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**Friday September 20th, 2019**

**Dogman (15)**

**Dir: Matteo Garrone**

**Starring: Marcello Fonte, Edoardo Gero**

**Sponsor: Pitstop Barbers (Newark)**

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**Synopsis:** A decrepit, drab suburb in Italy, the present. Estranged from his ex-partner but close to their daughter Alida, Marcello runs a small salon providing services to dog-owners and trades small amounts of cocaine on the side. He is persistently abused and exploited by the thuggish ex-boxer Simone (aka Simone) cocaine user and violent criminal, but always submits. Even when others try to assassinate Simone, Marcello drives him to his mother and helps to extricate the bullet from his chest. Simone realises that he could burgle a pawn-shop by breaking through the wall of Marcello's salon; Marcello balks at the repercussions he would face from local friends, but finally provides a set of keys. The day after the robbery, Marcello refuses to name Simone to the police and is sentenced to jail himself. One year later he is released and seeks out Simone (the proud owner of a noisy new motorcycle) to ask for his share of the loot. Simone prevaricates and then beats up Marcello for damaging the motorcycle. Reviled by his neighbours, Marcello tricks Simone into hiding in a large dog cage in his salon, ostensibly to ambush some drug dealers, but locks him in and exults in gaining the upper hand. Simone uses brute force to break out and Marcello accidentally kills him in a struggle. He carries the body to nearby marshes and sets fire to it. But when he tries to tell the community that he has ridden it of its menace, no one is there to listen.

All Italian filmmakers of the moment stand on the shoulders of giants, and the giant on whose shoulders Matteo Garrone stands is Francesco Rosi (1922 - 2015). He has inherited Rosi's interest in the workings of Italy's organised crime networks, in the melodramas of working class lives - and even in the core meanings of fairy tales, which Rosi tackled in *Once Upon a Time (C'era Una Volta... aka More Than a Miracle, 1967.)* What he doesn't appear to have inherited is Rosi's sophisticated grasp of the way that big business interfaces with politics in modern Italy, much less the ways that spiritual interests can interface with political activism, as Rosi explored in his adaptations of books by Carlo Levi and Primo Levi. Sadly, Garrone's work is poorer for it.

You could call *Dogman* a social-realist fable, an odd combination of dog-cage realism, ultra-violence and sometimes-cute fantasy. It's set in an anonymous, rundown suburb; most reviewers have assumed (by analogy with Garrone's 2008 *Gomorrah*) it's outside Naples but it was apparently shot in Magliana near Rome; presumably the dialects on the soundtrack give Italian viewers some kind of geographical anchor, but Garrone says he wanted a conceptual space between the city and the wilderness. The



protagonist Marcello is a runt of the man with a face that bespeaks both years of misery and a despite-everything optimism. He runs a bare-bones salon for dog owners near a public housing estate, offering the usual primping services and short-term dog sitting. We're told next to nothing of his backstory but he lives for the moment he spends with his daughter Alida and his beloved dogs (in one rather challenging scene, he shares a plate of pasta with one of them); Alida's mother (his ex-wife?) barely glances at him. He has a sideline in dealing small amounts of cocaine, chiefly, it's implied, to finance his dreams of taking Alida on away days to the seaside.

Not surprisingly, the cocaine is his undoing. Supplying – and using a little himself – brings him into the orbit of the brutal ex-boxer Simone, who's occasionally friendly, more often a bully, and always a one-man crime wave in the neighbourhood. Marcello suffers one cruelty after another but always acquiesces, usually after feeble protests. It's cruelty to dogs which really upset him: when Simone's buddy brags that he silenced a chihuahua during a burglary by locking it in a freezer, Marcello rushes to the scene of the crime to rescue and revive the frozen pooch. Like a fairytale ogre, Simone seems beyond the reach of the police, so local men take matters into their own hands and try to have him killed; even then it's Marcello who is bullied into extricating the bullet and saving his life.

Since Marcello very much sees himself in the community - he's a team player in the estate's scratch football club – it's not clear why he allows Simone to railroad him into escalating involvement in crime. The film presents Marcello's submission in existential terms, climaxing when he hand delivers a set of spare keys to his salon to Simone so that he can batter his way through a wall to rob the pawnbroker next door. The story's rationale for Marcello's complicity is that he wants the share of the loot which Simone promises him, but something more deeply masochistic is clearly going on: Marcello serves a year in jail for refusing to name Simone as the robber, apparently unmarked by the experience, and comes out to find everything unchanged. The worm does eventually turn; the dog-man finally does fight-back, although the fantasy ending suggests that his belated resistance leave him bereft.

