

THE OLD OAK



CANNES FILMFESTIVAL
COMPÉTITION
OFFICIELLE SÉLECTION 2023

THE OLD OAK

REGIE
KEN LOACH
SCENARIO
PAUL LAVERTY

cinéart

PERSMAP

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Meer over de film:

Persmaterialen:

[Cineart.nl/films/the-old-oak](https://www.cineart.nl/films/the-old-oak)

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Distributie

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Synopsis

THE OLD OAK is de nieuwe film van tweevoudig Gouden Palmwinnaar Ken Loach (I, DANIEL BLAKE, SORRY WE MISSED YOU). De Britse filmmaker levert opnieuw een sterk sociaal drama af dat zich afspeelt in de arbeidersklasse van het hedendaagse Engeland. Oprecht, hoopvol en actueel.

In een voormalige mijnwerkersstad staat The Old Oak, de laatste kroeg van het inmiddels vervallen plaatsje in Noord-Engeland. De lokale bevolking kan zelf amper het hoofd boven water houden en ziet hun woonplaats steeds verder leeglopen. Kroegbaas TJ hoort zijn mopperende, vaste klanten zwijgzaam aan. Als dan de pub ook nog eens met sluiting wordt bedreigt, zorgt de huisvesting van Syrische vluchtelingen in het stadje voor extra onrust. Maar een onwaarschijnlijke vriendschap brengt de verschillende werelden voorzichtig tot elkaar, met The Old Oak als gezamenlijk middelpunt. In THE OLD OAK gloort er hoop in het besef dat we het toch samen moeten doen.

Voor THE OLD OAK werkte Loach opnieuw samen met zijn vaste scenarist Paul Laverty. De film werd geselecteerd voor de hoofdcompetitie van het Filmfestival van Cannes, waar hij zijn wereldpremière beleefde. 'Ken Loach' laatste felle oproep voor medeleven en solidariteit' (4 sterren - The Guardian).



Director: Ken Loach

BIOGRAPHY

Ken Loach werd in 1936 geboren in Nuneaton, ten noorden van Londen. Ondanks zijn passie voor film ging hij rechten studeren in Oxford. Daar gaf hij wel uitdrukking aan zijn echte ambities door voorzitter van de toneelvereniging te worden. Na zijn afstuderen probeerde hij als acteur aan de bak te komen, maar hij stapte al snel over naar regisseren.

Loach kwam terecht bij de BBC als regisseur. De bekendste van deze vroege televisiefilms zijn *UP THE JUNCTION* (1965) en *CATHY COME HOME* (1966). Met deze films verwierf Loach zijn reputatie als sociaal realistisch filmmaker.

In 1967 verscheen de eerste speelfilm van Ken Loach: *POOR COW*. Opvallend is, dat toen al duidelijk werd dat hij zich graag met vertrouwde mensen omringt. Tot op de dag van vandaag werkt hij vaak met dezelfde schrijvers en producenten. In *POOR COW* was de naturalistische stijl al te zien die zo kenmerkend voor zijn oeuvre zou worden. Een stijl die verder werd ontwikkeld in *KES*, een film die goed is ontvangen en een commercieel succes werd.

In 2006 won Loach de Gouden Palm op het filmfestival van Cannes voor *THE WIND THAT SHAKES THE BARLEY*. In 2009 verscheen *LOOKING FOR ERIC*, één van de meer commerciële films uit het oeuvre van Loach, waarin hij ook zijn passie voor sport kwijt kon. Tien jaar na *THE WIND THAT SHAKES THE BARLEY* won Loach opnieuw een Gouden Palm, deze keer voor *I, DANIEL BLAKE*. Loach behoort hierdoor tot één van de 9 regisseurs wereldwijd die de prestigieuze prijs twee keer in ontvangst mocht nemen.

Na *I, DANIEL BLAKE* en *SORRY WE MISSED YOU* sluit Ken Loach met zijn nieuwste speelfilm *THE OLD OAK* een trilogie af van films opgenomen in het Noordoosten van Engeland.



FILMOGRAPHY

DIRECTOR KEN LOACH

- 2023 THE OLD OAK
Cannes Film Festival - Official Selection - In Competition
- 2019 SORRY WE MISSED YOU
Cannes Film Festival - Official Selection - In Competition
- 2016 I, DANIEL BLAKE
Cannes Film Festival - Palme d'Or
- 2014 JIMMY'S HALL
- 2013 THE SPIRIT OF '45
- 2012 THE ANGELS' SHARE
Cannes Film Festival - Jury Prize
San Sebastian International Film Festival - Audience Prize
- 2011 ROUTE IRISH
- 2009 LOOKING FOR ERIC
Cannes Film Festival - Ecumenical Jury Prize
- 2007 IT'S A FREE WORLD
Venice International Film Festival - Best Screenplay Award
- 2006 THE WIND THAT SHAKES THE BARLEY
Cannes Film Festival - Palme d'Or
European Film Awards - European Cinematographer
Irish Film and Television Awards - Best Film and Audience Award
British Independent Film Awards - Special Jury Prize
- 2004 JUST A KISS
César for Best European Film 2005
Berlin International Film Festival - Ecumenical Jury Prize
- 2002 SWEET SIXTEEN
Cannes Film Festival - Best Screenplay Award
- 2001 THE NAVIGATORS
Venice International Film Festival - Children and Cinema Award
- 2000 BREAD AND ROSES
Temecula Valley International Film Festival - Jury Prize
- 1998 MY NAME IS JOE
Cannes Film Festival - Best Actor Award for Peter Mullan
British Independent Film Awards - Best British Director Award
- 1996 CARLA'S SONG
- 1995 LAND AND FREEDOM
César for Best Foreign Film 1995
Cannes Film Festival - FIPRESCI Prize and Ecumenical Jury Prize
- 1994 LADYBIRD
Berlin International Film Festival - Ecumenical Jury Prize

- 1993 RAINING STONES
Cannes Film Festival - Jury Prize
Evening Standard British Film Awards - Best Film Award
- 1991 RIFF-RAFF
European Film Awards - Best Film Award
Cannes Film Festival - FIPRESCI Prize
- 1990 HIDDEN AGENDA
Cannes Film Festival - FIPRESCI Prize
Special Mention of the Ecumenical Jury
- 1986 FATHERLAND
- 1981 LOOKS AND SMILES
Cannes Film Festival - Special Mention of the Ecumenical Jury
- 1979 BLACK JACK
- 1971 FAMILY LIFE
Berlin International Film Festival - FIPRESCI Prize
- 1969 KES
- 1967 POOR COW



Interview with Ken Loach (Director)

“In such dark times, where is hope?”

What was the gestation of The Old Oak?

We had made two films in the Northeast, stories of people trapped in this fractured society. Inevitably both ended badly. Yet we had met so many strong, generous people there, who respond to these dark times with courage and determination. We felt we had to make a third film that reflected that, but also did not minimise the difficulties people face and what has befallen this area in the past decades. There was another, longer story to tell, if we could find it.

