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The Bottom Line

Matthias Schoenaerts' raging bull a standout performance in crime drama that's light on crime, heavy on drama.

Venue

Berlin Film Festival (Panorama Special)

Cast

Matthias Schoenaerts, Joroen Perceval, Jeanne Dandoy, Barbara Sarafian, Sam Louwyck

Director

Michael R. Roskam

Michael R. Roskam's feature debut finds a gem in Belgian actor Matthias Schoenaerts, who leads a strong cast.

A Flemish bovine hormone mafia movie that begins with a voiceover informing us that no matter how hard we try to escape the past, "in the end we're all fucked" conjures up dreary images of interminable slaughterhouse sequences. And yet Belgian director **Michael R. Roskam**'s feature debut *Bullhead* is an emotionally driven tale of revenge, redemption and fate in which cows are rarely seen, much less hurt. As well as a showcase for the exceptionally talented **Matthias Schoenaerts**, who seriously beefed up for the titular role.

Bullhead has the capacity to be a mainstream hit in its co-production countries (Belgium, Holland and possibly even France), everywhere else it's destined for an arthouse release. Festival exposure will also help shine an international spotlight on Schoenaerts.

The Belgian actor plays Jacky Vanmarsenille, a buff, 30-year-old loner who helps his uncle run the family meat manufacturing business, which relies on a steady supply of growth hormone for its cattle. Everything goes south when their crooked vet suggests supplying beef to a new client, Marc Decuyper (**Sam Louwyck**), who happens to be one of the biggest hormone traffickers in Flanders. Decuyper had the cop investigating him killed and now needs new ventures to

throw the police off the scent of his previous operations.

Jacky is against the deal, especially after he sees Decuyper’s right-hand man Diederik (**Joroen Perceval**). The two men have a history together that isn’t made clear until a flashback takes us 20 years into the past, and also explains why Jacky himself takes massive quantities of testosterone.

Bullhead begins as a mafia movie, with midnight exchanges of illegal cargo and threatening tough guys pushing each other around, but soon becomes a search for emotional catharsis for its two main characters, Jacky and Diederik. Various subplots, including the woman that Jacky has longed for since childhood (**Jeanne Dandoy**) are stretched a little too thin to keep the story’s many threads intertwined until the final crescendo. Yet holding it all together, steering the film throughout (pun intended), is Schoenaerts.

The actor literally takes the metaphors of his bull-headed character to the limits and is never less than believable or mesmerizing. His head bowed low, always ready for a fight, Schoenaerts glares at the world from under his brow, making Jacky’s vulnerability (caused by a horrifying event 20 years ago) as palpable as his tremendous capacity for violence. Working from his own script, Roskam makes sure we feel for his monster.

In an all-around strong cast, Perceval also gives a commendable performance as a man whose past weighs upon him more than his criminal present. The few French-speaking characters are either comically thick or psychopaths — an inside joke between Belgium’s culturally warring factions that will be lost on most international audiences.

Technical credits are good. DP **Nicolas Karakatsanis**’ plays with chiaroscuro lighting and stunning landscape photography when not sticking close to the protagonist’s face, isolating him all the more along with sound designer **Benoît De Clerc**’s frequent audio fade-outs. **Raf Keunen**’s strings-heavy score has a tendency to swell predictably during key dramatic scenes.

Venue: Berlin Film Festival (Panorama Special)
Production companies: Savage Film, Eyeworks, Artemis, Waterland.
Sales company: Celluloid Dreams
Cast: Matthias Schoenaerts, Joroen Perceval, Jeanne Dandoy, Barbara Sarafian, Sam Louwyck
Director: Michael R. Roskam
Screenwriter: Michael R. Roskam
Producers: Bart Van Langendonck
Co-producers: Peter Bouckaert, Patrick Quinet, Jan Vanderzanden
Director of photography: Nicolas Karakatsanis
Production designer: Pavol Andrasko
Music: Raf Keunen
Costume designer: Margriet Procee
Editor: Alan Dessauwage
Sound design: Benoît De Clerc
No rating, 128 minutes

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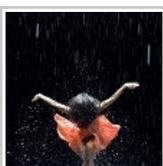
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