



Patron: Jim Broadbent
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Beast (Cert 15)

dir: **Michael Pearce**

starring: **Jessie Buckley, Johnny Flynn**

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Synopsis: Jersey, present day. 27-year old Moll lives at home, under the watchful eye of her parents, especially her mother Hilary. Relationship are strained. She meets Pascal, an enigmatic local man, and is attracted to him. They begin a relationship, to Hilary's disapproval. When a young girl is murdered, the police question Pascal, who has a record. Moll denounces her family. She sticks by Pascal but tells him she wants to leave the island. She begins to suspect he has something to hide about the killing. When she challenges him about this he does not deny it. While travelling to their cottage, he crashes their jeep and is badly hurt; Moll makes a decision.

Michael Pearce has described his debut feature, set on his home island of Jersey, as having "strong resonances with fairytales - a seemingly naive heroine...ventures into the woods and meets a man who might be Prince Charming, or might be the Big Bad Wolf." The factor that twists, deepens and intriguingly complicates this particular fairy tale is that Pearce's "seemingly naive heroine", Moll Huntford, proves to be secreting a formidable big bad wolf side of her own - the incarnation of Pearce's stated aim to create "a female character who was as complex as some of the seminal anti-heroes we have in cinema."

Following on from two striking TV roles - Princess Marya Bolkonskaya in *War and Peace* (2016) and manipulative actress Lorna Bow in *Taboo* (2017) - Jessie Buckley inhabits her heroine/wolf persona with unsettling ambiguity, her wide, sensual mouth and watchful eyes tracking every emotional shift as guilt shades into defiance, timidity into self-assertion and thence into aggression. She's ideally matched by Johnny Flynn, acclaimed for his performance in Martin McDonagh's *Hangmen* at London's Royal Court Theatre, as her seductively dangerous lover Pascal; the chemistry between them is potent. Several scenes, though, are all but stolen by Geraldine James, monstrous as Moll's emotionally manipulative mother, one moment patronising and humiliating her, the next cloyingly affectionate ("I thought we were best friends"). She's also director of the local amateur choir that Moll has been press ganged into joining, thus allowing Hilary further scope for putting her daughter down; "Moll, I need more from you," she announces. She gets just that when Moll takes public revenge at a swish lunch party at the local golf club, proposing a toast: "To my family - for everything you've done for me." Pause. "I forgive you."

The story is inspired by the real-life case of Edward Paisnel, self-styled 'Beast of Jersey', who attacked and raped women and children on the island between 1960 and 1971. But Paisnel didn't commit murder, unlike the 'Beast' of the present film, who may



or may not be Pascal. Pearce, who also scripted, conjures a tantalising mix of eroticism and paranoia, effectively sustaining our doubts, and Moll's, for almost the full running time of the film. It's only in the final 10 minutes that the 'is he/isn't he/does she know/doesn't she' debate starts to turn in on itself and loses traction.

Up to this point, though, *Beast* tellingly creates a double sense of smothering claustrophobia around Moll: the outer layer of the prim censorious island community, within which she's further hemmed in by the watchful disapproval of her own stifling family. With her wild red hair and history of a violent incident during her school days, she is marked as an outsider in this well groomed, self-satisfied environment; which makes her attraction to Pascal Renouf - identified as a fellow outsider with his *gersaise* name and working class background - all the more credible. (Related aspects of the islands at times overly close-knit society were brought out in Christopher Menaul's 2017 film *Another Mother's Son*, set during the World War II German occupation.) Pearce dramatizes the sense of freedom Moll experiences with Pascal by locating many of their scenes together in woodland or on Jersey's rocky coast, contrasting these places with the sedately villa-lined streets of her upbringing. (The latter scenes were mostly shot in suburban Surrey, chiefly for financial reasons.) The shooting style, courtesy of cinematographer Benjamin Kracun's subtly textured lensing, mirrors these contrasts: formal compositions with steady tracking and zoom shots for the families respectable world, looser and more fluid handheld movements when Moll and Pascal are alone together.

The film is burdened by Jim Williams is over emphatic score, which seems determined to underline every emotional crux just in case we fail to notice it; and a couple of nightmare scenes, where Moll dreams she's under attack, feel superfluous. Despite these flaws, *Beast* maintains, at least until that comparative let down of an ending, a compelling degree of sexual and psychological tension, for which its two lead performances - Buckley's in particular - can claim much of the credit. The basic set-up - the irresistibly sexy lover who may secretly be a killer - is nothing new; Hitchcock made use of it more than once, in *The Lodger* (1926) and again in *Suspicion* (1941), and plenty of others have followed suit. But Pearce revitalises it with a bold treatment that plays with our expectations while relishing the feral undertones at the central relationship. On the strength of this debut, he'll be a filmmaker to watch.

