

Sactuary [15] 2016 | Ireland | 87 min

UK release date **7th July 2017**

Director **Len Collin**

Screenplay **Christian O'Reilly**

Cinematographer **Russell Gleeson**

Cast **Kieran Coppinger** (Larry); **Charlene Kelly** (Sophie); **Robert Doherty** (Tom); **Patrick Becker** (Andrew); **Valerie Egan** (Alice); **Jennifer Cox** (Rita)

It's a sad reflection on the narrow-mindedness of UK cinemas that so few have been prepared to book Len Collin's funny, big-hearted and affecting new comedy-drama. The film follows a group of characters with "intellectual disabilities" on a day out to the cinema in Galway with their hapless but well-meaning young care worker, Tom (Robert Doherty). During the trip, with Tom's connivance, Larry, who has Downs Syndrome, and Sophie, who is epileptic, arrange a tryst in a hotel room.

"You never think of them like that, with urges," the receptionist observes of the would-be lovers, oblivious to how callous she sounds. The film has been credited with changing a law in Ireland which (until recently) made it illegal for those with intellectual disabilities to have sexual relationships.

Christian O'Reilly's screenplay combines elements from the typical feel-good drama with harsher insights into the lives of the protagonists. They're all yearning to escape the strictures of their supervisors, who, however well-meaning, treat them as if they are children or dolts. A couple of men sneak away to the pub for a few illicit pints. Two friends roam around the local shopping mall. Another couple enjoys a stolen kiss in the back row of the cinema. Tom, the care worker, is like someone trying to herd cats – he just can't get the people in his charge to go in remotely the direction he wants. It doesn't help that he is so busy courting the hotel receptionist that he is permanently distracted anyway.

The production values here are modest and some of the dialogue is on the clunky side. The film, though, has a wonderful strain of blarney and whimsical humour about it. The actors (many of them from the Blue Teapot Theatre Company) give memorable performances. Kieran Coppinger plays the “lover man” Larry with an engaging mix of gravitas and mischief. His frustrations at the limitations placed on him are apparent. Without resorting to subterfuge, he can’t spend any time with Sophie (Charlene Kelly). The filmmakers extract plenty of humour from the jokes about condoms and hangovers, from the scenes of raucous singing on the bus and karaoke in the shopping mall, and from the sequences of Tom wandering forlornly round the pubs, cafes and shops of Galway, trying to reassemble the party.

The tone of the storytelling feels very benign at first. Then, we begin to learn more about what these people have endured in the past – the sexual abuse and bullying that some have had to take for granted, and their boredom at the mindless tasks they’re forced to perform in the workshop. Just when we expect the film will provide a nice cosy and upbeat ending so we can all feel happy at what a good time everybody has had, we are reminded in brutal fashion of the challenges the protagonists face on a daily basis. Sanctuary emphasises how unwilling the rest of society is to treat those with learning disabilities as thinking, feeling adults with yearnings and desires of their own.

Geoffrey McNab, @TheIndyFilm, 26 December 17

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