

At a loss

Orphans, written and directed by Peter Mullan

David Walsh
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Peter Mullan is a Glasgow-born actor and director. He played the leading role in British filmmaker Ken Loach's *My Name is Joe*, winning a prize for his acting at the Cannes film festival. He also appeared in *Riff Raff* and *Trainspotting*. Mullan has directed television dramas and several short films; *Orphans* is his first feature film.

Michael, Thomas, John and Sheila, Glasgow natives, have just lost their mother. In the course of one night, on the eve of the latter's funeral, a number of things befall them.

Thomas gets up in a bar and sings a lugubrious song dedicated to his mother, sending a few of the patrons into giggles. Michael attacks them and gets stabbed for his efforts. John, the youngest brother, swears revenge on the knife-wielder. Sheila, confined to a wheelchair by a debilitating disease, gets left in Thomas' charge. Unfortunately, the eldest son is a devout Catholic and has promised his mother he would spend the night in church with her body. Wanting no part of that plan, Sheila sets off in the mean streets of Glasgow by herself. Fortunately, a family of good samaritans takes her in for the night. John meanwhile goes in search of a gun. Michael pays an unhappy visit to his ex-wife and children. He won't go to a hospital for his stab wound because he plans to show up for work in the morning and claim the injury came as the result of an industrial accident.

The four are parentless, but they are orphans in a larger sense. The power of traditional affiliations and restraints has weakened. Thomas clings to the Catholic Church, but it is clearly a losing battle. In the course of his overnight stay, he and Sheila manage to smash a statue of the Virgin Mary to smithereens and a freak storm blows the roof off the church.

For the other siblings, the absent elements are less

obvious. Michael (Douglas Henshall), the central figure, seems disconnected from nearly everyone, his loss of blood from the stab wound a metaphor for an emotional dissolution. He seems in danger of fading away. John (Stephen Cole) is all anger and cursing and threats of violence. Fortunately, faced with the choice of doing real mayhem, he turns back. Their sister Sheila (Rosemarie Stevenson) is perhaps the most appealing character, the one for whom one feels the greatest empathy. Where the brothers' aggression alienates them from each other and nearly everyone else, her very vulnerability and helplessness opens up the possibility of some sort of human relations.

All in all, these are people without much to go on. From the point of view of social life, there must be some significance in Mullan's portrayal of a working class population in which the trade unions, the Labour Party and other such institutions no longer play any meaningful role. His characters, in the historic sense, have been orphaned. One is left with the image of people who now have to go it on their own, facing an uncertain future. This is not an unimportant perception.

Whether the film is artistically successful is another matter. It certainly contains authentic and moving moments. There is also a great deal of unconvincing shouting, particularly in the scenes involving John and his quest for revenge. The conception that truth emerges more or less unaided when actors scream at each other full in the face is something that does not die easily.

Mullan obviously wants to go beyond Loach-type naturalism. It is less clear that he knows how to accomplish this. He includes a number of absurdist sequences: the roof blown off the church; the near-rape of a woman to whose husband John and a lowlife companion deliver pizza; a group of girls in party hats

pushing Sheila's wheelchair through the night; a peculiar scene in which Michael is set upon by a sadistic pub owner (this begins to feel a little like *Pulp Fiction*); Michael, near death from loss of blood, drifting down the Clyde on a raft, and so forth.

The difficulty is that the disparate elements do not entirely cohere. If the storm and the wreckage done to the church are to be taken with a grain of salt, then what are we to make of the film's definitively non-metaphorical moments, for example, an angry “realistic” confrontation between Michael and John? In fact, the one event feels no more “real” than the other.

The film does not strike one as having been fully worked out from a single artistic point of view. Mullan has not truly stepped outside of a certain tradition of “slice of life” filmmaking, he has merely permitted himself certain luxuries within it. It is indicative of the weight of the naturalist tradition within British filmmaking that Mullan obviously feels his relatively brief forays into the “surreal” to be quite daring, perhaps liberating. It should be remembered, however, that even in Britain tradition is not everything. The entire history of world cinema and art generally is available to every filmmaker.

There is talk of a “New Scottish Cinema,” following hard upon the heels of talk about the “New British” and “New Irish” cinemas. Much of this is idle chatter, a media concoction, and should not be discussed in serious circles. It would be wrong on that account to dismiss someone like Mullan. With whatever limitations, he is obviously a filmmaker with a good deal of heart and feeling.



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