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Friday February 2nd 2018

A Date for Mad Mary (Cert 15)

Dir: Darren Thornton

Starring: Seána Kerslake, Tara Kerr

Sponsor: Andrew Howard

Synopsis: Ireland, the recent past. 'Mad' Mary McArdle returns to Drogheda after 6 months in prison for assault. Back home, everything and everyone has changed. Her best friend, Charlene, is getting married and Mary is to be her maid of honour. When Charlene refuses Mary a 'plus one' on the grounds that she probably couldn't find a date, Mary sets out to prove her wrong. She begins a determined search for a suitable partner - most of whom are unsuitable - but her reputation as a trouble maker precedes her. Mary is increasingly upset by this, but finds an unexpected soulmate in Jess, the photographer hired for the wedding..

Perhaps not the most original film you'll see all year, but very possibly the most instantly lovable, first-time filmmaker Darren Thornton's beautifully performed, warm yet melancholic "A Date for Mad Mary" proves that "Sing Street" director John Carney does not have the Irish monopoly on highly exportable rite-of-passage dramedies. And in Seána Kerslake's performance as the eponymous Mary ("mad" being used in its semi-admiring, semi-cautionary Irish vernacular form) he may even have an ace that Carney's ensemble picture lacks: a barnstorming central performance, full of light and shade, that should by rights be the breakthrough Kerslake has deserved since her debut in Kirsten Sheridan's bafflingly underseen "Dollhouse."

Seldom have the familiar beats of the transition-to-adulthood story felt more engaging, perhaps because Thornton knows his material inside out: Having directed the Yasmine Akram play "10 Dates for Mad Mary" for stage, he has now, together with his brother Colin, adapted it into this poppy, profanity-laden period piece. (For reference, it's set post-"Mamma Mia!" and pre-Tinder, so we're looking back, but not so very far.) Yet as appealing and accessible as it is, there's a keen edge of relatable sadness to it too: As much as it's a comedy and a salty taste of lower-middle life in Drogheda (a biggish port town just north of Dublin), it's also an end-of-love story.

We are introduced to Mary as she is released from prison, after a six-month stint for a vicious attack on a girl in a nightclub. But in contrast to the hard-edged images and Mary's air of resentful belligerence — "Bout f—in' time," is the first thing she snarls at her mother (Fionnuala Murphy) when she's a little late to pick her up — her soft, awestruck voiceover gently lists all the amazing "things you need to know about Charlene." Charlene, her best mate, is soon to be married, and Mary is painstakingly composing her maid-of-honor speech; though the circumstances of its sweetly personal declarations ("She'd always have your back and not just in a fight, like") may be artificial, the sentiment is real.

But Charlene (Charleigh Bailey) doesn't show up to celebrate Mary's release, and there follows a series of increasingly mortifying interactions, unanswered phone calls and pointed gestures that show how Charlene now considers Mary a peripheral presence at best —



the kind of second-tier friend who, at a "Mamma Mia!"-themed hen party, might hilariously be assigned to dress up as Stellan Skarsgard. (The maid of honor position, by this point, seems like a legacy appointment.) As for a plus one, well, who would Mary even bring — isn't everyone she knows already coming, and isn't the catering 60 quid a plate? In so many areas, the film is sharp in its delineation of women of all ages acidly judging each other based on their ability to attract a man.

Assuming her friend will come round sooner or later and unable to comprehend the scale of her loneliness without her (having proudly alienated almost everyone else in town), Mary thus embarks on a petulant, unromantic mission to find a fella who will be her date to the wedding. But then an unexpected relationship begins, with musician Jess (a luminous Tara Lee) and new notes of hope and confusion are introduced into Mary's Molotov cocktail of emotions. As lovely as the kindling spark between Mary and Jess is, it's a shame that the coming-out subplot will almost inevitably be read as an "explanation" for parts of Mary's arc that are more resonant if they simply belong to her and not to her sexuality. The ferocity of her friendship with Charlene might be seen as the result of unrequited lesbian love, yet extraordinarily passionate attachments are often formed between young girls with no correlation to sexual orientation. Mary's violence and her antisocial behavior could also be accounted for as an offshoot of her repressed homosexuality, but Kerslake's multifaceted characterization deserves better than such pat cause-and-effect logic.

