



ACTING HARD: WORKING CLASS MASCULINITY IN BRITISH CINEMA

Muscle

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Director: Gerard Johnson
Production Companies: Stigma Film, Hook Pictures
Producers: Frédéric Fiore, Matthew James Wilkinson, Richard Wylie, Ed Barratt
Written by: Gerard Johnson
Cinematographer: Stuart Bentley
Editor: Ian Davies
Production Designers: Bobbie Cousins, Helen Watson
Costume Designer: Ryan Hooper
Hair and Make-up Designer: Scarlett O'Connell
Music: Matt Johnson
Production Sound Mixer: George Aris Anastassopoulos
Re-recording Mixer/Sound Effects Editor: Steven Parker
Cast:
Craig Fairbrass (*Terry*)
Cavan Clerkin (*Simon*)
Polly Maberly (*Sarah*)
Lorraine Burroughs (*Crystal*)
Peter Ferdinando (*Ken*)
Sinead Matthews (*Sandra*)
Niall Greig Fulton (*Death Trip*)
Mark Stobbart (*Ronnie*)
Ali Cook (*Harry*)
UK 2020
110 mins
Digital

ACTING HARD: WORKING CLASS MASCULINITY IN BRITISH CINEMA

Muscle + Q&A with director Gerard Johnson, actors Craig Fairbrass, Cavan Clerkin and Polly Maberly

Fri 22 Sep 18:00

Beautiful Thing

Fri 22 Sep 20:40

Sexy Beast

Sat 23 Sep 18:20; Mon 2 Oct 20:30

Blue Story

Sat 23 Sep 20:40

Mona Lisa

Sun 24 Sep 18:20; Fri 29 Sep 20:30

Govan Ghost Story

Mon 25 Sep 18:30

Sweet Sixteen

Mon 25 Sep 20:40

The Football Factory + intro by Danny Dyer

Mon 25 Sep 20:45

My Beautiful Laundrette

Thu 28 Sep 20:30

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+ Q&A with director Gerard Johnson, actors Craig Fairbrass, Cavan Clerkin and Polly Maberly.

Contains scenes of unsimulated sex.

Gerard Johnson's films frequently confront the banality of male violence and *Muscle* is no exception. Bored office worker Simon decides to take respite from his loveless marriage by hitting the gym. He meets the mysterious Terry, with whom he becomes enamoured. But that admiration belatedly turns to fear as Simon realises that Terry is a hard man to say 'no' to.

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Stuck in a depressing telesales job, spending every night in the pub, and slowly drifting apart from his frustrated girlfriend, Simon (Cavan Clerkin) is a man in dire need of a change. 'You're happy to moan and groan instead of changing things. You're pathetic,' his girlfriend Sarah (Polly Maberly) complains, which might be what prompts Simon to walk into the Atlantis gym on a whim one afternoon, paying up front for a six-month membership in the hope of getting fit.

'Fuck fit. You want to get big, and you want to get strong' is the no-nonsense advice he receives from Terry (Craig Fairbrass), the personal trainer who takes Simon under his wing and is as good as his word, transforming the tubby Simon into a burly, bearded beast. But Terry's influence over his new friend won't end there.

The song 'Mister, You're a Better Man Than I' over the opening credits sets the tone. *Muscle* is a film about the gap between the man Simon is and the man he thinks he should be, and Gerard Johnson's third feature is a welcome change of pace after the stylish but hollow violence of *Hyena* (2014). *Muscle* is a twisted black comedy exploring questions of masculinity and insecurity, with echoes of *Fight Club* (1999) in the central relationship, as alpha-male Terry takes over and destroys Simon's life and his sense of self.

After two films set in London, Johnson has moved to Newcastle for *Muscle*, and while he doesn't make much of this new environment cinematically (with most of the film taking place in either the gym or Simon's home), Stuart Bentley's crisp black-and-white cinematography and the evocative score from The The (the band led by Johnson's brother Matt) has helped him craft a striking and atmospheric piece of work that crackles with tension.

A veteran of the straight-to-DVD British crime thriller, Fairbrass is often asked to bring nothing more than hulking menace to a film, but the role of Terry allows him to simultaneously play up to his hardman image and subvert it. Terry flits between aggression and affability, encouragement and criticism, as

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he locates all of Simon's weak points and pushes him into the corners where he wants him to be. He is a skilled manipulator, but he can also come off as an unhinged and obsessive rage case, capable of losing control at any moment, and Fairbrass handles these abrupt gear changes with gusto, delivering a commanding and often hilarious performance. Terry mutters darkly about his violent past, saying things like 'I should write a book... mind you, I'd get a life sentence for Chapter Five alone,' but all of this is lapped up by Simon, who is simultaneously fearful of and attracted to his mentor's strength and confidence. Cavan Clerkin is the perfect foil for Fairbrass, making Simon both an exasperating and sympathetic figure, and while other minor characters figure in the film, *Muscle* is essentially a two-hander, resting on the warped and ever-shifting dynamic between these men.

Johnson has a keen eye and ear for performative machismo and the rituals of male-dominated spaces. This is true not only of the gym but of Simon's call centre workspace, where successful sales result in much strutting and hollering, and where a steroid-fuelled Simon later flips out angrily after a downturn in fortunes. The director also has a lot of fun playing with the homoerotic subtext of bodybuilding; when Terry first introduces steroids into the workout he offers Simon his 'man juice', and *Muscle* also boasts the most suggestive ice lolly sucking since *Inherent Vice* (2014).

Muscle finally shows a poignant poetry in the repeated image of Simon gazing at himself in the mirror, contemplating his destructive choices and wondering what kind of man he has become.

Philip Concannon, *Sight and Sound*, bfi.org.uk, 1 December 2020