
3.5 Stars (out of 4)

Waiting was the closing night film at the 2016 Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles.

Writer-director Anu Menon presents an unvarnished look at the lives of those with seriously ill loved ones in the smart drama Waiting.

A young wife, Tara (Kalki Koechlin), finds herself in the southern city of Cochin after her husband is injured on a work trip. The husband, Rajat (Arjun Mathur), suffered serious head injuries and lingers in a coma while doctors wait for swelling in his brain to subside.

Alone in a strange city at night, Tara turns to the only other person in the hospital cafeteria for comfort. Retiree Shiv (Naseeruddin Shah) can sympathize with Tara’s situation. His own wife, Pankaja (Suhasini Maniratnam), has been in a coma for eight months following a stroke.

Shiv patiently talks Tara through the torrent of emotions she’s experiencing: disbelief, anger, depression. He’s been through them all himself. Looking past Tara’s short temper and foul mouth, Shiv sees in her the daughter he and his wife never had.

Being together gives Shiv and Tara something they both need: a way to relieve their boredom. Having spent my fair share of time in hospitals in recent years, I can attest that the predominant feeling is not panic or sadness, but tedium. Everything happens slowly. Answers are vague and in short supply. The chairs are uncomfortable. The walk to the cafeteria isn’t nearly as long as you wish it would be to kill all the time you have on your hands.

Palling around gives the two spouses something to do. Shiv explains to Tara that her duty is to take care of herself while the nurses take care of Rajat. But time spent together allows them to put off answering the terrible question of what their own lives will be like if their spouses never wake up.
Dr. Nirupam (Rajat Kapoor) is the surgeon responsible for the well-being of both patients. His instincts are often correct, but he finds it expedient to project an air of confidence regardless of his level of certainty. He’s not exactly compassionate.

It falls to Dr. Nirupam to have a frank conversation with Shiv about Pankaja’s quality of life. The doctor says, “You have to ask yourself, what would she want?” Shiv replies, “She would want to get better.”

Sometimes people can’t get better, and the film addresses the challenge of accepting that fact. Menon doesn’t try provoke a reaction from her audience, instead presenting her characters in a natural way that sparks the audiences’ empathy. It’s sad without being melancholy.

Both lead actors are so strong in very different ways. Shah’s character is easier to sympathize with, but Koechlin makes Tara likeable and relatable, despite her brash exterior. Kapoor is solid as the film’s equivalent of a villain: a man who’s trying to do what he thinks is right, albeit in an off-putting way.

The straight-forward tone of Menon’s story makes it feel familiar to those who’ve spent time in hospital waiting rooms while also serving as a useful guide for those who haven’t. *Waiting* is a real achievement, and an enjoyable one at that.

**Links**