A starting point was the reality of the region's neglect. The old industries had gone – ship building, steel and coal mining – and little had been put in their place. Many of the pit villages, once thriving communities with great traditions of pride in their tradition of solidarity, local sports and cultural activities, were left to rot by the politicians, both Tory and Labour. We found that people expected nothing from the Tories, but Labour's failure was denounced – ‘done nothing for us’ – yet it was a Labour heartland, with Tony Blair and Peter Mandelson being local MPs. It had made not a jot of difference. The communities were simply abandoned.

Many families had left, shops closed, as did schools, libraries, churches, most public spaces. Where there was no work, hope drained away, and alienation, frustration and despair took its place. Alarming, the far right made an appearance.

Councils in other, more prosperous areas sent vulnerable, needy people, seen as ‘problems’, who depend on housing benefit to cover their rents, to places where accommodation was cheap. Conflicts were inevitable.

Then there was another twist. The government finally accepted refugees from the horrific war in Syria. Fewer came here than to most European countries, but they had to go somewhere. Again, it was no surprise when the Northeast took more than any other region. Why? Cheap housing and an area that the national media barely notice.

Paul heard the stories of what had happened when Syrian families first arrived, and we began to think this was the story we should tell. But first it had to be understood. Two communities living side by side, both with serious problems, but one with the trauma of escaping a war of unimaginable cruelty, now grieving for those they have lost and worried sick for those left behind. They found themselves strangers in a foreign land. Can these groups live together? There will be conflicting responses. In such dark times, where is hope?

It seemed a tough question, and Paul, Rebecca and I thought we should look for an answer.

How did those initial thoughts evolve into the characters and story of The Old Oak?

Paul and I talked about the wider picture a lot. Then Paul suggested centring the story around a pub, to be called The Old Oak. The landlord, TJ, would embody the struggle,

How did you ground the characters who are living in the village, those who reject newcomers?

As always, we listened and learned. After years following social conflicts and struggles, we know what to expect, but the precise way events unfold and people react is always revealing. What became clear is that in everyone's position there is a truth. The problem is, what do people learn from their truths? You wait a long time to see a doctor – who is to blame? School classes are too crowded – who is responsible?

There are no immediate villains here. A sense of grievance can drive people to extreme measures, but there is always a logic to how they behave. To miss that is to cheapen the drama.

This village is part of a wider community. It has a long history of standing up to exploitation and attacks, first by the older mine owners and more recently by Margaret Thatcher and the enforced closure of the pits. These struggles taught solidarity and the value of international support. But the weakening of union power left individuals to fend for themselves. Look after number one, 'there is no such thing as society', the worship of the entrepreneur, these are shifts in consciousness that may overwhelm the old values. And affect whether the Syrian families are made welcome or not. And so we listened, observed, and Paul wrote the script.

How did you want to portray the Syrian families who arrive in the village?

The principle is always the same. Listen, observe and allow the people to be true to themselves. Casting is critical. It was clear that Syrians in the film should be those who have settled in the area. Paul's script allowed them the freedom to contribute so that they the story was a true reflection of their experiences.

The details were important, and we all learned a lot. As in all groups, people are different. Some families were traditional, some less so. Some had learned English; some had found it difficult – I sympathised with that. All were generous with their time, many committed wholeheartedly to the project, and the cakes they brought to the set became legendary!

We were lucky to find two people who guided us through our developing relationship with the Syrian families. Yasmeen Ghrawi was invaluable during the casting and from time to time during the shoot. Sham Ziad became our link to the families, sensitive to all the questions that arose day by day.

Sometimes we had to slightly amend the details as we went along. Some Syrian mothers did not feel comfortable being seen to enter a pub and were concerned that their heads should remain covered. There was always an answer and it was important that everyone felt respected and at ease. We had a lot of laughs and made many friends.

And the rest of the casting?

After the script, casting is the most important element of any film. In The Old Oak, we wanted everyone apart from the Syrians to come from the local community. All the different responses to the Syrians' presence came from people who lived in the same streets, shared the same history and knew there had been good times before the bad ones. Then it becomes apparent that the same experience can be interpreted in

contrasting ways, the conflicts of the drama spring from the same source.

It followed that we should find people who seemed part of the very landscape of the village. No one assumed an accent that was not theirs. They could drop into one of the real pubs and be taken for a local. This might seem a limitation, but it was the opposite. We found so many talented people, from established actors to relative newcomers and those whose lived experience made an immediate impression.

Kahleen Crawford has been our casting director for many films and she, Carla and Eliza worked hard to ensure that we met everyone who might fit the bill. After so many films I should not be surprised at the ability of so many to make fictional situations seem real. Everyone we met had something to offer, and we were left regretting that an already large cast was not even larger.

Apart from TJ, Yara and Charlie, who we mention below, there were many critical roles to cast. Two of the hardest were Vic and Gary, who take a strong line on the arrival of the Syrians. Chris McGlade and Jordan Louis understood what drove that hostility. They committed to present that without apology or overplaying the scenes. It is important for the story that the audience understands Vic and Gary, that they are credible. I felt that Chris and Jordan achieved this without compromise – a real achievement.

Two other key roles were Laura, one of the few in the village who welcome the newcomers from the start, and Fatima, the mother of Yara and three younger children. Clare Rodger's positivity, warmth and optimism were vital ingredients to the story. Meet Clare and you cannot fail to be struck by her energy and clear understanding of the real tensions in the region, similar to those in the film.



Amna, who played Fatima, like all the Syrian mothers, was eager to express her gratitude for being given a home and for the kindness of strangers. The stories of war, cruelty, torture and loss were devastating, and we marvelled at the strength of the human spirit that enables people to retain their humanity. Amna's had the essential quality of credibility. She made the fiction seem real.

It was to Amna that I turned if there was a difficult question about how to make scene work. Maybe there were cultural details where I needed guidance. Amna's help was invaluable.

Who is TJ?

TJ is a man in his late fifties, born and bred in the village. He began work in the pit just before the strike in 1984. The experience made him a militant and he became a leader in the community, organising football for the local youngsters.

When the pit closed, he did various jobs. Then his father lost his life and with the compensation his mother was able to buy a pub, The Old Oak. The village thrived and so did the pub. Later, when TJ inherited it, the pit had closed, without work the local economy collapsed and TJ has done his best to keep The Old Oak open. It is the last pub in the village.

But TJ is struggling. His marriage failed, his one son lives a distance away, he gives up his community activities and keeping The Old Oak going becomes his sole concern. He understands only too well the politics and social consequences of what has happened but has lost the will to fight back. Like so many, he knows who is responsible for the hardship he sees and experiences and knows also they have been betrayed by those who profess to speak for them. He has one reliable friend, his little dog, Marra. She asks for nothing and is always there to make him smile.

