Well met in the laundrette

BY JULIAN WEST and JONATHAN RICHMOND

You might not expect a movie about a homosexual Pakistani laundromat operator to be a massive success, but “My Beautiful Laundrette” has been breaking box-office records in Britain, and is a hit in New York as well. The film — originally intended for television — was made on a shoestring budget, so don’t expect a climactic masterpiece. What you can expect is a fine character study, and a glimpse of a class of people who are growing in importance, but not well understood.

“Laundrette” provides a close study of the life of London’s large Pakistani immigrant community, and its relationship with racist working-class youth. The Pakistanis develop businesses and thrive on them; the out-of-work whites take out their jealousies on them.

Gordon Warnecke — in his first screen appearance — plays the film’s central role, Omar. We see him in his ailing father’s run-down apartment, then his shift to a job working for his uncle, laundering cars, clothes and money, and falling in love with his childhood friend Johnny (Daniel Day-Lewis).

Director Stephen Frears develops this unlikely relationship between a Briton who despite the advantage of a white face, is going nowhere, and a Pakistani on the rise in his adopted land, “this dear country which we hate and love.” Johnny formerly hung out with a bunch of Paki-bashing thugs. After Johnny throws in his lot with Omar, they ask him “why are you working for these people? They come over here to work for us.” When Johnny tells them that “Crystal Palace [football club] ain’t my team” any more, the little Englanders retort “I bet you don’t even support England any more.” The strains between Johnny and his background make telling footage, and Omar’s struggles within his own community make for probing psychology, too.

Omar gets a little too involved with a smooth and manipulative relative, Salim (Derrick Branch), who collects modern Indian art and illicit videocassettes. But Omar learns from him and — by cheating him in a drug deal — gets the money necessary to do up the money-losing laundrette his uncle has entrusted to his care. A laundry palace called “Powders,” emerges (the name a backhanded acknowledgment of their source of capital). With superb irony, “Land of Hope and Glory” is playing over the stereo system as the Grand Opening takes place.

There are several carefully-drawn character studies. The conflict between Omar and his father (Roshan Seth) a Socialist, who puts education for his son above the gratification of money, is as illuminating as the schism between Johnny and his former mates. The trains run by outside the sleazy flat, carrying memories of Omar’s mother, who threw herself under a train, and of dreams of an illusory charmed life in a new land.

Rita Wolf plays Omar’s cousin, Tania, a rebel against her family’s traditions. There is high comedy as she bares her breasts to Omar through the living-room window, unseen by the other stereotypical conformist males in the room.

There are many memorable moments on film. The superposition of Johnny’s face on Omar’s reflection removes, for a moment, their superficial differences and underscores their partnership. The scenes of racial violence, which finally erupt into the foreground, are cleverly understated by placing the observer safely behind a pane of glass. The silence and slowness of the violence, of which Johnny, as a “traitor” bears the brunt, thus only serves to underscore its horror.

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