

God's Own Country [15] 2017|UK|104 min

UK release date **1st September 2017**

Director **Frances Lee**

Screenplay **Frances Lee**

Cinematographer **Joshua James Richards**

Cast **Josh O'Connor** (Johnny Saxby); **Alec Secareanu** (Gheorghe Ionescu); **Gemma Jones** (Deidre Saxby); **Ian Hart** (Martin Saxby)

This debut feature from Yorkshire-born actor and first-time director Francis Lee is tough, sensual, unsentimental, with excellent lead performances from Josh O'Connor and Alec Secareanu. Johnny (O'Connor) is the unhappy, angry young guy working on the family farm, dulling his emotional pain with drink and casual sex; Gheorghe (Secareanu) is a hired hand from Romania brought in for a few weeks. They give tremendous performances – and Gemma Jones and Ian Hart are both very good in the supporting roles as Johnny's grandmother and father, stoic and tightlipped by temperament and repressed by years of work and responsibility, and in his father's case by the aftermath of a stroke.

It is almost – but not quite – a Dales Brokeback, a love story which does not exist in quite as much of a homophobic context as the classic Ang Lee movie and Annie Proulx story, and which does not require two female partners to exist in respective states of denial. (In fact, the storyline and its bucolic setting are rather more similar to Catherine Corsini's recent French film *La Belle Saison*, or *Summertime*.) It is, in its way, a very British love story, bursting at the seams with unspoken emotions, unvoiced fears about the future, and a readiness to displace every emotion into hard physical work.

Johnny is a borderline alcoholic with a perpetually bleary face, almost asymmetric with hungover agony. All his friends from school have gone off to uni, including Robyn, who teases him about his morose attitude when she sees him down the pub – a nice performance from Patsy Ferran. But Johnny has had to stay behind to help look after the farm when his widowed father (Hart) was

affected by a stroke. And what does he live for, now? When he is in town for livestock auctions, Johnny has fleeting sexual encounters with people he meets there: Lee coolly places one such liaison after a scene in which Johnny has made a manual examination of a cow with an antiseptically lubricated plastic gauntlet. We are far from James Herriot country.

Things change when Gheorghe arrives: a thoughtful, watchful young man who calmly submits to the squalor and hardship of living in a grim caravan in the yard. But Gheorghe is a good worker and he has ideas: he asks the family if they have considered making sheep's cheese from the milk, a possible lucrative sideline. They hadn't. Gheorghe and Johnny have to spend nights away from the farmbuilding up in the hills repairing a dry stone wall. Inevitably, things happen away from judging eyes.

God's Own Country is not an exercise in miserabilism: it does not believe that love or adventures of the heart are doomed. It is a film which lives and dies by the performances which Lee gets from his cast, and these are excellent: sharp, intelligent and emotionally generous.

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