Then the Syrians arrive. A new set of demands and now he's on the spot. The film is, in part, the story of how he responds to this challenge. He doesn't have an easy choice; moments of personal despair weaken what's left of his optimism. He meets Yara and is touched by her and the Syrians and the story they tell, but does he have the strength to intervene on their behalf in this small, divided community?

Working with Dave Turner was a real pleasure. He knew the story in his bones. He has run a pub. But, more importantly, he lived the story truthfully as we filmed it, day by day. We could not imagine anyone else as TJ.

Who is Yara?

Yara is the eldest of the Fatima's children, in her early twenties. After escaping the war, they lived in a refugee camp, probably in Lebanon. It was a transformative experience for Yara. The international volunteers took her under their wing, she learned languages, particularly English, worked alongside organisers, teachers and medics, and understood how to communicate with people from every kind of background, it meant that she became more cosmopolitan in her outlook. Which probably led to issues with her mother, now happily resolved.

Yara's father is a major presence in her world. He's a tailor, a good craftsman, thoughtful

man and caring father. He has spotted Yara's talent and does his best for her, as for all his children. He and Yara's mother are close – it is, was, a secure family. Then her father crosses the authorities, and he is now in prison in Syria. Yara is quick to read their present situation. They are placed in this village in England, on the Northeast coast, where the beach is polluted by industrial waste and the first encounter with local people is hostile. It is natural that Yara, speaking the language, is the first to make contact, but it takes guts and the confidence of youth to walk into a crowd of strangers. But she does it. And TJ can't help but be impressed by her courage. It is the beginning of a friendship. Whether it can be sustained is another matter.

Finding someone to play Yara led us to see people here and from Syria. Film directors, friends from the region, made good suggestions, we saw many people on Zoom, and three came to Newcastle. They were all brilliant, but of course, different. Ebla was the closest to the character Paul had written. Like Dave Turner and TJ, Ebla became Yara from day one. Her simple, direct way of communicating, linked to a personal warmth and empathy, meant that she became an integral part of the team immediately. Sometimes Ebla would not know the camera had found her, but I knew that her eyes were always bright with concentration, and her commitment would be as intense as ever.

Who is Charlie?

Charlie is a good man. A boyhood friend of TJ, they grew up together, families close, and their adult lives have been similar. Whereas TJ was active in the community, Charlie was a quieter, family man, probably a couple of kids, one of whom, a daughter, lives nearby.

He and his wife Mary bought the terraced house they had rented when it was offered at a reasonable price. They have always seen it as both a secure investment and their permanent home. But they have had bad luck. Mary has a long-term illness which confines her to a wheelchair. Other families have left, houses have become cheaper, new neighbours take over the streets, some bring problems, and the community of good neighbours is no more. Charlie and Mary are stuck. The imagined serene, secure retirement will not happen.

Charlie, like so many, feels let down. The Old Oak is his regular haunt, where he can have a quiet pint with friends, and that helps him look after Mary, and the two of them take pride in their well-kept house and their supportive kids. But it is a tenuous hold on what is left of his hopes. If there is one more unexpected problem for him and Mary, Charlie might crack. Even as a good man, there is only so much he can take.

Trevor Fox, who plays Charlie, was the quiet stalwart in the team. Trevor is not only a fine actor of great experience, he is also from the area, lives there and is embedded in the daily lives of the characters Paul describes. He understood the unspoken disappointment of Charlie's life and his deep need to hang on to what is familiar and reassuring. The other side of Charlie is that he too remembers the solidarity of the miners during the strike, the principles they stood by, and how those strengths seem increasingly irrelevant in today's world, where individualism triumphs over the collective. Charlie wouldn't put it like that, but he'd feel it just the same. Despair can drive us to extreme action. Trevor captured that, a crucial element in the story.

Paul Laverty (writer)

At the outset there are endless possibilities before diving in to write the screenplay. A screenplay cannot be copied from the street, but it can inspire. Getting lost, wandering, watching and listening are greatly underestimated. I am particularly indebted to all the Syrian families who shared their lives with us. Many did not want to be named in case it would endanger their families back home. Activists too could not have been more generous, again too many to list. But I must thank Sara Bryson, who suggested many great notions, and through her I had the great luck to cross paths with John Barron, Val Barron and their network of volunteers who organised to welcome Syrians and had the insight and dedication to organise games and food for local youngsters during their summer holidays. Solidarity in action.



This has been the toughest one to make together, or so it seems to me.

Over 4 years ago Ken, Rebecca and I discussed the notion of trying to make a third film in the Northeast.

It might not seem so, after the film is made, but at the outset and at many points in between, it is always a much more fragile process than it appears from the outside. It is a gamble.

As ever, we met brilliant generous people along the way that give you heart and inspiration.

The ex-mining villages are unique. On one of my first trips I had the good fortune to meet John Barron, a minister, outside his beautiful old church sitting at the top of the village looking out over the rolling hills. Later that day there was to be a funeral. A young mother had walked her child to primary school, come back home, and then hung herself. This image and imagining her last days haunted me for an age, and did Ken too, once I told him the story.

I met another older woman who listed the names of other young women who had taken their own lives.

Wandering around many of these villages it was striking to talk to the older members of the community who were miners, or family of miners. One remarkable older lady in her nineties was a nurse and tended the wounded (one was her neighbour's father, who still to this day lived next to her) from the Easington mining disaster of 1951 in which 83 miners died. Listening to vibrant people like her, and others who were involved in the miners' strike in 1984, bore testimony to a powerful sense of community spirit, cohesion and political clarity which contrasted with the hopelessness of many in the present.

It became apparent that "the past" should be a character in our film.

As I wandered these villages, talking to young and old, and noticed how the dereliction of the high streets was manifest, I wondered about the inner life and spirit of the older generation as compared to the tragic story of the young mum who took her life. How did community solidarity, as best illustrated by the soup kitchens during the miners' strike, disintegrate into isolation and despair?

Other questions came to mind as Ken and I met up. How did a once organised working class with militant unions end up in the world of Ricky, the main character of our film *Sorry We Missed You*, who had embraced the free-market narrative and considered himself to be master of his own destiny, despite being manacled to an app that measured every moment of his working life. How did Daniel Blake, in our other story, end up alone, bullied, and picked off by the systematic brutality of State bureaucracy which targeted our most vulnerable? Ricky's life, and Daniel Blake's life, did not happen by accident but by a series of political choices.

How could we make the past manifest itself in the present, in this story?

As we travelled around these communities it was obvious that the infrastructure was disintegrating: shops boarded up, swimming pools, church halls, libraries, but what was even more apparent was the number of pubs that were lying empty or were pulled down. All of this, as ever, reflected wider changes in the economy since the miners' strike in 1984.

What if we had an old pub as a character, the last one in the village, hanging on by its fingertips? The last public space standing, connected to the past, but contested territory in the present? It seemed to us *The Old Oak* had roots stretching back, that might help us untangle many of the conflicts and contradictions of the present.

