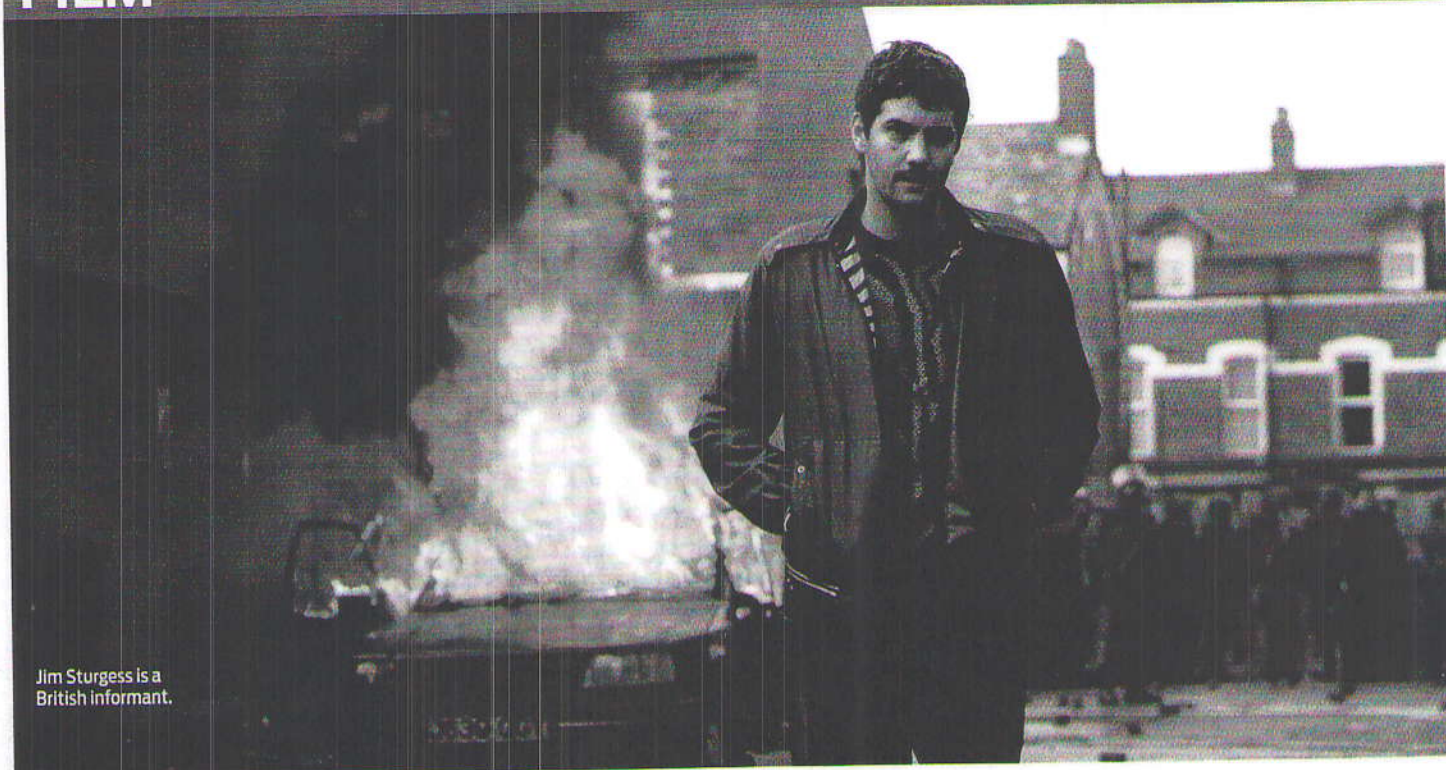


FILM



Jim Sturgess is a British informant.

'Fifty Dead Men Walking'

By Doris Toumarkine

NEW YORK — The decibels, energy and overall quality are high in "Fifty Dead Men Walking," writer-director Kari Skogland's 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 largely is 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 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."

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. **THR**

BOTTOMLINE Doculike film based on exploits of an actual Belfast hood-turned-informer against IRA terrorists is an explosive cinematic experience. OPENS: Friday, Aug. 21 (Phase 4 Films). PRODUCTION: 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. Rated R, 117 minutes.