



Film

Direct approach

Poverty, unemployment, abuse, exploitation – Ken Loach knows how to keep his audience happy

There is a flag hanging on the wall of Ken Loach's film company offices in Soho, the emblem of a Marxist militia group who fought against Franco's nationalists in the Spanish Civil War. A prop from the film he is currently working on, it seems to fly there as a symbol of commitment. It is red and defiant and pleasingly incongruous.

The same could be said of Loach's approach to film-making. In a career that has produced some of the most biting political films and documentaries of the last 30 years, some of which have been banned, Loach has stood out from his British contemporaries as a director producing work of uncompromising emotional honesty and integrity. Ever since he first made his mark in the Sixties with such pioneering television dramas as *Cathy Come Home* and *Up The Junction*, and the film *Kes*, Loach has continued to

make films the subjects of which, on paper, might seem unrelentingly bleak – poverty, unemployment, homelessness, exploitation, abuse – but which he renders compellingly cinematic.

It is this latter quality that has sewn the seeds of his renaissance. Although he has had to endure periods in the Seventies and Eighties when he faced the challenges of unemployment and poverty himself, his more recent work has been showered with European film awards. The director once derided as "the master of misery" is now recognised as the man who makes the worthy watchable.

"The words 'grim' and 'depressing', when applied to my films, are just not things I relate to," says Loach. "What I'm trying to make is something that feels real, something that people can believe in. If a film has a strong emotional content then almost by definition it is not unpalatable because I think most people go to the

cinema to feel emotion, to have a strong emotional experience.”

His latest film, *Ladybird, Ladybird*, certainly feels real. It is the moving and tragic story of Maggie, a woman who fights to keep her family together after her children are taken away by the social services because of her history of violent relationships. Only when she meets Jorge, a sympathetic Latin American refugee, does she begin to find any hope. Based on a true story, it has been compared to the personal tragedy found in *Cathy Come Home*, a story of homelessness and deprivation that, at the time, led to controversy and political change.

“It’s a film in close-up, like *Cathy Come Home*, but it’s very different,” insists Loach. “*Cathy* was a campaigning film whereas this is the story of a relationship, of how two people support each other, and of the damage that has been done to them by the many kinds of social pressures they face.”

If *Ladybird, Ladybird* is also different to Loach’s previous films – *Hidden Agenda*,

Riff-Raff and *Raining Stones* – which dealt much more directly with wider political issues, it shares with them the methods that have become the hallmarks of his craft. He is admired for his use of Super 16mm cameras, natural light and sound, and minimal technical back-up – low-budget techniques which enhance the documentary feel and intensity of his work. Like Mike Leigh, he is a director who prefers the naturalism engendered by building up character and dialogue through improvisation. And perhaps most radical of all, he is known for his resolute faith in employing non-professional and first-time actors – a policy that can yield unexpected results.

In *Ladybird, Ladybird*, the part of Maggie is played by Crissy Rock, a comedienne from Liverpool whose only previous dramatic experience was playing working men’s clubs. Although she says she is “just an ordinary person”, her explosive and compassionate portrayal earned her the Best Actress award at this year’s Berlin Film Festival.

“Crissy makes herself vulnerable in a way that somebody more experienced might not be able to,” says Loach. “Part of being an experienced actor is learning the defence mechanisms; the novelty and wide-eyed commitment to the work can get lost. Most films aren’t about the characters; they’re about the people who are in them. I’m not interested in stars; I’m interested in people.”

Maggie is all the more fascinating because Rock makes her more ambiguous and unsympathetic than might be expected. A woman who “smells trouble and goes to bed with it”, she is rude and offensive, yet also desperately brave and resourceful.

“She’s a fighter,” says Loach, who clearly admires both the real-life “Maggie” and Rock’s depiction of her. “She’s vibrant and has a kind of suppressed energy which comes out in her humour, her rich use of language and her extraordinary tale. She’s just someone worth being with for a couple of hours.” **PHILIP WATSON**

Ladybird, Ladybird opens on September 30.



Hell raiser

Emmanuelle Béart brings a touch of heaven to Claude Chabrol’s latest thriller

There is a scene in *L’Enfer*, the latest film to star the giddily beautiful Emmanuelle Béart, which seems to divide opinion. Dressed in black lacy underwear and perched on the edge of her bath, she is arched back, with full front and seductive long legs – a woman exaggerating her sexuality for maximum effect. Women, it would seem, find this kind of posturing annoying and unnecessary – another example of an actress putting flirting before acting. Men feel rather differently.

Ever since she first frolicked naked in Claude Berri’s *Manon des Sources*, Béart has been an actress unafraid to parade her sexuality on camera. In *La Belle Noiseuse*, in which she played a painter’s model-cum-muse, she was naked for most of the film’s four hours (although she explained away her role by saying she was baring her soul more than her backside). And in *Un Coeur en Hiver*, she even managed to instil her portrayal of the modest Camille – a violin virtuoso who falls for her boyfriend’s best friend (real-life paramour Daniel Auteuil) – with all kinds of barely hidden intensity and eroticism.

Claude Chabrol’s *L’Enfer* (“Hell”) is little different. Wearing a fetching range of short summer dresses and figure-revealing tops, *la belle* Emmanuelle playfully struts her way through the thriller as the carefree Nelly, newly married to murderously jealous Paul (François Cluzet). Convinced she is having an affair with any number of adoring guests and employees at the hotel they manage together, Paul succumbs to a manic obsession and paranoia that leads him to spy on Nelly, follow her, and finally to abuse and imprison her.

Béart’s portrayal convinces if only because it is easy to see how someone with her sublime looks – the large, hypnotic blue eyes, the exaggerated lips, the flowing hair, the woman-child sensuality – could stir doubts and insecurities in the most reasonable of men.

Yet she does a lot more than flit and flirt. In a characteristically taut piece of Chabrol film-making, Béart successfully communicates Nelly’s spiralling confusion of emotions – from the loving flattery of petty jealousy to the outrage of betrayal, and, finally, hatred and fear for her life. As glossy and invidious as her position may be as France’s favourite sweetheart, the new Bardot or Deneuve, it takes a lot more than just a pretty dress to do that. **PHILIP WATSON**
L’Enfer opens on October 20.