

DRIVING LESSONS

**A 2006 Sony Pictures Classics release
Written and directed by Jeremy Brock**

Film reviewed by Franco P. Visser

Ben Marshall (played by Rupert Grint) is trapped in a dysfunctional and fragmented family life. As the son of the local parish vicar, Robert (played by Nicolas Farrell), Ben struggles to form his own identity as a 17 year-old on the verge of adulthood. Ben is caught between the overly religious, controlling and at times bizarre life of his mother, Laura (played by Laura Linney) and that of his father who appears to be a desperately helpless individual torn between his different responsibilities and stuck in his own emotional processes. Ben is forced to spend his free time assisting his mother's various parish causes and cares almost to the point where the viewer gets the sense of strong dependency issues on the side of his mother. Ben also needs to act the part of a eucalyptus tree in a play choreographed and directed by his mother for a Girl Guide charity.

In the midst of this, the summer holiday sees Ben looking for a part-time job on his mother's instruction. She has 'kindly' invited the elderly Mr. Fincham (played by Jim Norton) to 'recover from shock' at their home, after Mr. Fincham ran over his own wife with his motorcar, and it is his mother's idea that Ben should donate the earnings of his summer job to Mr. Fincham to assist in his 'recovery'. In this respect Ben finds a classified advertisement requesting a companion to a formerly well-known actress, Dame Evie Walton (played by Julie Walters).

An eccentric and lively woman, Dame Evie serves as the lure to get Ben 'out of his shell' so to speak. A forgotten actress from a daytime television drama called *The Shipping Magnets*, Dame Evie escapes her isolation and feelings of rejection by actively – and very verbally I should add – involving herself in her garden. Dame Evie is also a very keen reader. Her activities in and around her home she does aided by liberally consuming strong alcohol. One can clearly see that the loss of her son at age two due to meningitis clearly left a significant emotional scar on Dame Evie.

The time spent with Dame Evie exposes Ben to a whole different world; a world of fun, impulsivity, creativity and individual opinion. Through a series of 'adventures' initiated, and at times forced upon Ben by Dame Evie this world slowly but surely starts to impress on Ben. Their first camping trip together and the disastrous literature reading festival in Edinburgh serves as only two examples of this. One also gets the sense from viewing this film that Dame Evie, through Ben, also gets the chance to deal with significant issues of her own. The two characters, Ben and Dame Evie, seem to have been



destined to meet at a particular time in both their lives. By reciting and acting Shakespeare together both Ben and Dame Evie find means of expression previously not possible. The film also portrays Ben's inevitable internal struggle – the so called push/pull effect – from wanting to flee his experiences with Dame Evie, but also wanting more of it as he realises that their experiences together provides a way of escape from his troubled home life.

The title of this film, *Driving Lessons*, holds more importance than meets the eye at first. Yes, Ben is also a learner driver who, under the tutelage of his thrifty mother undertakes frequent driving lessons – strangely enough always to the home of a younger priest named Peter (played by Oliver Milburn) where Ben's mother spends

inordinate amounts of time (yes, Mrs. Holy Vicar Laura is having an affair with a younger priest). The title of the film contains significant meaning and irony with regards to independence, freedom and a general sense of achievement – all of which Ben is struggling so hard to find.

Driving Lessons is a proverbial tear-in-the-eye humoristic drama that not only portrays the different journeys of the main characters, but it also leaves the viewer with a sense of change and the possibility that difference holds. It takes the viewer along on the main character's journeys and the use of nature scenes as adjunct to the evolving emotional processes is especially worth mentioning. Ben is finally able, albeit in a very short poem penned by his own hand especially for Dame Evie, to express himself and his gratitude towards Dame Evie, and inevitably his poem highlights the underlying message and theme of the film:

*'we can never know what we can never know,
except, whoever you are and whoever I am,
you made it alright to be me...'*

This is a film definitely worth the time and effort to watch. Here is a film that leaves the viewer with significance and strong emotional reactions, both good and those involving heartbreak and sadness. Julie Walters' portrait of Dame Evie is again a brilliant performance from an actress who embedded herself along with her peers as one of Britain's finest artists. The young Rupert Grint might possibly be on his way to rid himself of the Harry Potter type cast of Ron Weasley, moving more into the adult drama type genres that are essential for any actor in terms of recognition and respect.