That's an observation rather than a critique, though: In every other department, "Mad Mary" is a delight, especially for its rounded supporting characters, its skewering use of language, and the pinpoint accuracy of its observations of life in this specific time and place. From Mary's ever-present can of Bulmers cider to the way the bouncers throwing her out always know her name, to the proper use of the word "mitching," this is an immensely endearing, insider's look at Ireland's recent past. And when he needs to, Thornton knows to just let a scene be: The moment when Mary comes face to face

with the victim of her attack is played completely wordlessly, but speaks volumes about the inescapability of your past in a town where everyone knows your business.

Drogheda's wet nighttime streets are shot by Ole Bratt Birkeland's warm-toned camera to look romantic, but there's a reason why the song Jess performs one evening in McPhail's pub has the refrain, "Let's get out of this place." While steeped in fondness for its setting, the film also castigates a stifling atmosphere of conformity: At one point, Charlene digs deep for the most wounding thing she can say to Mary, and can only come up with, "You're making a show of yourself." As funny, flawed and foulmouthed as its irresistible central character, "A Date for Mad Mary" makes an absolute show of itself, and it is wonderful.

Jessica Kiang, Variety

Credits

Mary McCardle	Seána Kerslake
Suzanne	Denise McCormick
Charlene	Charleigh Bailey
Leona	Siobhan Shanahan
Sally	Norma Sheehan
Jess	Tara Lee
Julie	Shauna Higgins
Charlene's mum	Fionnuala Murphy
Rita	Susie Power
Scarred girl	Kelly Byrne
Gabba	Kyle Bradley Donaldson
Scote	Mark Dunne
Grungy guy	Stephen Cromwell
Cork guy	Timmy Creed
Guy on train	Chris Newman
Director	Darren Thornton
Screenplay	Darren Thornton, Colin Thornton
Cinematography	Ole Bratt Birkeland
Music	Hugh Drumm, Stephen Rennicks
Editing	Tony Cranston Juangus Dinsmore
Art Direction	Michael Moynihan
Costume	Alison Byrne

Ireland 2016. 82 mins

Another view

Irish director Darren Thornton's debut feature is a deft crowd-pleaser. A sharp, funny script, great set of performances (including a truly first-rate lead) and a keenly sympathetic sensibility help make *A Date for Mad Mary* an undoubtable success.

In some ways Ireland's answer to *Rachel Getting Married*, *A Date for Mad Mary* focuses on Mary, played with gusto by Seána Kerslake, who is desperate to secure a date in time for her best friend's wedding. Released from prison at the beginning of the film, signs are immediately ominous for Mary when she finds no-one waiting for her at the train station. As the wedding day approaches, she finds herself increasingly frustrated with the bride's apparent coldness towards her, as well as the chaotic, isolated life she quickly falls back into. Gradually, she strikes up a warm friendship with Jess (Tara Lee), the wedding photographer, whose character, to the audience's relief, is one of the very few that treats Mary with respect.

Mad Mary's real strength lies in its compassion. Even the most villainised of the characters, Charlene, the bride (played with wonderful narcissism and superiority by Charleigh Bailey), is, in the throes of one speech, completely humanised. Mary herself, while very conspicuously flawed – aggressive, physically violent, reckless – is treated with complete dotting sympathy, a feat sustained through the force of Kerslake's performance.

The first half of the film plays out mostly like a defiant rumination on human loneliness, punctuated liberally with laughs. Towards the end, however (and the pacing is quite conventionally three-act), *Mad*

Mary becomes more of a coming-of-age yarn, a story about identity and self-image. Sexual identity is explored, refreshingly free of the compulsion to label. There is very little moralising; even the premise (the need to acquire a date for a wedding) is interrogated quite even-handedly. Romance is neither sentimentalised nor dismissed.

For a first feature (Thornton had previously only made shorts), *A Date for Mad Mary* is an exceptional work. It manages to achieve accessibility not through any artistic compromise but through the universality of its subject matter. In every laugh, every hope and disappointment, the film is brilliantly, palpably human.

Louis Chilton, The Panoptic

Our next film: Friday February 16th. 7.30pm

The Salesman (dir: Asghar Farhadi. Iran/Fra. 2016 Cert 12a)

In winning the Oscar for Best Film not in the English Language last year, *The Salesman* emulated Asghar Farhadi's other Oscar-winner *A Separation* (shown by LFS in 2013). Here, married couple Rana and Erad move into an apartment offered to them by an acquaintance, slightly disconcerted that many of the old tenant's belongings still have to be collected but blissfully unaware of the previous tenant's lifestyle. When Rana leaves the door open for her husband one night, a bad thing happens, and Erad is determined to seek retribution, to his wife's dismay. Like *A Separation*, *The Salesman* is a perceptive study of a couple whose marriage is under strain.