Credits

Moll Huntford	Jessie Buckley
Pascal Renouf	Johnny Flynn
Clifford Clifford	Trystan Gravelle
Hilary Huntford	Geraldine James
Leigh	Charley Palmer Rothwell
Jade	Hattie Gotobed
Polly	Shannon Tarbet
Tamara	Emily Taaffe
Theresa Kelly	Olwen Fouere
Director	Michael Pearce
Screenplay	Michael Pearce
Director of Photography	Benjamin Kracun
Editor	Maya Maffioli
Music	Jim Williams
Sound Design	Gunnar Öskarsson
Costume Design	Jo Thompson
Production Design	Laura Ellis-Cricks

UK 2017. 107 mins

Another View

Not quite England and not quite France, the isle of Jersey occupies a unique space within Europe. While the picturesque idyll is primarily known for its temperate climate and history of cattle farming, in Michael Pearce's *Beast*, it takes on the sinister identity of a suffocating enclave in a strange state of social flux. As much a character as the people inhabit its sweeping coastlines and dark crevices, it provides an ethereal, eerie setting for first love and last rites.

Jersey makes for a beguiling setting at once familiar and strange, the contrast between dreamy summer holiday spot and sparse wilderness highlighted through smart cinematography (c/o Benjamin Kracun). A sense of literal and metaphorical isolation – the suggestion that life on the island trickles rather than flows – renders *Beast* a drama that meanders slowly but purposefully towards its agonising conclusion.

Turning to more human characters, *Beast* presents audiences with Moll (Jessie Buckley), a troubled young woman struggling under the iron grip of her controlling mother. Slight and fearful with wide brown eyes, she goes about the summer with a restrained longing, working as a coach tour guide by day, and battling familial tensions with her parents and siblings at night. The catalyst for change in her stagnant life is the appearance of Pascal (Johnny Flynn), a rough, mysterious loner who Moll finds herself drawn to despite the disdain of her family and the wider community.

While puppy love unfolds between Moll and Pascal, a murderer is on the loose, preying on the island's teenage girls. As tensions begin to flare and accusations stack up, Moll is forced to confront the very real possibility that her new beau is not all he claims to be – and more worryingly, the uneasy thought that she might not care. On the surface, Pearce's film sounds like a fairly conventional bad-boy-meets-good-girl-chaos-ensues romp, along the lines of *Badlands* or *Natural Born Killers*, but there is so much more buried beneath the topsoil, waiting to be unearthed.

The relationship between Moll and Pascal, whilst central, is by no means the film's heart. This instead belongs to the performance given by the astonishingly good Buckley, who pivots from morose vulnerability to snarling rage in a moment's notice. Her wide-eyed candour is captivating, but it's the subtlety with which she reveals Moll's spiralling descent into darkness that really resonates.

Meanwhile Flynn provides an intriguing foil as Pascal, an erratic, mysterious presence whose primary method of communication is

a loaded stare or a knowing grin. Two outsiders in a close-knit community, Moll and Pascal are quick to set themselves up together against the world, but there's always a creeping sense that their *folie à deux* can't last forever.

Beast is an accomplished debut feature for Michael Pearce, who for the most part manages to bring fresh ideas and characters to the established sub-genre of romance-tinged thrillers. The only real misstep is an ending that feels altogether too tidy given the film's frayed edges, but there lurks a sense of breath-stealing unease even within its final frame.

Hannah Woodhead, Little White Lies.

Our next screening - September 21st, 7.30pm *Redoutable* (France 2017. Cert 15)

May 1968: social unrest, internationally and in France, is at fever-pitch, revolution is in the air and New Wave directing icon Jean-Luc Godard is caught up in the spirit of the time. But his radical views on cinema views do not appear to be appreciated as much as he thinks they should be. *Redoutable* is based on Anne Wiazemsky's (then Godard's wife) memoir 'Un an apres' and Michel Hazanavicius' (*The Artist*) shows him to be unpredictable, inconsistent and at times devastatingly rude to those he disagreed with (which turned out to be almost everyone). It's a film that is both provocative in its treatment of Godard, and scathingly funny.

Programme news

The first of our empty slots for new release films (November 9th) will be filled by *C'est la Vie* (France, 2017). Released at the end of August, it stars Jean-Pierre Bacri as Max Angély, a veteran wedding planner on his last gig, organising an event for Pierre and Hélène in a sumptuous 17th century chateau. Throw in ridiculous period costumes; a hyper-sensitive singer who thinks he's a Gallic James Brown; and a micromanaging groom, and it can only end in hilarious chaos.

Membership matters

Membership for this season closes after our next film, *Redoutable*.

The Society's AGM is provisionally arranged for October 12th, at The Venue. It will take place after the screening of *Goodbye Berlin*