

Trade secrets: how to procure a passport

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People often take a great deal for granted while dismissing so much of what goes on around them. This is especially true when what people fail to see involves the plight of illegal immigrants and low-level workers. These unnoticed persons are the very individuals around whom the plot of director Stephen Frears's *Dirty Pretty Secrets* revolves. They are the people like lead character Okwe (Chiwetel Ejiofor), who describes himself and his friends as “The people you do not see [.. .] the ones who drive your cabs, clean your rooms, and suck your cocks” (*Dirty Pretty Secrets*). Generally, the transparency of their existence works against their success; occasionally, the anonymity of these unseen people provides the perfect cover for their entrance into mainstream society—provided that they can tolerate what must be done along the way.

The storyline of *Dirty Pretty Secrets* which is set in London, England, revolves primarily around three people: Okwe (Chiwetel Ejiofor), a cabbie by day and a desk clerk at the Baltic Hotel by night; Senay (Audrey Tautou), a friend of Okwe's, who is a maid at the Baltic Hotel; and Sneaky (Sergi López), the head clerk at the Baltic who uses the motel as a distribution center for anything that will net him money—most notably, human organs.

The complex relationships that surround these three characters are further developed by two supporting actors: Sophie Okonedo, who plays Juliette, the Baltic's resident hooker; and Benedict Wong, who plays Guo Yi, a morgue employee and friend of Okwe's. As the film progresses, the audience learns that Okwe is an illegal immigrant who was forced to flee his home in Lagos, Nigeria after being falsely accused of his wife's murder. Okwe was working as a pathologist when a Nigerian Government official was shot, and when

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Okwe refused to destroy evidence of the crime, his home was firebombed—with his wife inside.

The Nigerian police accused Okwe of the crime, so he fled. Senay is an immigrant from Turkey, and while she is not an illegal, she is forced to violate the immigration policies of London to survive. Specifically, she is not allowed to work during the six-month period during which her case is being reviewed; therefore, to survive, she works illegally. Sneaky is living and working in London legally, so he is in a position to take advantage of both Okwe and Senay, and the degree to which he is willing to exploit their secrets leads to the story's pivotal scene.

The most prevalent themes in *Dirty Pretty Things* are human integrity coupled with how the need to remain secretive can result in personal compromise and leave one open to mistreatment, but the sub-theme is how the people who go unnoticed often band together to survive and support one another against their foes. Okwe is a sympathetic character, and as the plot progresses, the audience begins to see that he must make escalating choices that challenge his sense of right and wrong. Because he is a fugitive from justice, he is eventually coerced by Sneaky to participate in his organ-trading scheme.

Senay is also very likable, especially after the audience sees that the secrecy and prudishness she initially displays are due to her immigrant status and her being Muslim. Once the Immigration Enforcement Directors begin to hunt her down, she is forced to seek alternate employment and is immediately made a sex toy by her sweat-shop boss. Senay becomes the final piece in Sneaky's ploy to force Okwe to become the Baltic's organ doctor when she, in

an act of desperation, agrees to give up a kidney in exchange for a passport: Okwe agrees to perform the surgery to ensure that Senay is not butchered.

Like Okwe, Senay is forced to compromise more and more of herself in order to survive. The juxtaposing of Okwe with Guo and Senay with Juliette adds even greater depth to this movie: where most of the people Okwe and Senay associate with take advantage of their situations and exploit them, Guo and Juliette—a morgue worker and a hooker—help the main characters survive and persevere: it is a banding together of those whom society fails to acknowledge. *Dirty Pretty Things* is an excellent film on a variety of levels and should appeal to a wide-range of viewers.

The plot is timely and gritty, the acting is superb, and the turning of the tables at the end of the movie—when Okwe and Senay exploit Sneaky's greed and end up taking his kidney—make one want to stand up and cheer for the justice that is served and the underdogs who dish it out. Anyone who has felt inferior and has been forced to make choices dictated by that feeling of inferiority will likely enjoy this movie, and certainly, those open to reevaluating their prejudice against illegal immigrants will be forced to think again about their position.