I found an old notebook with the scribble “Tommy Joe Ballantyne has lost faith.” Where this imaginary character popped up from I do not know, but I was very relieved to make his acquaintance. TJ demanded his place in The Old Oak. It begs the question why TJ has lost faith, and it suggests the even more important question of whether he can find hope again.

In one of the villages I saw an older Syrian man walk the streets. He was dressed in his traditional clothes, and it seemed almost surreal as he walked past youngsters on street corners in their tracksuits with big dogs. He seemed oblivious to everything around him, and it was hard not to imagine that the poor soul had been traumatised by the Syrian war.

We met wonderful Syrian families both in the Northeast and in Scotland who shared their stories generously with us and offered encouragement.

Due to ultra-cheap housing in many of the ex-mining villages, often owned by landlords who bought the houses online at auction, many Syrian families and families from inside the UK but outside the Northeast ended up in ex-mining villages.

We heard too, from activists in the communities, that local authorities from other parts of the country had done deals with landlords in the villages and had transferred some of their own tenants, many with deep-seated problems, to the Northeast, without telling the corresponding local authority. We heard the first inkling of such brutal policies when we did I, Daniel Blake and this was the reason the character Katie ended up in Newcastle. More irresponsible local authorities are doing the same, dumping their problems elsewhere instead of a creating a coherent plan to resolve them. Prisons too advertised cheap housing in the villages to inmates.

Little wonder many of those who live there felt hard done by and were convinced they were carrying an unfair share of the burden without adequate support. This is the febrile territory the far right continue to take advantage off to sow their poison. It would have been easy, and perhaps more melodramatic, to have had this as part of our story, but we felt that the challenge of creating the character Charlie was far richer and more revealing. How does Charlie, a decent man, part of the community, get worn down by circumstances and make those choices? It begs the bigger question of how hopelessness, unfairness, and lack of agency in our lives, play out in how we treat each other. How does it lead to fear and hatred?

How does one traumatised community react when it ends up, side by side, with another? What we choose to see is another question we were fascinated by. This is how the character Yara came to mind and helped us open up the story. You have to have the curiosity to look, to understand. We met some remarkable people in the communities who did that with the newly arrived Syrians, which once again raises the eternal question of hope: what is its source, and how do we nourish this fuel for change?

Hope is something we wrestled with from our first conversations about this story back in 2019. In fact, it is something we have been obsessed with from our very first collaborations way back in the early '90s. Which brings me to the 17th of June 2022, when we shot a scene in the stunning Durham Cathedral, a day that will stay with me for the rest of my life. It seemed fitting too, that this was Ken's 86th birthday.

This is not the usual fare for production notes, but since this is the last film we will do with Ken I want to say something for the record.

We have made films together in many parts of the world and have attended many festivals and meetings of every sort. I have seen Ken operate under the most severe pressure, from being ill in Nicaragua on our first film, and not least to the last day of *The Old Oak* nearly 30 years later, trying to shoot a massive scene in between thunder showers as the clock ticked on. From children to government ministers, he has treated everyone with kindness, and a gentle humour. He has deep-seated political convictions and will take political opponents head on, but never once, even at his most exhausted, have I ever seen him treat anyone of whatever political, racial or religious background with anything other than the deepest respect; it is in his DNA, and a mighty example.

One last thing. Directing a film, even with the best support in the world, is a lonely place. It's worse than a writer facing the blank page. There comes a moment when you decide to dive in or not. The team awaits, and many eyes are upon you. Following COVID it would have been easy for Ken to have passed on *The Old Oak*, which was always going to be a mighty challenge. There were many months of work and travel even when the film was just a possibility. Casting took over 6 months' graft, even before the prep and shooting of the film. On occasions as he got back to the hotel at 11 pm I did fear this punishing schedule, that would challenge a youngster in their 30s, would be too much. I am convinced his political conviction got him through. It might make him smile if I quote Saint Augustine from over fifteen hundred years ago who said that HOPE had two beautiful daughters. One, the anger at the way things are. Two, the courage to try and change them. This has been his working life. What a skinny frame to carry so much courage.



The cast

DAVE TURNER | TJ BALLANTYNE



How did you come to be cast?

It's a very long story but briefly, before I retired from the fire service in 2014, I was a full-time union official. When Sixteen Films came up the Northeast to make *I, Daniel Blake*, they sent out some enquiries to local trade unions and a friend of a friend put me forward. I was totally naive. I didn't even realise what I was going for - I literally walked into a Newcastle labour club and bumped into Ken Loach. I had a chat with him and then I was called back three or four times, but I never knew I was auditioning, genuinely. He gave me a lovely part in *I, Daniel Blake*, but it was a small part. Then when they came back up to the Northeast to make *Sorry, We Missed You* they got in touch, and they gave me a small part in that, a lovely role. Then it all went quiet for a little while, although Paul [Laverty] kept in touch with me.

It was probably early 2019 when he said, "Would you like to meet for a coffee?" We had a bit of a chat, talking about the pub where I was working at the time and the problems in County Durham with the pit villages where they've just been left to rot. I took Paul for a drive around some of the villages and he saw how bad it is - that was around February 2019. He came to the pub where I worked and spent quite a few hours because it was full of characters. The pub was actually called *The Oak Tree*. I think it was in June 2019 I got a phone call saying would you be interested in driving Ken Loach around for a few hours? Would !! That's really a hardship! So I drove Paul and Ken around a lot of the villages and you could see they had something in their minds. Then COVID came but Paul and Ken did keep in touch.

Last year (2021) it was obvious that there was something in the offing regarding a film and I was asked to go in. I did a lot of auditions, and they were much more difficult, more serious, more difficult subjects: domestic violence, racism, substance abuse. I realised that I wasn't going to be getting the jokey part. And then the last time I auditioned was in December and I think I did seven scenes in an afternoon. Most of them were with people who've got parts in the film funnily enough, but I remember walking out of the County Hotel in Newcastle just being absolutely drained. I walked across to the pub

and had to have a pint just to collect my thoughts. The week before Christmas Ken rang me and said, "I would like to offer you the part." I didn't realise until a few weeks later that it was the part. And from then it's just been a matter of trying to get my head around it.

You don't get a full script at the beginning. What did you know about TJ and his backstory when you started filming?

I knew his name; I knew he owned a pub that had been left to him by his late mother. I knew his father had died. I knew his marriage had broken up - I wasn't living with my wife and child anymore. I was in a pub that was in a village and the pub was on the bones of its arse. That was basically it.

Who is TJ? What's his story?

He's a good man. Ex-miner, his father was killed in a mining accident and as a consequence of that his mother bought The Old Oak pub. She's been dead 20 odd years and wanted to help his mother, but his marriage has broken up, he's living in the poverty zone and the pub is struggling - as are most of the village pubs around. It's the only public space left in the village. Because of what's happened to TJ, he's lost. He had been an organiser in the village - previously he ran football teams; everyone knew TJ. But because of what's happened to him he's just been beaten down and he's withdrawn into himself. Then one day, some Syrian families move into the village. And that's where the story of TJ in this film starts.

