

FILM REVIEW

The Changing Face of England: Marc Isaacs'
All White in Barking
[Icarus Films, 2007, 73 minutes]

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Barking is a white, working-class community east of London. For many years it was a hub of shipbuilding, but recently many of the young people have moved away, with an influx of immigrants taking their place. The older residents are now living next door to citizens from Africa, China, Pakistan, Lithuania, Nigeria—with new countries represented every day. In addition to buying homes, the immigrants have purchased many shops featuring diverse foodstuffs and native goods. The face of Barking has changed dramatically in the past few years, and the white residents are feeling a sense of discomfort with the new diversity.

The film's purpose, as described in the preface, is to show "how far we are willing to go to confront our fear of foreigners." The technique is to interview white residents about their reactions to the new neighbors and film the immigrants in their new lifestyle. Much of the conversation focuses on food; it is filmed in a butcher shop and grocery store. We learn very little about the people filmed other than their first names, so it is often hard to follow the interviews. Some of the questions lead to serious answers, while others are flippant, such as exclamations about being upset that the neighbors' cooking smells are "different" and that they simply "are not our people." Dave, the most antagonistic of the citizens, insists that he is not racist; he merely has "personal preferences," which are acceptable because, after all, "this is England."

One white couple accepts a dinner invitation from a Nigerian couple and is surprised to find the food edible, even though the evening was, on the whole, "awkward."

There is an underlying theme about Jewish residents; some of them are Holocaust survivors. Monty, a survivor of Aushwitz, has hired Betty, a Nigerian woman, as a caregiver, which causes some comments from his Jewish friends. Betty seems genuinely fond of Monty and wants to have him accompany her on a trip back to Nigeria. They seem to have the most equal relationship. On the whole, the white citizens do feel superior to the immigrants without seeming to realize that they will have to adjust to this new community life. One woman said that if she won the lottery, she might

move away, but she would always come back; she explains, “My son is buried here—these are my roots.”

Overall, the film has a fascinating premise, with the added value of being based on reality. Barking may well be a microcosm for what will happen to other small communities around the globe. However, the film itself is technically flawed. The camera work is reminiscent of *The Blair Witch Project*, looking like a hand-held camera technique. There is too much trailing the residents around; the viewer longs to see everyone settled and to hear in-depth conversations about their deeper feelings. Since the older white men seem similar in appearance, it would be helpful to have more identifiers on screen. The film lacks dramatic impact, and the audience’s attention might wander after the first hour (the film is 73 minutes long).

While there are some hopeful moments, the film dwells on the natives’ negative reactions to the immigrants. It ends as it began: with Dave, who is asked the question, “What would you do if more come here?” Dave is standing by the breakwater and he responds, “Africans or foreigners? I’d go in there . . . in the f—ing drink.” The fact that it is said in such a matter-of-fact way makes it all the more discouraging. The population may have changed, but the mindset is still “All White in Barking.”