

## Toronto Film Fest Reviews

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Toronto

### Fifty Dead Men Walking

(Canada-U.K.)

By JOHN ANDERSON

A Brightlight Pictures (Canada)/Future Films (U.K.) presentation. (International sales: Handmade Films Intl., London). Produced by Peter La Terriere, Karl Skogland, Stephen Hegyes, Shawn Williamson. Executive producers, Stephen Margolis, Guy Collins, Michael Ryan, Nicole Carmen-Davis, Karyn Edwards, Kyle Lundberg, Cindy Cowan, Elsie Choi. Directed, written by Karl Skogland, inspired by the book by Martin McGartland, Nicholas Davies.

Fergus - Ben Kingsley Martin - Jim Sturgess Sean - Kevin Zegers Lara - Nathalie Press  
Rosena - Rose McGowan

**Packing a high-caliber performance by Jim Sturgess and enough thrills to start a theme park, "Fifty Dead Men Walking" is a classic about the Irish "troubles." Despite the unavoidably convoluted facts of the real-life story, pic boasts plausibly written, solidly acted characters and a conflict that pushes the viewer's righteous-indignation buttons, and as such could become a crossover hit.**

It's 1988 Belfast, and the Brits are occupying the Irish streets; the IRA is waging an insurgent war; the innocent are caught in the murderous middle. Any parallels to current-day Iraq are probably intentional, but there's enough historical distance between the conflicts to make "Fifty Dead Men" more about action than political metaphor.

And Sturgess -- as Martin McGartland, the Irish informant for the British whose work reputedly saved at least 50 men from IRA execution -- is a wonder. McGartland was a petty hustler and incipient criminal, selling stolen clothes and closing pubs when the British came to town. As such, he makes an ideal, formless informant for Fergus (Ben Kingsley), the intelligence agent tracking Republican activities in Belfast, who knows exactly how to wheedle his way into Martin's heart.

When Martin's pal Frankie (Conor MacNeill) is kneecapped by hooded IRA men, Martin is outraged enough that he uses his natural instincts as a con man to get inside the IRA.

To say Martin is conflicted -- about his friends on the outside, his father figure on the inside and the threat his secret life poses to his girlfriend, Lara (Nathalie Press), and their baby -- is to seriously understate the case. Overstating the merits of Sturgess' complicated performance, however, would be hard to do.

It will take American auds some minutes to adjust to the pace and schematic of the story -- there are so many people working for so many sides that Martin serves as an anchor to keep the viewer from sinking into a hole of confusion. (Likewise the accents, which take some getting used to.)

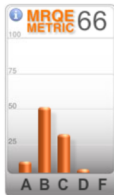
But helmer Karl Skogland, who did such different work in the recent "Stone Angel," is a director with an unexpected but natural gift for frenetic action. She also has some exemplary actors at her disposal: Kingsley, who seems to have entered his own new golden age (see "You Kill Me," "Elegy," "The Wackness"); Press, who is extraordinary as the besieged Lara; and Kevin Zegers, as Martin's boyhood friend and IRA "colleague," Sean.

Skogland has done the right thing in making "Fifty Dead Men Walking" a movie about characters, and character: Thanks to Sturgess, the viewer feels deep sympathy with a character whose clandestine activities are looked upon by his closest community as satanic. Martin is an amorphous entity but a fascinating one, portrayed with just the right doses of cockiness and desperation.

Production values are good, notably the gritty, ash-blackened look of Jonathan Freeman's cinematography.

Camera (Technicolor), Jonathan Freeman; editor, Jim Munro; music, Ben Mink; music supervisor, Ian Neil; production designer, Eve Stewart; art director, David Hindle; costume designer, Stephanie Collie; sound (Dolby), Mervyn Moore; visual effects supervisor, Doug Oddy; casting, John Hubbard. Reviewed at Toronto Film Festival (Gala), Sept. 10, 2008. Running time: 118 MIN.

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