What's TJ's response to the arrival of the Syrian families?

The way I played it was he didn't want to be involved. He didn't want to go back to being active and he couldn't be bothered. I identify with that - I was a trade union official and by the time I was retired I was just worn out. When you get to a certain age and you've been doing something for so long, and then somebody comes along who's 30 years younger and they're full of enthusiasm you look back, and you just think, "Well, that was me, but I can't be arsed now." That's the way I've played TJ: he's washed up, he's had enough. But then he develops these relationships with two women - Ebla [Mari], who plays Yara and is an amazing young woman, and Laura, played by Claire [Rodgers], who I auditioned with a couple of times last year and I love to bits. And these two young women have given him the kick up the pants he needs. He starts to do what he can. But then, just as he's coming out of his down period, he has a couple of huge personal setbacks, through no fault of his own. And then he's back at the bottom, where he was previously.

TJ's best friend is his beloved dog, Marra, how did you get along with Lola, the real Marra?

I did over 1,000 miles to get to know the dog, because it was a 50-mile round trip every time I came to see her. I started coming in February, coming down once or twice a week, every week. It was just due to the generosity of the owners of the dog, Steve and Michelle, who welcomed me into the house and said, "Have a cup of coffee and then you can take Lola for a walk." I did it for four months. It created an ease - she would just walk alongside me without a lead, respond to the name 'Marra' and she was lovely.

How close do you feel to TJ?

The problem I've had is I've taken it on. I've become TJ and that's something I've had to get my head around. I'll be honest with you, the first day was not that difficult, because it was just me with the dog, and it was just filming on the beach. Then the second full

day's filming was a scene in the pub with a lot of the actors. I found it incredibly difficult. In the first two weeks I had a massive case of impostor syndrome. You're sitting talking to people who have been acting for years and years. And they're bloody good. And I've walked in off the street and I've got the lead part in a Ken Loach film. I now realise there was a hell of a lot of guilt. I felt I shouldn't be here. It took us the first three weeks to get over that. It's taken a toll on us physically and emotionally and I would never have believed that possible. But as I say, I've never been in this position before. I started to enjoy it once Ken said to us, "It's not easy to enjoy it at the time but you will look back on it with enjoyment." And he was right.

EBLA MARI | YARA



How did you come to be cast in The Old Oak?

Last November (2021) a Palestinian director called Annemarie Jacir contacted me and said that she was helping the production here to find a Syrian actress. She knew an actor from the village I'm from, Majdal Shams in the occupied Golan Heights, which is a Syrian place occupied by Israel in 1967. I gave her a video from a play I was doing and then had a meeting with Ken [Loach] and casting director Kahleen Crawford on Zoom. It was only 15 minutes but we chatted about where I'm from, a general chat. Then I auditioned on Zoom and I was so bad! And then I came and auditioned in real life in March (2022). It was improvisation only, some in Arabic, some Arabic/English, some only English - they didn't say anything about the character or the story. I only knew that the character is a photographer and a refugee. Four days later Ken called me and asked me if I would like to be in the film.

What were you told about Yara in the first instance?

Not a lot! But I knew her situation because I went to visit Syrian refugee families here in the UK. But that's it. I know what's happened in Syria. I know the horrible, horrible stories that happened and are still happening. I was against the regime. But I also watched a lot of documentaries in preparation for this role about the revolution in Syria and what happened after that, what's happening to Syrian detainees and what they are experiencing there. I researched where Yara came from and what happened to her. I researched the refugee camps - but not who Yara is. Because maybe Ken wanted me to be myself but different.

Is what people see in the film an accurate portrayal of what some Syrian families have gone through?

Yes of course. Ken and Paul and Rebecca and the production, you can feel the effort that they want to portray the right narrative. They asked a lot of the Syrians here in a meeting to speak about their personal experience. Most of them were detainees in Syrian prisons and were tortured for doing nothing. After hearing their stories Ken told them that he knows how serious this should be for them. But in the story of the film, they are not focusing on what happened in Syria. This is a story of two communities.

Who is Yara?

She's a refugee who came here with her family. She doesn't know where her father is because he was taken to prison and that was the last she heard of him. And I know real people who still don't know anything about their fathers, where they are. Nothing. So my father, Yara's father, he gave me a camera because I love to take photographs. This is the only thing I have from him and it is very emotional for me because he believed in me, believed that I want to be a photographer. After fleeing the war my family lived in a refugee camp in Zaatari in Jordan – imagine that. We went there to a hostile, hard place, not because the people are bad, but because they are victims too, because of what's happening to them. They have nothing and their life is hard. So we came here, and we are all victims. Yara faces a lot of hostility but then she meets TJ and they form a friendship. Yara wants to make life here easier and more friendly and to forge a friendship between the two communities. That's very similar to what TJ's role is, building bridges. You feel empathy towards Yara because she faces a lot of racism. You will see it.

What is Yara like?

I feel like she's brave. She stands up for herself. She's also sociable. And sometimes I'm not like that, I'm not as sociable as she is. I stand up for myself, but I feel she's stronger than me, which I like – I feel that sometimes I learn from her bravery and her social confidence, in terms of going out there and trying to make a point or trying to fulfil something good. I wouldn't be as active as her. She's not apologetic about that. She believes in what she thinks. The rules don't come from above and she has to obey them. I mean she's respectful, but she's her own person, which I like. She's more of a modern woman, so she decided not to wear the hijab. In the refugee camp she was a volunteer and she met a lot of people from around the world. She saw lots of different versions of life that she could relate to, that she wanted to experience or to discover.

What does photography mean to Yara?

Firstly it's something she loves, but also, because her father gave her a camera it's a way to see life through both her eyes and her father's. She's trying to see hope through the ugliness and unfairness of the world. The camera gives her hope. Ken and I talked about hope – she's trying to see the good and the beautiful moments and to capture them as a way of searching for hope. Also, taking pictures is a way of resistance for her. She's waiting for her father to come back so she can show him her best pictures. Photography for her means three things: a way of documenting, resistance, and hope. Those three things are important to me too.

How did you learn to be a photographer?

I spent two days with Joss [Barratt, photographer] going around and taking pictures of people. He taught me how to hold the camera and support it and find the light. That bit isn't hard, but taking the right pictures, beautiful pictures, is hard. I studied theatre and

I love visuals: my dream is to be a filmmaker. So I think I can see what's beautiful. But to capture something real, to notice things that other people walk on by, to really see... that is difficult.

CLAIRE RODGERSON | LAURA



Who is Laura?

Laura is an old family friend of TJ's. They used to be activists together, probably doing anti-austerity stuff. Then TJ has kind of lost his way but Laura has kept on fighting for the community while trying to build a family and hold down a job. When the Syrian families arrive she wants to be a positive force to bring the communities together.

What is her background?

