44 Inch Chest


Director: Malcolm Venille
Classification: MA
Duration: 90 minutes
We rate it: 4 stars.

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I can’t quite believe that it was almost ten years ago that I was raving to everyone I knew about an independent film from England called Sexy Beast. The great Ray Winstone (who began his career on TV in Robin of Sherwood, of all things) gave a bravura performance as Gal, a retired British criminal living on the Costa del Sol, laying low and enjoying the sunshine. Into his idyllic retirement came the terrifying Don – a genuinely frightening Ben Kingsley – whose mission was to entice Gal back to Blighty for one last job. The fireworks began there and didn’t let up for another 100 minutes; Sexy Beast was the most bracing, hilarious, tense and unmissable film about British criminality and masculinity to come along for years.

While the director of Sexy Beast disappeared almost without trace, the writers of that film have been working on a number of things in the meantime, and now we have 44 Inch Chest, a piece that was originally workshoped as a play, but which has been filmed as an amazing ensemble movie by director Malcolm Venille.

A number of the key Sexy Beast cast members are back, specifically Ray Winstone and the equally brilliant Ian MacShane (fresh from his triumph as Al Swearengen in HBO’s brilliant Deadwood). The milieu here, as with Sexy Beast, is the British criminal underworld, with Winston the formidable Colin, a somewhat dodgy criminal/businessman whose wife (Joanne Whalley) has just told him that she’s seeing someone else. Colin is shattered, and the film opens with him dousing his sorrows in a bottle of cheap Brandy while his pals – MacShane, Hurt, Dillane and Wilkinson – gather to console him. They have tracked down the wife’s young lover, you see, and have him tied to a chair in an abandoned flat...

What follows is a bracing, in-your-face exploration of masculinity, machismo, rage and betrayal, with every single cast member giving a pitch-perfect performance. Winstone, who really does carry the film, is absolutely staggering; I couldn’t take my
eyes or ears off his performance. Colin falls apart, rending the very air around him as he explores his grief, and then slams himself back together again in order to explain the situation to his friends or confront his wife’s lover. It’s an electrifying piece of acting, and it’s beautifully balanced by an unusually gentle turn by MacShane as a debonair gangster whose sexuality differs from that of his compatriots, and who thus offers reflections on the central betrayal that are given from interestingly oblique angles. Wilkinson is as dependable as always, and Dillane and Hurt both give fascinatingly shaded performances as men whose focus is on helping their fallen comrade do whatever he needs to do to get over his grief. Melvin Poupaud, a noted young French actor, does surprisingly well as the lover, given that he spends the bulk of the film tied to a chair and gagged with gaffer tape. He utters barely a syllable throughout, but he communicates terror and regret vividly.

44 Inch Chest is by no means a film for everyone (it comes with the mother of all coarse-language warnings) but for those who are interested in watching a group of supremely gifted actors strut their stuff inside a well-conceived and strongly-written piece exploring the depth and strength of human emotions, it’s not to be missed.

Nick Prescott