

Is Anybody There?

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [June 16, 2009](#) issue



The low-budget English production *Is Anybody There?* is now reaching screens in the United States, thanks to the presence of Michael Caine in the lead role. The action takes place at Lark Hall, a family-run nursing facility. As one aging resident dies, another arrives to take over the bed—a cycle of life and death accepted mostly with a nod and a shrug.

But not by ten-year-old Edward (Bill Milner), the lone child of the house, who has become so obsessed with the frequent turnaround that he has taken to slipping a tape recorder under sickbeds so he can capture the sound of last breaths. He is convinced that something must happen at the moment of passing, something important and profound, something that he hopes to discover on his reel-to-reel.

Things get more complicated for Edward with the arrival of “The Amazing Clarence” (Caine), an aging magician who doesn’t want to spend his sunset years with this bunch of losers but comes to accept that he needs help.

At this point in the film one expects Clarence and Edward to form an eccentric bond, à la the characters in *Harold and Maude*. But to the filmmakers’ credit they don’t take that easy route. Instead, the film presents both Clarence and Edward as angry and unpleasant figures—Edward because he has lost his bedroom and must live in a home with a bunch of sick old people, Clarence because he is raging against the dying of the light. Clarence is also burdened by a massive amount of guilt for the way he constantly cheated on his wife and never apologized to her before she died.

Yet eventually Clarence and Edward do develop a friendship, fueled by visits to Clarence's magic storehouse and the cemetery where his wife is buried. Subplots and secondary characters start to surface, including a story about marital strife between Edward's parents (Anne-Marie Duff and David Morrissey). We are introduced to some of the other Lark Hall residents, who are portrayed by a who's-who of outstanding British and American character actors, including the still-lovely Rosemary Harris as a former dancer. The main story and the subplots soon start bumping up against each other, leading to a series of confrontations and betrayals, and a magic show that goes horribly wrong.

Holding the disparate parts together is the 76-year-old Caine, who seems to be relishing the chance to play a complex and unhappy character. (His standard retort is "Sod off!") The gleam in Clarence's eye shows the life beneath the surface, a hint of the abundant charm he must once have had.

The film is directed with care by John Crowley (*Boy A*) and scripted by British television writer Peter Harness, who based the tale on his own childhood experiences growing up in just such an environment. The filmmakers bring a touching precision to many of the characters and scenes, including a beautiful late-night moment at the back of a bus in which Edward learns that while the secrets of death may never be revealed, the power of goodness on Earth is inestimable.