An irreverent force of nature, is how she was described in the script! She doesn't take any shit but just believes that the community can be better. She's a fighter. And she hasn't given up like TJ. That's what I'm like in real life - you can't just give up and accept the fate that's been dealt to you by the powers that be. I'm from round here, I'm from Sunderland. I guess Laura and a lot of people like her - and like me - are sick of only ever lamenting the past. And no one ever talking to us, or trying to support us to build a future and just slowly strangling these communities - someone's got to fight that. In Laura's particular case, her mam was active in the strike, running the kitchens and whatnot, so when you're from a political, activist family, there's a kind of osmosis that happens as well. That's where she gets her drive from.

How did you come to be cast in The Old Oak?

I work for a national charity called Citizens UK and we have 17 local chapters, one of which is Tyne and Wear Citizens. I'm an organiser within that chapter. We have orbited around Ken [Loach] and Paul [Laverty] making these films in the Northeast for a while - when Sorry We Missed You had a premiere, for example, we ran a campaigning workshop after it so that people didn't go out thinking we're powerless and we're all doomed. Somehow, I ended up meeting Paul [Laverty] when he was doing the research for the film. He came to Sunderland, met a few people who are involved in our work and was introduced to me, because part of my background since moving back to the Northeast has been working with young people who have been drawn into the politics

of the far right. We had a nice chat, and I just got on with my life. Then, when they were casting this film, someone came through my trade union looking to speak to women who are active in the community. I thought, "Alright, I'll just go and meet Ken Loach, that'll be quite nice." The first time I'd acted in my whole life was doing that improv for the first audition. Then they kept asking me to come back and eventually they said we'd like to offer you this part.

How much does the story of The Old Oak speak to your working life and experience?

There are elements of the film that I have seen in my life. I've seen the racism. I've seen the people fighting the racism. I've seen people believing that we're stronger if we act together rather than fighting over arbitrary divides that the ruling classes have determined for us. I've seen all of that. The Northeast in particular is a really segregated place. There are pockets of integration and moments of beauty but I had not lived in the Northeast for a long time and I still can't get over how segregated it is. There's this idea from the Blair age of 'problem communities.' It's not problem communities, it's problem systems, problem scapegoating and problem dumping.

Part of the story of The Old Oak is how often these issues are ignored...

Yeah, exactly. I think that's why I'm involved in this project. So we can tell this story. If this was just some love story or something it wouldn't be for me. I'm in this film because it shows resilience, that we can fight, we don't have to roll over to the fate that's been determined for us by politicians who don't give a shit. Nigel Farage paraded down this very bit of coastline a few years ago saying that he gave a shit about working class people in the Northeast. Fuck him. This is the opposite of that story. People are really trying in these communities. And to be able to tell that story is an absolute honour, and to be able to tell a story of immigrants and people who aren't white standing shoulder to shoulder to try and make things better is really important to me. You're stronger when you act together, and you might not be that different after all. That's my work in the Northeast and my reason for being here.

TREVOR FOX | CHARLIE

Who is Charlie?

Charlie's a guy who lives in the village and drinks in The Old Oak. He's a very old friend of TJ [Dave Turner] the landlord; they've been through a lot together. They went to school together, their dads worked in the pit together. TJ made a speech at his wedding and they go back years and years. Charlie's wife Mary is disabled and they have a daughter. They own their own house, they're very proud of the fact that they come from the village but things have got really rough for them. All the housing around them is getting sold off and what once was like a thriving, nice place to live has become a nightmare. And he can't get out: their house is now worth like a quarter of what they paid for it. So they're just fucked. They're stuck there, there's nothing he can do and he feels totally helpless.

What does Charlie want?

The village to be back the way it was. But that's not going to happen so he wants to get out. He'd like to be able to sell the house and move somewhere nice. They wanted to move up to be next to where his wife's sister lives, they thought about doing it a while ago, but that's impossible now because they're just stuck in their house with a mortgage. He's living a total nightmare. The next-door neighbour is a lunatic, frightening his wife,

there's rubbish all over the streets. It's just a living hell.

What does The Old Oak mean to Charlie?

The pub's the last place he's got in the village where he can just kind of go and forget about his troubles. At one time there was the Miners' Welfare, there were community centres, but that's all gone now. All they've got is the pub. You can go there and you can forget about things for a little while. I mean, he doesn't drown himself in alcohol. He's not an alcoholic, anything like that. He can just meet with the lads, have a crack, just have a couple of hours out of the misery that is more or less the rest of his life.

What is Charlie's reaction when the Syrians arrive?

Charlie's reaction is that he's not against immigration. He's not against refugees. But why is it always their village or villages like theirs that get them? You see him say during the course of it that they never put them in London next to all the posh people, they put them next door to us and we've got nothing. And what little we've got we've got to share out with other people. It's just another group of people who have been placed in the village who won't be supported properly and the people in the village will have to pick up the pieces. Well, they can't anymore. It's gone too far now.

What is Charlie's predicament?

He really doesn't know what to do but he feels like he's got to do something. So he makes the wrong decisions. In life that happens to us, doesn't it?

How did you come to be cast?

I first auditioned for Ken Loach in 1988 for a film called Riff-Raff. I've met him several times since over the years, and I did some voiceovers for him on the documentary about the welfare state [The Spirit of '45]. And then I came in and met him again for I, Daniel Blake. I've met him several times over the years, but it's just never worked out, but I mean obviously, it's Ken Loach - I've always wanted to work with him. And then just on this one, I was actually doing a job in London and they were auditioning in Newcastle. So even though I live in Newcastle I had to come home from the job in London. I met him, and then it came down to a few auditions, I improvised with Dave [Turner, TJ] and with a few of the other lads who were in the pub, and then after three or four auditions they said, "Yeah, we'd like you to do it." I mean I think that the reason Ken cast me is because he didn't want George Clooney to do it. He saw something in me that was close to Charlie.

What's your connection with the Northeast?

I come from a town called Wallsend which is an ex-shipbuilding and coalmining town. The pit shut when I was a kid, and then the shipyards closed when I was at school. My background as an actor is I've done a lot of work in community and political theatre. I've toured all these towns, done shows here, performed in community centres, worked in the Miners' Welfare. My extended family, this is where they live, in outlying towns around Newcastle, in ex-pit villages. It's in the family. It's in the blood. It's in my DNA.



Production

REBECCA O'BRIEN | producer

Having done *I*, *Daniel Blake* and *Sorry We Missed You* there was a feeling that there was another story to tell in the Northeast. It was partly that the stories Paul [Lavery] was picking up while he was researching those other two films were forming in his head – he felt that was another level of story to tell.

We would have done it a couple of years ago: Paul was ready to do more research and get writing, but then the pandemic hit and that stymied us. The research is very detailed, and it takes months and months not just for Paul, but for Ken [Loach] who goes around with him. They met many people from the ex-mining community in County Durham and people like Dave Turner, who plays TJ, showed them around (and it was always in the back of their minds that he might be in the film.)