In his presskit statement, Garrone himself has trouble explaining the film's central dynamic. He says the film isn't a tale of revenge, nor a variation on the 'eternal' theme of the struggle between the weak and the strong: he also throws the notion of 'redemption' into the mix. He goes on: "It is instead a film that, through an 'extreme' story, makes us face something that concerns us all; the consequences of the choices we make daily to survive [...] the

difference between who we are and who we think we are.” Really? This sounds more like the kind of rambling apologia that the autodidact Korean director Kim Kiduk would make for one of his vicious fables than anything you might expect from a follower of Francesco Rosi. If only there was some way of measuring how many viewers of *Dogman* finds their own existential pain reflected in Marcello's protracted submission to bullying.

### Credits

<b>Marcello</b>	Marcello Fonte
<b>Simone</b>	Edoardo Pesce
<b>Simone's mother</b>	Nunzia Schiano
<b>Franco</b>	Adamo Dionisi
<b>Video arcade owner</b>	Francesco Acquaroli
<b>Alida</b>	Alida Baldari Calabria
<b>Restaurateur</b>	Gianluca Gobbi
<b>Alida's mother</b>	Laura Pizzirani
<b>Gasperoni</b>	Giancarlo Porcacchia
<b>Director</b>	Matteo Garrone
<b>Screenplay</b>	Matteo Garrone, Ugo Chiti, Massimo Gaudioso
<b>Director of Photography</b>	Nicolaj Brüel
<b>Editor</b>	Marco Spoletini
<b>Art Director</b>	Dimitri Capuani
<b>Music</b>	Michele Braga
<b>Sound</b>	Maricetta Lombardo
<b>Costume</b>	Massimo Cantini Parrini
	<b>Italy/France 2018. 103mins</b>

### Another View

Dogs of all shapes and sizes feature in Matteo Garrone's ninth feature, which sees the Italian filmmaker return to his social realist roots with a low-key crime drama that calls to mind his Cannes Grand Jury Prize winner from 2008, *Gomorrah*. Man's best friend is not the primary focus here though – as per the title, the film chronicles the life of a gentle dog groomer named Marcello (Marcello Fonte) who runs a small shop in a rough neighbourhood on the outskirts of Napoli.

Given the authentically gritty setting, where every man, woman and pup is seemingly on the take, it's unsurprising to learn that Marcello sells cocaine on the side to help pay for regular scuba diving trips with his young daughter, Sofia (Alida Baldari Calabria). Soon, however, Marcello's illicit dealings see him become mixed up with a hotheaded local brute named Simone (Edoardo Pesce) who's quick to take advantage of Marcello's passive nature and diminutive stature.

Marcello's unwavering kindness towards animals (in one scene he returns to the scene of a burglary to rescue a chihuahua, which one of the robbers has left to die in a freezer) makes him an instantly endearing figure, and although centring such a bleak story around a benign character could be viewed as a cheap, slightly cynical ploy from Garrone, the film benefits greatly from the lighter moments where Marcello is shown washing, walking and generally making a fuss over the various pooches in his care. Still, watching this big-hearted little man being constantly kicked around like a stray mutt makes for uncomfortable viewing.

*Dogman* is pitched as an “urban western”, and Nicolaj Brüel's dirt-smudged cinematography certainly adds a layer of grime and gloom to proceedings. Yet while the film is compelling enough as an unsentimental portrait of social decay in downtrodden southern Italy, it lacks the thematic muscularity and visceral jolt of Garrone's earlier work, in particular the explosive *Gomorrah* and 2002's *The Embalmer*, about a middle-aged Neapolitan taxidermist.

In the neorealist tradition of Luchino Visconti, Roberto Rossellini and especially Vittorio De Sica, Garrone's protagonists tend to be

ordinary people pitted against oppressive individuals, factions or larger systemic forces. Their daily struggles are typically depicted as being symptomatic of complex sociopolitical issues beyond their control. To that end, *Dogman* feels strangely unleashed from reality, the director displaying a basic unwillingness to develop both the central characters and narrative, instead driving home the tedious dog-eat-dog metaphor that forms the basis of this unrelentingly dour fable.

Garrone clearly knows how to construct taut allegorical thrillers on this scale, but following his ambitious, darkly comic previous features (*Reality* from 2012 and *Tale of Tales* from 2015) this feels like a comparatively minor work. Marcello's sympathetic putz schtick really does wear thin after a while (although Fonte works wonders with the material), and there's a sense of shrugging inevitability about the symbolic act of retribution that closes out the film.

**Adam Woodward: Little White Lies**

### Our next screening: Friday September 27th, 7.30pm Free Solo (USA 2018. Cert 12a)

Is there something about living in Lincolnshire, with its reputation for being a flat county, that makes people yearn for documentary films about mountains?

Touching the Void (2005) and Sherpa (2016) drew huge audiences and ratings. Now, we're pleased to bring you Free Solo.

As with the other two, this film offers a riveting account of one man's desire to tackle nature head on. It's full of tension, determination, skill and bravery. It's also a telling statement about the personal obsessions that drive mountaineers, with some of the most extraordinary climbing footage ever filmed.

Winner of this year's Oscar for Best Documentary, Free Solo demands to be seen on a big screen. It is quite the most extraordinary watch.