

Beast [15] 2017|UK|107 min

UK release date **27th April 2018**

Director **Michael Pearce**

Screenplay **Michael Pearce**

Cinematographer **Benjamin Kracun**

Cast **Jessie Buckley** (Moll); **Johnny Flynn** (Pascal Renouf);
Geraldine James (Hilary Huntington); **Charley Palmer
Rothwell** (Leigh Dutot)

British TV director Michael Pearce makes a commanding feature debut with this psychological drama-thriller that puts an eerily windswept island location to fine use and features an excellent lead performance from Jessie Buckley, whose open, intelligent face transmits thought and feeling with piercing clarity. Pearce has also written a well-carpentered screenplay; there are some very big scenes and big moments here – sometimes too big – but he gives us a carefully crafted dramatic setup, an intriguingly curated selection of suspects for the crime and all of it building to a fascinating, finely balanced ambiguity in the movie’s climactic stages.

The scene is Jersey, where a serial killer has murdered several young girls; in their tense, clenched way the citizens are carrying on, only rarely acknowledging this elephant of horror in their living room. Buckley plays Moll, a delicately beautiful and unhappy young woman and put-upon daughter (the character reminded me of her Marya Bolkonskaya in the BBC’s recent *War and Peace*), who has a terrible job that she hates: a tourist bus-trip guide.

She lives at home with her parents, a dad with Alzheimer’s and a fiercely controlling mother Hilary (Geraldine James) who conducts the church choir of which Moll is an obedient member. Hilary treats Moll like a child who needs cold and unfeeling discipline; she doesn’t hesitate to make it clear that Moll is a lesser sibling than her smug brother Harrison (Oliver Maltman) or her manicured sister Polly (Shannon Tarbet).

There is a reason for this cruel and controlling treatment, and it isn’t simply the reports of a killer on the island. There is a dark secret about Moll’s emotional

life, which explains Hilary's own behaviour: James's performance efficiently conveys her gimlet-eyed air of martyred authority. And then Moll horrifies her family, her mother in particular, when she takes a liking to a dangerous outsider with a police record. This is Pascal (Johnny Flynn) who for all his roughness seems to be the only person with the delicacy and gentleness to understand Moll. He carries a rifle for shooting (and poaching), giving him a hint of Mellors with Lady Chatterley. But there is something very dark about Pascal, and perhaps it has caused darkness to surface – or resurface – in Moll. Soon Pascal is in the frame for the killings and Moll has to decide how far she is prepared to go to protect him.

The movie comes to a head with a final conversation at a beachside restaurant, an exhilaratingly clever and ambiguous scene in which we must decide what is happening and where our sympathies lie. *Beast* is a title which might appear to promise horror or melodrama and there is a little of both. But there is always something subtler going on, and it comes from the finely judged performances of Buckley, James and Flynn, and the intelligent, responsive way they are shot by cinematographer Benjamin Kracun and directed by Pearce.

After: Peter Bradshaw, The Guardian 10 Sep 17

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