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Men and Chicken (Denmark 2015. Cert 15)

dir: **Anders Thomas Jensen**

Starring: **Mads Mikkelsen, David Dencik, Nikolaj Lie Kaas**

Sponsors: **Linda and Richard Hall**

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Synopsis: After their father's death, Gabriel, a professor, and Elias discover that they both are adopted half-brothers and their biological father is a geneticist who specialized in [stem cell research](#). They visit the Island of Ork where they discover he is dead and they have three other half-brothers, all with appalling social skills. Gabriel tries to alter their poor lifestyle, but after a series of unsuccessful efforts he abandons them, leaving Elias behind. Noticing strange animals around the island he goes back to the house to investigate. He learns his father has been experimenting with stem cells and that each of the brothers is genetically part-animal. Gabriel is outraged and wants to flee but eventually is persuaded to stay with the others as a family.

Though best known as a freakishly prolific and versatile screenwriter (from Dogme '95's *Mifune* to the Oscar-winning *In a Better World* and most of his compatriot Susanne Bier's prestige features), Anders Thomas Jensen has a sideline directing his own work; offbeat, darkly comic, dabbling in the margins, from the small-town cannibal delicacies of *The Green Butchers* (2003) to the neo-Nazi versus the Church in *Adam's Apples* (2005). *Men and Chicken*, his first film in ten years, sees him pushing even further into absurdist territory, splicing genres from brutal knockabout slapstick to mad-professor horror. At times it's like a modernised Marx Brothers take on Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932).

Jensen regularly injects a sneaky philosophical bent into his material, and here the familiar nature-versus-nurture debate is given a blithely gruesome twist. Even more so than its habitual deadbeat protagonists, *Men and Chicken*'s five half-brothers are described in the opening fairytale-inspired voiceover as unfortunates "whom nature hadn't dealt the best of cards. In fact, they hadn't been dealt any cards at all." Unable to function in the outside world, they are driven by compulsions they blindly follow but don't understand; their malformed facial features and distinctive cleft lips are merely the external signifiers of an innate corruption, all the more chilling when revealed as genetic mutations inflicted by their own deranged scientist father.

It's the sort of narrative gambit whose very lack of restraint can easily send the whole concoction spinning wildly out of control, and indeed more sensitive viewers may find the repeated cartoon-like violence and focus on physical deformities disturbing. Yet look closer and it's clear that Jensen has calibrated a blend of tones and styles far more carefully than his unseen scientist villain attempted in his warped experiments. The deliberate pacing allows for bursts of frenetic action, but the film more frequently takes the time to delve into the tragicomic group interplay and situate the characters in their cocooned environment. Jensen is helped no end by Mia Stensgaard's superbly atmospheric production design, which genuinely fulfils that common cliché of making the location - the brothers' sanatorium home - a multi faceted character in his



own right, part *Psycho* 'old dark house', part *Deliverance* backwoods nightmare.

All this accomplished filmmaking and impressive facial prosthetics aside, it's the actors - a roster of Denmark's A-list male talent now familiar from hit Scandinavian TV series and acclaimed European cinema - who ultimately make the man-or-beast conceit feel so, well, natural. A star of all Jensen's directorial efforts (and several that he's only scripted), Mads Mikkelsen will be unrecognisable to those most familiar with his urbane Euro-villainy in the Bond film *Casino Royale* (2006) or in television's *Hannibal*. Yet as we saw from his balding, flop-sweating antagonist in *The Green Butchers*, he and Jensen clearly relish playing against type and subverting expectations, to usually enjoyable effect. While the pair have gone on the breakout mainstream success (Jensen scripted the Stephen King epic *The Dark Tower*), *Men and Chicken* proudly makes the case for sustaining the evolution of supposedly less valuable life-forms amid the dominant species.

Credits

Elias	Mads Mikkelsen
Gabriel	David Dencik
Gregor	Nikolaj Lie Kaas
Franz	Søren Malling
Josef	Nicolas Bro
Director	Anders Thomas Jensen
Screenplay	Anders Thomas Jensen
Director of photography	Sebastian Blenkov
Editor	Anders Villadsen
Production design	Mia Stensgaard
Music	Franz Bok, Jeppe Kaas
Sound design	Nino Jacobsen
Costume design	Manon Rasmussen

Denmark/Germany/Sweden
2015 104 mins

Another view

You never know what will come out of Denmark next. From the turmoils of medieval Elsinore to the chastising vows of Dogme 95 — one cleaning out the royals, the other the movie rules — if there's something rotten in this state it's not for want of an urge to purge. Cleanse-and-start-again fundamentalism is the creed. Perhaps the Danes believe they can even reinvent the laws of life and procreation. They give it a try in Men & Chicken.

