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FILM REVIEWS

Fifty Dead Men Walking -- Film Review

By Doris Toumarkine, August 18, 2009 05:31 ET



"Fifty Dead Men Walking"

Bottom Line: Docu-like film based on exploits of an actual Belfast hood turned informer against IRA terrorists is an explosive cinematic experience.

NEW YORK -- The decibels, energy and overall quality are high in writer-director Kari Skogland's "Fifty Dead Men Walking," her supremely well-made, highly stylized, graphic tale of Northern Ireland's "Troubles" in the late 1980s. Upscale audiences should respond to her film, loosely based on Martin McGartland's account of his perilous stint as an Irish

Republican Army insider spilling beans to the Brits. Also assaulted by visuals as dazzling as they are dizzying and a pounding rock soundtrack, they might additionally wish for a seat belt. At least they get subtitles for the hammering, thickly accented dialogue.

All performances, especially from Jim Sturgess as McGartland and Ben Kingsley, again showing his chameleon DNA as McGartland's Special Branch handler Fergus, are stunning.

Bookended by the 1999 incident that has McGartland discovered in Canadian exile, the film is largely set in 1980s Belfast. It's a historic era of violent, deadly confrontations pitting IRA terrorists against British army "invaders."

British intelligence agent Fergus, stationed in Belfast, targets the unruly, ornery McGartland as an excellent candidate to recruit for counterintelligence. The young man hangs with best buddy Sean (Kevin Zegers), and together they fearlessly provoke the armed British "occupiers" and talk or tear their way through checkpoints. Fergus, scouting the urban battlefield, recognizes McGartland's con-man artistry and bravado.

The small-time hustler falls for the pitch of being "part of something big." He accepts a new car, takes a job as a cabbie and begins feeding information to the British. Concurrently, he gets involved with girlfriend Lara (Natalie Press). When she becomes pregnant, the two move in together.

As McGartland experiences fatherhood, he continues to feed Fergus information on IRA moves. Able to cover his tracks, the informant builds his trust with the upper echelons of the insurgents, to the point that they formally induct him as an IRA "full volunteer."

With each morsel passed on, McGartland's mission grows ever more dangerous. Even such intimates as Sean and Lara are left completely in the dark, as is IRA intelligence head Grace (Rose McGowan), a sexy Irish Mata Hari. The stakes couldn't be higher, and McGartland, knowing the IRA tortures, does not want to become an exposed infiltrator, otherwise known as a "dead man walking."

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But a planned IRA pub attack threatens to become McGartland's undoing. The supercharged event and its aftermath reveal subtleties of espionage and camaraderie that force moral considerations. The breathtaking denouement also is one of several riveting set pieces that underscore cinema as kinetic art.

Opens: August 21 (Phase 4 Films)

Production companies: Future Films, Brightlight Pictures

Cast: Ben Kingsley, Jim Sturgess, Kevin Zegers, Natalie Press, Rose McGowan, Tom Collins, William Houston

Director/screenwriter: Kari Skogland

Based on the book by: Martin McGartland

Producers: Kari Skogland, Peter La Terriere, Stephen Hegyes, Shawn Williamson

Executive producers: Guy Collins, Stephen Margolis, Michael Ryan, Nicole Carmen-Davis, Karyn Edwards, Elsie Choi, Cindy Cowan, Kyle Lundberg

Director of photography: Jonathan Freeman

Production designer: Eve Stewart

Music: Ben Mink

Costume designer: Stephanie Collie

Editor: Jim Munro

Rated R, 117 minutes

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