy beats aligning to his big squishy heart – while Ava sings along to the jaded, soulful folk of Karen Dalton's 'Something on Your Mind'.

Ava's son Callum (Shaun Thomas), who lives with her – together with his girlfriend and their newborn – arrives home to see Ali and runs to grab the sword that he inexplicably owns. It's a terrifying act, but one that is absorbed into the narrative in a very human way. Ava and Ali find ways to laugh at it (Ali dubs him 'Zorro'), and it prompts Ava to lay to rest Callum's illusions about his father, who was a domestic abuser.

This is Barnard's most accomplished film since her debut, *The Arbor*. Where her gratuitously punishing drama *Dark River* (2017) hammered home a note of suffering until it became a monotonous drone, *Ali & Ava* is a nuanced slice of life, generous to all its characters, allowing them moments of grace and happiness even as it recognises the size of the challenges they face. Bradford

is filmed with an insider's eye for the details that make its diverse milieu pop with life, and Barnard is careful to address the additional tension that arises from spotlighting an interracial couple, without letting this aspect of their relationship overwhelm their story.

Versatile compositions from cinematographer Ole Birkeland seamlessly capture the film's shifting moods, using propulsive, high-energy shots to translate the hustle and chaos of the characters' lives. Then there are times – as when Ali and Ava steal a night-time moment alone on a hill above glowing city lights – where the surroundings look breathtakingly still and serene.

Extreme close-ups enhance the very real intimacy between these two characters. The more time they spend together, the more each learns what the other is going through and the less space there is to hide. Barnard presents a romance that involves not escape from one's problems but acceptance of another's.

Lightly threaded around the key events of the film is the question of naming Callum's baby. Various suggestions are shot down until all agree on Grace – a word that also applies to what Ali and Ava find together.

**Sophie Monks-Kaufman, *Sight and Sound*, April 2022**

## **Adeel Akhtar Profile**

After his deeply affecting performance as the happy-go-lucky Ali in *Ali & Ava*, it's hard to believe Adeel Akhtar's most well-known film role to date, as the hapless wannabe-terrorist Faisal in Chris Morris's *Four Lions*, was 12 years ago. But Akhtar is becoming a more recognisable face in British cinema these days, having popped up in smaller roles in recent theatrical releases such as *Everybody's Talking About Jamie*, *The Electrical Life of Louis Wain* and *Save the Cinema*; and the actor has been making an impact in TV dramas for almost a decade. He received acclaim for his turn as Wilson Wilson (sic) in the short-lived dystopian thriller series *Utopia* (2013) and won his first BAFTA for the made-for-TV movie *Murdered by My Father* (2016). He's also had a host of supporting roles – as Lestrade in Netflix's revisionist *Enola Holmes* (2020) and in BBC1's *Les Misérables* (2018-19), in which he played Thénardier alongside David Oyelowo's Javert.

*Ali & Ava*, while understated, is perhaps the best showcase to date of Akhtar's range as an actor. Inhabiting the vibrant persona of Ali, he can slip seamlessly from high-energy physical comedy to a quiet, understated grief. As the male romantic lead, it is his charisma and chemistry with Claire Rushbrook that elevate the film. At the 2021 British Independent Film Awards, Akhtar won Best Actor, beating Jude Law, Stephen Graham, James Norton and even *Four Lions* co-star Riz Ahmed. 'When I was first starting out, I felt the casting was quite narrow in terms of what I could do, because of my ethnicity,' Akhtar said in an interview for BAFTA. 'But now, I generally feel that the challenges I have are the same as any actor, and that's for a person to look at me and know that acting is my job, and I could probably do more than one thing.'

**Carly Mattox, *Sight and Sound*, April 2022**

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**ALI & AVA**

*Directed by:* Clio Barnard

©: Avali Film Ltd, British Broadcasting Corporation, The British Film Institute

*a Moonspun Films production*

*Presented by:* BBC Film, BFI, Screen Yorkshire

*In association with:* Altitude Film Entertainment

*Developed with the support of:* BBC Film

*Made with the support of the* BFI Film Fund,

BFI Locked Box Initiative

*Executive Producers:* Rose Garnett, Claudia Yusef,

Lizzie Francke, Hugo Heppell, Caroline Cooper Charles,

Will Clarke, Mike Runagall

*Produced by:* Tracy O’Riordan

*Co-producer:* Ameenah Ayub Allen

*Line Producer:* Joanne Dixon

*Casting Director:* Shaheen Baig

*1st Assistant Director:* Tony Aherne

*Post-production Supervisor:* Meg Clark

*Written by:* Clio Barnard

*Script Consultant:* Kamal Kaan

*Character Consultants:* Moey Hassan, Rio

*Director of Photography:* Ole Bratt Birkeland

*Editor:* Maya Maffioli

*Production Designer:* Stéphane Collonge

*Costume Designer:* Sophie O’Neill

*Hair and Make-up Designer:* Fiona Lobo-Cranston

*Original Music:* Harry Escott

*Music Supervision:* Connie Farr

*Production Sound Mixer:* Rashad Hall-Heinz

*Re-recording Mixer:* Martin Jensen

**Cast**

Adeel Akhtar (*Ali*)

Claire Rushbrook (*Ava*)

Ellora Torchia (*Runa*)

Shaun Thomas (*Callum*)

Natalie Gavin (*Dawn*)

Mona Goodwin (*Michelle*)

Krupa Pattani (*Usma*)

Vinny Dhillon (*Jameela*)

Tasha Connor (*Karen*)

Macy Shackleton (*Venice*)

Ariana Bodorova (*Sofia*)

UK 2020©

94 mins

An Altitude Entertainment release

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**NEW RELEASES****Flee**

Continues from Feb

**The Real Charlie Chaplin**

Continues from Feb

**Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy**

Continues from Feb

**La Mif (The Fam)**

Continues from Feb

**Rebel Dread**

From Fri 4 Mar

**Ali & Ava**

From Fri 11 Mar; Tue 15 March 14:00 Seniors’ matinee + discussion

**The Worst Person in the World**

From Mon 28 Mar

**Playground**

From Fri 15 April

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