This sly, black comedy-drama from Anders Thomas Jensen, writer-director, serves up awful warnings. The plot has a time-bomb dystopianism. Old mansions contain ominous secrets. Nasty things are seen in storage jars that are not jam or marmalade. And every character is conflicted, starting with the squabbling brothers Elias (Mads Mikkelsen) and Gabriel (David Dencik). Edgy, hare-lipped and emotionally arrested — Elias is a pathological masturbator — they learn one day that their biological father was, or is, an evolutionary geneticist living on a remote island. Off they go to the island. Roll the plot.

I can't spoil by saying more. Enough to say: this is the land that gave us Danish bacon and Kierkegaard — cured meat and incurable existential angst — and a clammy sense grows that Jensen has taken Kierkegaard's philosophy of epiphanic doubt and self-doubt and constructed precise scientific grounds for it. Elias and Gabriel find more brothers; and a clapped-out house full of laboratory nightmares; and evidence that this island once resembled, and may still, a famous atoll imagined by H.G. Wells.

It's a scary, discomfiting, clever film, hard to rid from your head once you've seen it. Best among the actors, all called on to play repelled or repellent, is Mikkelsen. The ex-Bond villain wears a moustache, a Christopher Walken hairdo and a permanent, vulnerable look of spooked expectation. You almost come to love him: not a common response to the heroes or antiheroes of New Danish Cinema.

Nigel Andrews: Financial Times

Our next screening: Friday March 24th, 2017 Embrace of the Serpent (Colombia/Venezuela 2015. Cert 12a)

Embrace of the Serpent draws on the historical facts of early 20th century real life in the Amazon to create a multi-layered film that rewards watching on every level. Director Ciro Guerra explores the region's anthropology, colonial history, myth and biology through the stories of 2 different explorers of the region 40 years apart, one following in the footsteps of the other, on a search for a rare plant that has the power to cure illness. Wonderful photography and outstanding performances distinguish this spellbinding film which has been compared with Fitzcarraldo, Aguirre: Wrath of God and Apocalypse Now.

Programme News

A reminder of the 3 films we have selected for the new release dates in the programme

March 31st: The Clan (Argentina 2016. Cert 15)

Set in Buenos Aires in the 1980s, Pablo Trapero's film (his latest in a sequence of thrillers drawn from events in his country's past) is about the Puccio clan who take advantage of the right wing politics of the time to set up a business involving kidnapping, extortion and murder.

April 21st: Under the Shadow (UK 2016. Cert 15)

Babak Anvari's debut feature is about a mother and daughter struggling to cope with the terrors of the post-revolution, war-torn

Tehran of the 1980s, when a mysterious evil begins to haunt their home. Winner of the 2017 BAFTA for Outstanding Debut for Writer/Director/Producer, Anvari's feature was also voted Best Film in the 2016 British Independent Film Awards.

May 6th: Julieta (Spain 2016. Cert 15)

Pedro Almodóvar returns to something like his best form in a bewitching tale in which we learn how Julieta, a middle aged woman apparently starting a new chapter in her life, has everything turned upside down when a chance meeting reveals news of her estranged daughter with whom she has lost touch.

Please note the change of date for **Julieta**. This will now be shown on Saturday May 6th at 7.30pm (not May 5th, as published in the programme). The original date is required for a University function and is no longer available

Films for next season

We will be choosing the films for next season in a little over 3 weeks time. While we cannot say for certain which films will be included in the programme, members may like to know that among those being considered are

- Elle (France 2016),
- Toni Erdmann (Germany 2016)
- The Salesman (Iran 2016)
- Certain Women (USA 2016)
- The Eagle Huntress (UK 2016)
- The Unknown Girl (Belgium 2016)
- Paterson (USA 2016)
- Graduation (Romania 2016)
- The Young Offenders (Ireland 2016)
- Hunt for the Wilderpeople (New Zealand 2015)

We expect to be able to announce details of the new season at our film on April 21st.