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Dead Man's Cards



Reviewed By: Chris Docker

Thought that nightclubs were run by nice charming businessmen who wouldn't hurt a fly? Although 'Dead Man's Cards' is one of the grittiest crime thrillers in British cinema since the gold standard of 'Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels', it should be enough to at least make you wonder if nightclubs aren't really controlled by the long arm of nasty criminal types, whether in knuckle dusters or smart suits.

I started watching this movie not expecting to like it, and there being more f-words in the first few minutes than my mother could have endured without fainting, felt my expectations were going to be fully realised, but it wasn't long before I had to admit I'd got it wrong. 'Dead Man's Cards' breathes life into a genre that too often sags under the weight of its own excesses, and comes up with a hand of aces.



Ex-boxer Tom gets a job as a bouncer at a dive, much to his wife's disgust, and is soon initiated into the refined way of doing things. "If you wanna do someone in, take 'em out the back - no cameras," advises fellow doorman Paul. This being an age of political correctness, they undergo one of the legally required courses in non-violent restraint, which provides more opportunities for grim humour as Paul shows the instructor how to get out of his judo holds. Club manager Billy (Tom Bell) dresses as a cowboy, lives in fantasy land, and likes to think he's in charge until there's some argument about the going rate for security, at which point he hastily backtracks. Tom's wife wants to "do something like a normal couple" and whisks hubby off to communion, but he's still recovering from the night before and has to rush outside the church to vomit. He and Paul try to maintain their decency by brute force in the face of pressure from bigger club owners, but there's a limit to everything, including how many conflicting loyalties you can juggle especially with drug-fuelled hangovers and a slutty gun-toting barmaid determined to take advantage.

Many British gangster movies since 'Lock, Stock...' (with the notable exception of 'Sexy Beast') foundered on too much comedy, complex and unrealistic plots, unconvincing characterisation or simply lack of talent. 'Dead Man's Cards' cleverly succeeds where others have failed. Its only fault is that it may be too violent for some viewers, but if the subject matter offends, you've been warned! There's no overriding message that I could discern, no lingering Oscar-worthy close-ups where we are invited to admire some unspoken subtext, just thumpingly honest entertainment that doesn't pull its punches. Director James Marquand has scored a hit with first feature film, and we can only hope that, rather than be tempted to make 'Dead Man's Cards II', he goes on to make more equally original and incisive work.

A slice of gritty entertainment served with a sharp knife

Director: James Marquand

Writer: James Marquand and James McMartin

Cast: James McMartin, Paul Barber, Tom Bell, Gary Mavers, Samantha Janus, Lisa Parry, Mark Russell, Andrew Schofield, Andrew Simister

Runtime: 92 minutes

Certificate: tbc

Year: 2005

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