

# SCREENDAILY

## Bullhead

14 February, 2011 | By [Fionnuala Halligan](#)



Dir/scr: Michael R Roskam. Belgium. 2011. 129mins

***Bullhead* is a disturbingly visceral male drama with a brooding central performance from Matthais Schoenaerts. It's a violent and complex work which requires the viewer to be completely engaged for 129 minutes as the intricacies of plot and character interact.**

Despite its stylistic flourishes - and this is a notably stylish film - all eyes are drawn to Schoenaerts as Jacky.

While *Bullhead* isn't for the faint-hearted, there is a significant payoff for those who stay the course. With the right critical support, Celluloid Dreams could notch interest from bold distributors looking for an upscale challenge. Major European territories should accept the Flemish/French dialogue, although English-speaking audiences may find the Belgian topography challenging ground.

Most reminiscent, perhaps, of Tom Hardy's transformation in *Bronson*, Matthias Schoenaerts bulks up shockingly to play the central role of Jacky Vanmarsenille, a hulking Flemish farmer in Limburgh. His performance, which will surely attract awards attention, is almost entirely internalised, and all the more remarkable for it.

Jacky's family breeds cattle and dabbles in illegal hormones to enhance their meat. This is mirrored in Jacky's own sparse life, as he abuses his body with testosterone and other drugs for reasons which become slowly and painfully clear to the viewer.

Directing his first feature, Michael R Roskam has not made things easy for his audience; a thuggish criminal gang circles around Jacky's world. These men have murdered a policeman who tried to disband their hormone-smuggling mafia.

There's also a gay police informant called Diederik (confusingly called Ricky at times), who has multiple connections to Jacky's life, including a vital part in a devastating incident which took place 20 years ago. And two hapless French-speaking mechanics, charged with destroying the getaway car, look set to inadvertently seal Jacky's fate. A moment's inattention will cost the viewer the plot.

Much of the action in *Bullhead* takes place in darkened interiors - a brutally tense sequence in a nightclub, for example, or the film's ultimate burst of violence, which is almost unwatchable. The Flanders farmyards are a flat and uncommenting backdrop to a sealed-off provincial life in which grudges are played out across the generations.

Despite its stylistic flourishes - and this is a notably stylish film - all eyes are drawn to Schoenaerts as Jacky, the inarticulate, disintegrating, fatally wounded "Bullhead" of the title. Roskam depicts a world of men into which this man cannot enter; of animals and flesh and impotence; of the very essence of maleness in the agricultural world.

Schoenaerts, helped by young actor Valvekens in the crucial flashback sequences, present Jacky as a raging bull whose tragedy we can identify with even as his fury terrifies us - and seals his own fate.

Production companies: Savage Film, Roskam Film  
International sales: Celluloid Dreams, [www.celluloid-dreams.com](http://www.celluloid-dreams.com)  
Producer: Bart Van Langendonck  
Cinematography: Nicolas Karakatsanis  
Production designer: Walter Brugmans  
Editor: Alain Dessauvage  
Cast: Matthias Schoenaerts, Jeroen Perceval, Jeanne Dandoy, Barbara Sarafian, Tibo Vandendorre, Frank Lammers, Robin Valvekens

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