Children of Men

Talent: Clive Owen, Julianne Moore, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Michael Caine, Claire-Hope Ashitey.

Director: Alfonso Cuaron
Classification: MA (15+)
Duration: 109 minutes
We rate it: 3 and a half stars.

Children of Men will, I suspect, be remembered alongside other dark cautionary tales like Brave New World and Nineteen Eighty-Four. The film is based upon a novel by well-regarded crime writer P.D. James, who has occasionally written what is broadly termed “Literary fiction”. The novel upon which Children of Men is based was first published in 1992, and shares much with the dystopian science fiction of Huxley and Orwell. Set in a devastated Britain of 2027, the novel depicts a society that has become infertile: women are unable to conceive children and the population is nearing its “end of days”. With a background of devastating environmental decay and widespread anarchy, this is a bleak story indeed, and it has been turned into a bleak and brilliant film by director Alfonso Cuaron.

Clive Owen stars as the central “everyman” figure, Theo Faron, a man who has himself lost a child in the past, as a result of an influenza epidemic. Theo now works as a kind of journalist-cum-bureaucrat, and as the film opens, he is finding himself increasingly depressed at the hopelessness by which he is surrounded. Theo’s world is thrown into even deeper disarray at the news that the youngest person on the planet, a man in his late teens, has been killed by an angry mob. Later that day, Theo is approached out of the blue by his ex-partner, the oddly named Julian (odd given that she’s a woman, played by the ever luminous Julianne Moore). Julian is the leader of an underground group that turns out to be harbouring that most precious of human artefacts: a miraculously pregnant young woman. Invited into the fold, Theo is charged with transporting the mother-to-be to safety.

Such is the setup for this immensely disturbing, brutally vivid and unforgettable film, a film that becomes more fascinating and troubling as its desperate narrative unfolds. Every performance hits just the right note: as the journey progresses, Owen and newcomer Claire-Hope Ashitey (playing the young woman, the intriguingly named “Kee”) are drawn closer together, and their relationship ultimately becomes deeply moving and indeed heartbreaking. Julianne Moore is remarkable in a small role, as is Michael Caine, playing an old hippie who lives in the woods with his wheelchair-bound wife. Chiwetel Ejiofor, Danny Huston and Charlie Hunnam are also wonderful

Archived at Flinders University: dspace.flinders.edu.au
in support, and the film’s every technical element is perfectly orchestrated, from Emmanuel Lubecki’s visceral cinematography to the brilliantly used John Taverner score.

The single flaw here is that Cuaron has made a film that is at times almost unbearably bleak – Children of Men is such a pressing cautionary tale that it deserves to be seen by a wide audience, and I feel that many cinemagoers will simply find the film too harrowing to stay with. Inspired by a novel that seems to have come from a deeply felt place in its author’s psyche, Children of Men has been fashioned into a dark and hugely challenging film. For those who can stick with this difficult-to-digest material, there is much to be learned from the experience. “Let us not have the world turn out like this,” such moral tales suggest; all I can say is “Hear, hear.” See Children of Men if you’re feeling strong of heart.

Nick Prescott