Then Paul came up with the idea of having a pub and having a look at the communities from the local point of view; having a look at the situation where refugees have been placed in these relatively poor areas, which have been undervalued since the main industry left. We ended up with a feeling that it would be good to tell that story from the point of view of the local community.

When did you start to see *The Old Oak* as the third part of a trilogy?

I think Ken felt that there's a symmetry – or an asymmetry – in the idea of having three stories set in a similar milieu. We'd had such good experiences working on both *I*, *Daniel Blake* and *Sorry We Missed You* that it seemed like this would be the area to tell the story in. And there is something balanced about a third one. It wasn't intended to be a trilogy but I suppose people will call it that.

Once you had a script what did you do next?

Once I've got the script, I will then go and start sending it to our usual supporters. In this case, it made total sense to go to the people who supported us on *I*, *Daniel Blake* and *Sorry We Missed You* and see if they would come on board. In truth it was nerve-racking post-pandemic as to whether they were going to do it. Our French partners *Why Not*, the production company and *Goodfellas* (formerly *Wild Bunch*), the sales company have been incredibly supportive over the last 15 years so I didn't doubt that they would back us. We do also need to have that British endorsement and so we also went back to BBC Films who were supportive on the other two, and they said yes, absolutely. Then I approached the BFI to see if they would help fund this film, as well as Studiocanal to make a trio of British funding. And then we're in a co-production with our regular Belgian partners *Les Films du Fleuve*. As before, we're spending money in Belgium and bringing Belgian technicians over to work with us which we love. But with Brexit that does mean that visas have come into the fray, as well as carnets, which means it's been more difficult to do a European co-production. Luckily our partners have stuck with us and just said, "No, we're not bothered about that. We'll just keep doing it." So though it involves more administration, it's been possible.

Casting

Casting took a long time, more than normal because it's a bigger cast but also because we wanted to cast a young woman who was Syrian and during the pandemic it was

very difficult to do that. We have two particular filmmaker friends in the Middle East who were helpful and sent us a list of actresses that they thought would be of interest to us. And indeed they were. We cast Ebla Mari as Yara, who just shone. Having cast her, normally it would take three weeks maximum to turn it round and get her visa. In this instance we didn't know how long it was going to take because there were no more priority visas because of the Ukrainian situation – and the Home Office was being completely unhelpful in telling you where you were in the list. Luckily, because she'd already just had a visa to come over to be auditioned, they couldn't very well deny her coming over and being in the film. It just meant that we had to push the film for two weeks because we had no guarantee we were going to get her in. That costs money but it was worth the push.

Also, it was important to us that the Syrian families were authentic. The people in the film who play the Syrians are Syrian families and refugees who came here four or five years ago and made their homes here. Some of the situations in the film are very familiar to them, things that they have experienced.

How did this film compare in the making to the two previous Northeast pieces?

It's a much more complex film, because normally in our films we're dealing with maybe one community. Here, we have two communities. We had to represent the local families and the local pub goers, and then within the pub group, you've got people who are in favour of the refugees being here, and you've got people who are against. It's a complex tapestry of characters and people and families. The Syrians needed extra support in terms of explanation, what they're expected to do, how we pay them... all those elements are quite complicated. And with that bigger cast there are quite a few big scenes with lots of people, showing both communities celebrating, or both in sadness. It's a complex structure. I mean, it would have been much easier for us to have done this one before I, Daniel Blake and Sorry We Missed You!

If I, Daniel Blake and Sorry We Missed You were broadly tragic, is The Old Oak an attempt to end the trilogy on a more positive note?

There is no easy answer. People do their best in difficult circumstances, not of their making. We have tried to unravel a few knots, share the experiences of people trapped by war and social conflict. We hope audiences will see their situation a little more clearly now. Who knows?



FERGUS CLEGG | PRODUCTION DESIGNER

What design challenges did the script for The Old Oak present?

The big thing was finding the pub. It was clear in the script that the pub was a character as much as any other. And so it was finding something that looked right, had the architectural interest of an older building and contained echoes of its former glory in the architecture. Most pubs have that tradition of being the centre of local life in their city or town or village. We wanted to get that feeling of some backstory to the building. You wanted a sense of previous owners, because in each pub you go to there's a sort of accretion of development that takes place over time. It starts off as one thing and develops as fashions change. And so you go in and you see all the different layers of a pub, from its original features to those that have been changed in the 70s or 80s.

The script also called out for a room at the pub where you could hold the functions, one that was big enough to hold 50 people. That was unusual. There's a slight element of the Working Men's Club, or Miners' Colliery Club there.

You always hear pubs are closing five every week, or whatever it is, so we thought we'd be awash with options. But it turned out we weren't. Because we were too late: they've already been redeveloped. We'd found that there were a lot of pubs that had 'gone missing' in the intervening years since the end of mining. With the closing down of the mines, the revenue stream in the villages had gone.

But we found a pub in Murton with a room at the back that if we did some building work, we could modify it enough to make it just about big enough for what we had in mind.

How did you work up the interior of The Old Oak?

The function room is supposed to have been mothballed for 20+ years so we had to decide on a look for that room that was different to the rest of the pub. The look of it is more 60s - metal furniture, formica tables and things. The rest of the pub is still in the world of a traditional pub with woodgrain, wainscot detailing on the walls, traditional wallpaper and nicotine stains. But for the function room there were a lot of very good photographs taken by Keith Patterson, in Easington, of the very same situation in pubs and in soup kitchens that were set up in rooms to feed the striking miners and their families. So that was a good reference. We also had to build a kitchen because that's part of the story.

Was the function room actually functional?

Yes. That's the thing with Ken [Loach] - everything has to work. It was a proper building site. We were making the beer run properly so we could use the pumps, and we had the kitchen set up so it would function as a kitchen.

How did you find other locations and houses for the film?

Part of our backstory is that you can come up here and buy a house for £5,000 so we thought, "This is going to be straightforward." But the ownership issues are complex. There are some landlords who are decent and others who less so; some are housing associations; some are council owned. Some are tenanted and the tenants have got issues around drug use, or mental health, or both. We homed in on a few that were cooperative and responded. There's a lot of offshore ownership, people who don't want to be known, don't want to be involved. So we alighted on Tea Street in Horden

for Yara's house. There were houses on that street that were cooperative. Ken has a particular dislike of white UPVC doors and windows – they're very bright and contrasting with red brick and that on film for Ken is very invasive. He doesn't like red, white or bright colours in general so one of my big jobs is toning down the palette. And of course many houses have exactly that. The quick way of doing it was with adhesive vinyl. We found a muddy grey colour that Ken liked and had a team of sign installers just going round to these allocated areas and covering over the PVC windows with this vinyl.

How did you make sure the Syrian houses were portrayed authentically?

