

New York Film Festival 2014 #1: Starting With a Bang

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I love the [New York Film Festival](#). Unlike most film festivals which seem to be about the market or the industry or the press, the [New York Film Festival](#) is really and truly for New Yorkers. If -- like me -- you can't afford to go to Sundance and Telluride and Cannes and Venice and Toronto, why the people at the NYFF do it for you, spot the best films and then bring as many as they can to New York. I want that job! This year is no exception and looks to be the strongest in memory.

While NYFF has always been a curating gem, it hasn't always thrown its weight around for world premieres and exclusives. That wasn't the game they played, though of course everyone needs a flashy opening night and closing film. Still, just as Toronto worried it was being overshadowed by Telluride, NYFF stepped up with a clutch of big titles. They've got *Gone Girl*, the new film by David Fincher based on the massive bestselling thriller. They've got Paul Thomas Anderson's *Inherent Vice* (I'm reading the loopy Thomas Pynchon novel it's based on to prepare). And now out of the blue they've added *CitizenFour*, [a super secret documentary about Edward Snowden that's directed by oscar nominee and MacArthur genius grant winner Laura Poitras](#). Now who's got the buzz?

All well and good, but I'm immune to online hype that thinks movies that have already been "discovered" is old news. Heck, they haven't played in movie theaters yet, so I'm really eager to see *Mr. Turner* and *Whiplash* and *Foxcatcher* and *Heaven Knows What* and *The Look Of Silence* and *Two Days One Night* (the new Dardennes! the best filmmakers in the world at the moment!) and about a dozen other movies by major stars and rising talent. You can have your buzz. I just want great movies. And this year it looks like NYFF has a bumper crop.

'71 *** out of ****

Here's a good example of the sort of movie I love to stumble on at a film festival. It's a tense, gripping drama, marks the film debut of UK director Yann Demange who's had good success on TV and features a strong central performance from a very talented young actor named Jack O'Connell. Will it get Oscar buzz? No. Will it tear it up at the box office? Unlikely. But '71 is worth any avid filmgoer's time.

The story is set in 1971 Belfast during the Troubles. From the very first shot, director Demange is in full control, creating dynamic visuals, building characters despite minimal dialogue and ratcheting up the suspense. A knot forms in your stomach as danger mounts and it almost never goes away. Think Paul Greengrass's *Bourne* films as a template, though in fact his excellent film *Bloody Sunday* is a better comparison, one that '71 matches much of the way.

Gary Hook is a new recruit in the military. We soon realize he and his little brother are alone in the world. The kid is in some government facility/detention center while Hook has joined the army as the only way out. Much to his dismay, their unit isn't sent to Germany but to Belfast and that's where the nightmare begins.

A "simple" house to house search in a Catholic neighborhood quickly escalates into a full-scale riot. Hook and a buddy are separated from the rest when trying to retrieve a stolen weapon. In the blink of an eye, his buddy is killed, Hook is being pummeled to death and the rest of the soldiers pull out, accidentally leaving him behind. Through sheer happenstance, Hook is momentarily spared. But he's hiding in a bombed out toilet, wearing the

hated uniform of a British soldier and deep in "enemy" territory. On the run and desperate to survive, Hook is plunged into a frenzy of running and hiding, stealing clothes, warily befriendng a little boy and stumbling upon more violence in one night than most people see in a lifetime.

In essence, '71 is a modern companion piece to Carol Reed's *Odd Man Out*. That 1947 film starred James Mason as the leader of an IRA-like group who was on the lam after escaping from prison. In both films, anyone expressing an interest in negotiation and finding common ground is a traitor not to be trusted. And both films work on the simple level of a cat-and-mouse game.

Demange and his excellent technical team never let us catch our breath. An early training scene is nicely echoed by Hook's desperate attempt to outrun two gunmen chasing him through back alleys and dilapidated homes. The escalating tension when the troops pull up in front of some homes, from children being ushered away to women pounding on the pavement with trash can lids to raise the alarm to crowds milling angrily about and screaming at the soldiers is masterfully done.

And throughout O'Connell does a very good job of creating a believable, sympathetic character. Hook is no saint nor is he particularly political. But watching a fellow soldier assault civilians, seeing undercover agents working on homemade bombs just to sow dissent and having to kill someone face to face unnerve and change him, as it would change anyone.

The film stumbles in its script which frankly offers too many shades of grey. (Fifty shades would have shown restraint.) Literally every scene piles on the complexity. What at first seems an admirable attempt to reflect the painful reality of Northern Ireland ultimately becomes self-defeating. This movie features so many plot twists it would make *Downton Abbey* blush with shame. And that's a pity since so much of it is so very good.

Even the finale is botched. In case we had any doubt, the many unconscionable actions taken during the raid and search for Hook are of course swept under the rug. And then despite its desire to emphasize the bleak, the film tries to end on an unconvincing note of uplift. But put this in context: these are modest failings in a film that for most of its 99 minute running time delivers a taut, engaging thriller. Denange and O'Connell are unquestionably two talents we'll be hearing more from.

MOVIES I'VE SEEN SO FAR IN 2014 (not a good year for movie-going for me)

All ratings out of four stars.

1. *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966) **
2. *20 Feet From Stardom* **
3. *The Wolf Of Wall Street* ** 1/2
4. *In The House* (Ozon) ***
5. *Laurence Anyways* *** 1/2
6. *The Angels' Share* ***
7. *Philomena* **
8. *Mad Love* (1935 w Peter Lorre) *
9. *Women In The Wind* (1939 w Kay Francis) **
10. *The Hunt* *** 1/2
11. *Happy People: A Year In The Taiga* ***
12. *The Painting* ** 1/2
13. *The Spectacular Now* *** 1/2
14. *Dallas Buyers Club* * 1/2
15. *Blue Jasmine* ** 1/2
16. *The Story Of The Last Chrysanthemum* (1939) ***
17. *The Harvey Girls* (1946) * 1/2