The Review

The 65th Edinburgh International Film Festival

SLIM PICKINGS

The website may have trumpeted that in 2011, the 65th Edinburgh International Film Festival isn't ready for senior citizenship but after 3 lacklustre years that saw the Festival move from its traditional home in August (where it nestled vibrantly alongside Edinburgh's other festivals), to June, a dramatic drop in audiences, a combination of lack of vision, lack of ambition, bad management, and one of the worst programmes in its history means that the EIFF may well be ready for its bus pass.

2011's Festival had a Producer/Director instead of an Artistic Director. James Mullighan has described himself as *not* being a cinephile. His first act was to slash and burn; cutting the Festival's awards, scaling back the number of films and axing popular crowd-pleasing strands, getting rid of the red carpet Gala screenings, and severing ties with top entertainment PR company Rogers & Cowan and with multiplex chain Cineworld. No proper catalogue, almost non-existent media. And then there were the films themselves.

While previous Artistic Director Hannah McGill's programmes almost felt as if they were striving for mediocrity, it's safe to say Mullighan has achieved it with a mostly uninspiring selection of films. Top of the list, the Festival's Closing Night film (only confirmed halfway through the first week), the 3D reissue of Disney's *The Lion King*. First released in 1994: 17 years ago. For a festival that has traditionally showcased and championed the most innovative, exciting, dangerous, and creative cinema from around the world, if one of your biggest films is a last-minute screening of a two decade old cartoon surely that's got to start a few alarm bells ringing.

There were some awful films (*Charlie Casanova*, *Fast Romance*, *Stormhouse*, Israel's *Rabies*) and there were some good films. There just weren't any must-see films. The Opening Night film, John Michael McDonagh's *The Guard*, was a blackly comic, modern day Western set in the Wild West — of Ireland. Sergeant Gerry Boyle (Brendan Gleeson) of the Galway Gardaí is a country copper whose days are spent drinking, whoring, and consuming confiscated drugs. But when a drug dealer is murdered on his patch and his new partner goes missing, Boyle unbelievably finds himself the only incorruptible cop in

town and forges an uneasy alliance with straight-laced, by-the-book FBI agent Wendell Everett (Don Cheadle), in town to break up an international drug ring. A funny, profane, politically incorrect, sweetly melancholic twist on the traditional buddy cop movie, *The Guard* is a guilty pleasure. The humour is dark and, at times, deliberately uncomfortable. Gleeson's Boyle is an unreconstructed cop without a filter, unconsciously spouting casual racism. His first meeting with Cheadle's Everett is both hilarious and mortifying; during a briefing about the dealers they are after Gleeson asks 'I thought only black fellas were drug dealers? And Mexicans?' It's a moment that elicits as many wincing of embarrassment as it does laughs, Gleeson going on to comment 'I'm Irish. Racism is part of our culture.' *The Guard* works because of Gleeson who dominates the film and has never been better. You're never in any doubt that, come the final reel, Gleeson's Boyle will do what a man's gotta do.

American Indie cinema's favourite chunky monkey, Philip Seymour Hoffman, finally makes his directorial debut with his first feature, *Jack Goes Boating*. Based on Bob Glaudini's 2007 off-Broadway play for which Hoffman won rave reviews as Jack, Hoffman stars again as the titular Jack, a middle-aged pot-smoking slacker, drifting through life, isolated, his only friends married couple Clyde (John Ortiz) and Lucy (Daphne Rubin Vega) who decide it's time

Jack got himself a girlfriend and set him up with fellow social inept, the shy Connie (Amy Ryan). Jack and Connie unsurprisingly hit it off and Jack impulsively offers to cook her a meal and to take her boating in Central Park. The only problem is Jack can neither cook nor swim. Enlisting Clyde and Lucy's help, Jack decides to radically change his life to become the kind of man he feels Connie deserves, Clyde teaching him to swim and Lucy's chef friend teaching him to cook. But as Jack and Connie's romance flickers waveringly to life, their friends' marriage starts to implode. Amy Ryan shines as the insecure Connie and Ortiz is likeable and intense as the cheerfully desperate Clyde. Philip Seymour Hoffman's performance is unshowy, solid, and dependable. Workmanlike. An honest and realistic portrait of loneliness and middle-aged romance, *Jack Goes Boating* is poignant but never quite shakes off its stage roots and feels longer than its 89 minutes.

Far more exciting was Jose Padilha's pulse-pounding conspiracy thriller *Elite Squad 2: The Enemy Within*. Picking up where the 2007 original left off, Wagner Moura reprises his role as Roberto Nascimento, commander of Rio's paramilitary police unit BOPE. After bloodily suppressing a violent prison riot, Roberto is promoted and finds himself out of his depth, forced to navigate the treacherous corridors of power, uncovering a web of corruption linking crooked politicians, corrupt cops,

Brendan Gleeson and Don Cheadle in *The Guard*.