To start with we spoke to people who were involved in housing refugees and then we spoke to several families, one of which we got very friendly with – they would invite us around for fantastic meals. We went around to four or five homes early on and asked them for their experience from their flight to their arrival here. In the beginning the local councils were very badly prepared but as things progressed, they had houses that were decorated, furnished to a degree, but only with the absolute minimum. We'd start the house with that kind of look – generic British furniture sourced by the council with some food packages sourced by charities.. We asked the families what they'd try to get first and it was always proper utensils for cooking – because traditional food helped to preserve their identity. We would feel the same. They had brought some items that they put on the walls, reminders of home. Throughout we were led by the Syrians. We learned a lot and we were all moved by their enthusiasm and willingness to help.



JOSS BARRATT | PHOTOGRAPHER

What part does photography play in The Old Oak?

Photography is the thread that stitches the locations and the characters and all the narrative together. It's the device that links Yara to her history, to her present, and to her exploration of a new place and a new people. It gives her the licence to look and see. And then photography is also the device of how we self-select. It reflects what we choose to see and what we choose to remember. Because what we don't see, we then start to fill in with our imagination. So photography in the film is the prompt to what

What does photography mean to Yara [Ebla Mari] in the film?

She was always going to be a photographer. I don't think she's a professional photographer but it's always been part of her makeup. And the camera is then the gift from her father, which becomes the icon of how she expresses herself. Even more so in a foreign land. Because when you go anywhere, as a photographer, what you see first off is your big, first impression.

What coaching did you give Ebla?

Joss's photography school was not remotely technical: it was making sure she had the right camera that would be accurate to her age and circumstance and where she'd come from. So she has a very good camera, but a 10-year-old very good camera with a not very expensive lens, but one that does everything. That was a choice. In order to get Ebla into thinking like a photographer, we just spent a few days walking the streets in Newcastle. My tutoring was not technical, more about approach and intention. If you approach someone with humour, and with engagement, then that's 90% of what they'll give back to you. That starts before you've even left your room in the morning. It's like, "What am I going out to see? What am I going to look for? What's my motivation for taking any of these pictures? What am I trying to show?" Photography, when it really works, is this fantastic, dual-facing prism: it shows who you're photographing and who you are simultaneously.

There are two sets of stills montages that feature in the film. How did you capture them?

The conceit is that all the photography we see in the film is Yara's photography. For the title sequence Yara arrives at this rather hostile reception committee. Her pictures that we see were meant to be instinctive, reactive, sort of jaggedy, compositionally uncomfortable snapshots of what she saw when her family arrived in the village.

Later Yara exhibits a photo essay, a slideshow, to the community in order to show them what she's been doing with that camera. At least three of them are Ebla's actual pictures. The idea was to get her competent enough to take some of them - every time you see her on screen with her camera she was shooting live pictures. Some of those ended up in the final slideshow. What I was trying to elicit from her is not how to do it but why you're doing it - what it is to be a photographer and what it is to make those connections with people.

SHAM ZIAD | SYRIAN CAST COORDINATOR

What was your role on The Old Oak?

I was Syrian cast coordinator, translating sometimes, informing the Syrian families what time they had to come the next day, what they had to wear, everything, basically. When they arrived I welcomed them, took them to their costume, checked they were alright and asked them for their opinion about the scene.

How did you become involved in the production?

I am a Syrian refugee myself. I came here seven years ago and I've been involved in projects like translating for Syrian families before. In November last year (2021) Gateshead Council called me and asked me if I'd be interested to meet Ken.

How much of the Syrian families' experience do you recognise?

In my case, I didn't experience any racism, but people around me did. It's there, I can't deny it. A lot of my input has been to do with Syrian culture back home. Or Syrian names or accents – we have so many accents back home. People from different cities speak different dialects. I wanted to make sure that everything would look and sound right. I wasn't involved in casting the Syrian families but they gave me their information and I contacted them to learn about them.

How did you come to the UK?

I left Syria in 2012 and went to Egypt because my house in Damascus was bombed. My dad said it is not safe anymore, so we went to Egypt. We declared ourselves as refugees hoping they would take us to another country. We waited for four years to get to any country in Europe and then they called us in 2016 and said are you ready to travel? We said yes, please, because we know that Egypt is not safe for Syrian families either. In January 2017 we travelled to the UK. I was excited. It's safe, I can finally be stable in a house, not having to move around all the time.

When you saw in the film refugee families being bussed into communities in the Northeast what did you think?

It happened to me. You feel like you're lost. You don't know how to start. You have to remove all your past life and start again, new language, understand a new culture. For example, you can go and talk to the police here. Back home you can't. You can talk to teachers at school or uni here. Back home you have to talk to them in a really formal way. These are small details but we're not used to this environment.

What did you make of the Northeast when you arrived?

To be honest it was depressing. I came here when I was 26 and didn't know where to start. I couldn't integrate, I didn't have a social life or friends here. Now I'm studying for a Masters in International Relations, Conflict and Security. Basically, when I got to Gateshead the council took care of me. They provided refugees with a social worker to look for jobs and for me, when they found out my English was okay, they told me how to get more English skills that would take me on to studying at uni.

What do you think of the story told in The Old Oak?

It's amazing, it's really touching, and I think everyone will really love it. The film shows the pain that Syrian families must go through. It's not easy to move your life from one country to another. We didn't have a choice. We were forced to leave home.



Cast

| | |
|---------------|-------------------|
| TJ Ballantyne | DAVE TURNER |
| Yara | EBLA MARI |
| Laura | CLAIRE RODGERSON |
| Charlie | TREVOR FOX |
| Vic | CHRIS MCGLADE |
| Eddy | COL TAIT |
| Garry | JORDAN LOUIS |
| Erica | CHRISSIE ROBINSON |
| Jaffa Cake | CHRIS GOTTS |
| Maggie | JEN PATTERSON |
| Archie | ARTHUR OXLEY |
| Joe | JOE ARMSTRONG |
| Micky | ANDY DAWSON |
| Tommy | MAXIE PETERS |

Crew

| | |
|--|------------------------|
| Ken Loach | DIRECTOR |
| Paul Laverty | SCREENPLAY |
| Fergus Clegg | PRODUCTION DESIGNER |
| Robbie Ryan | PHOTOGRAPHY |
| Ray Beckett | RECORDIST |
| Kevin Brazier | SOUND EDITOR |
| Kahleen Crawford | CASTING |
| Joanne Slater | COSTUME DESIGNER |
| Anita Brolly | HEAR AND MAKEUP DESIGN |
| Jamie Hamer | ASSISTANT DIRECTOR |
| Eimhear McMahon | LINE PRODUCER |
| Jonathan Morris | EDITOR |
| George Fenton | COMPOSER |
| Pascal Caucheteux, Grégoire Sorlat, Vincent Maraval | EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS |
| Rebecca O'Brien | PRODUCER |
| Sixteen Films, Why Not Productions, Goodfellas, BFI, BBC Film, Les Films du Fleuve, France 2 Cinéma, Canal +, France Télévisions, Le Pacte, Cinéart, Ciné +, VOO, Be tv et Casa Kafka Pictures | A COPRODUCTION |