Alex de la Iglesia's *The Last Circus*.

and organised crime. Increasingly isolated and paranoid, Nascimento realises that the price of doing business in Rio may just be the assassination of himself and his family. A more mature, measured film than the original's rabid action thriller, *Elite Squad 2* is still more violent than a shark in a tumble dryer, packed full of tense stand-offs and violent shootouts. Moura is magnetic as the honest, incorruptible Nascimento, a shoot-first-ask-questions-later kind of cop, and Padilha's portrait of Rio is an almost Boschian vision of Hell.

If you suffer from coulrophobia, the irrational fear of clowns, maybe you should give Alex de la Iglesia's bonkers cult movie *The Last Circus* a miss. Haunted by his clown father's death in the Spanish Civil War 30 years before, shy, overweight clown Javier (Carlos Areces) finds himself drawn to Natalia (the wonderfully named Carolina Bang) the acrobat girlfriend of brutal, sociopathic head clown Sergio (Antonia de la Torre). As with any de la Iglesia movie it's not long before violent insanity erupts and the two warring clowns are rampaging through the streets in full make-up totting machine guns. *The Last Circus* is probably the only film you'll see in the next year featuring a machete-wielding clown taking on an army of Fascists.

One of the more amusing and frustrating conversations I had during the Festival was an argument in the cinema bar with a group of American students (what else?) complaining about the inherent atheist agenda of Norway's *Troll Hunter* and Europe's general anti-Christian bias. Just so you know, *Troll Hunter* is a mockumentary movie about a guy employed by the Norwegian government to hunt trolls, the

mythical monsters of Scandinavian myth. Aping the found footage-style of movies like *Cannibal Holocaust* and *The Blair Witch Project*, a group of film students follow the titular hunter as he traps the giant beasts roaming the countryside. And that's about it. And what caused the ire of our colonial cousins? At one point the hunter asks the film crew if any of them are Christians as true to the myths trolls can 'smell the blood of a Christian man.' I'm not letting any cats out of bags by revealing that pretty soon one of the film crew has to be replaced by a Muslim student.

In times of recession the number of sci-fi and horror movies hitting the screens traditionally rises exponentially, so brace yourself for the Apocalypse. From Mexico we had the glacial, cerebral *By Day And By Night*, an atmospheric fable where ecological collapse and overpopulation leads to the oppressive, totalitarian government implanting an enzyme into each person's DNA which regulates their sleep patterns, forcibly dividing the population into day citizens and night citizens, biologically unable to meet. And when they do ...?

Phase 7 saw a *28 Days Later*-style epidemic of madness and violence hit a laid-back Argentina with a slacker barricading himself and his pregnant wife in their apartment as war erupts between paranoid neighbours, while French horror-meister Xavier Gens gave us *The Divide*, the only film to inspire walk-outs at this year's Festival. When an unexplained nuclear attack destroys New York, a diverse group of survivors sheltering in the basement of their apartment building find themselves trapped as the world above them collapses. With

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supplies running low and the survivors starting to show signs of radiation sickness, tensions within the group build and alpha-male Josh (Milo Ventimiglia) and his friends establish their own personal fiefdom, using fragile single mother Marilyn (Rosanna Arquette) as their personal sex slave. As the situation devolves into violence, degradation and death, only the enigmatic Eva (Lauren German) struggles to maintain any sense of decency. But when the chance of escape presents itself she finds herself forced into a vicious struggle for survival. Bleak, intense, claustrophobic and horrific, *The Divide* is a post-apocalyptic movie that dares to suggest that the worst thing about the apocalypse may be surviving it.

The most satisfying film of the Festival, for once, however was British. Niall MacCormick's *Albatross* was that rarest of things; a genuinely funny, bittersweet, coming-of-age tale that didn't make you want to pluck out your own eye and bat it around your head like a Swingball. Penned by first-time screenwriter, Tamzin Rafn, the film follows teenage aspiring writer Emelia (Jessica Brown Findlay) who takes a job as a cleaner at the hotel owned by frustrated author Jonathan (Sebastian Koch). She befriends Jonathan's bookish, Oxford-bound daughter Beth (Felicity Jones), irritates his dissatisfied wife (Julia Ormond) and bewitches Jonathan who's struggling to fulfil the promise of his earlier bestseller. It's almost inevitable that the vivacious, worldly, yet still naïve Emelia will get involved with the older writer and it's just as inevitable that it will all end in tears, but it's to Rafn's credit that the film feels fresh and the chemistry between relative newcomer Brown Findlay and Jones is fantastic, their friendship having the breathless intensity of a girl-crush. Previously seen in *Downton Abbey*, Jessica Brown Findlay's performance is a joy to watch; she's smart, funny and sexy, and, for once, so is a British film.

If the Edinburgh International Film Festival is going to be around in 2012 it's going to need a radical rethink and more films like *Albatross*.

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Provenance
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