

Two Hands —Exaggerated praise for an Australian comedy

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Two Hands is a black comedy written and directed by Gregor Jordan about a naïve young man who falls foul of some dangerous but rather buffoonish gangsters. The story involves the adventures of Jimmy (Heath Ledger), a 19-year-old ex-street kid who runs into trouble with Pando (Bryan Brown), a ruthless local crime boss in Kings Cross, Sydney's red-light district.

Jimmy, a doorman at a striptease club who is eager to elevate his status in the crime world, is asked by Pando to deliver \$10,000 to an elderly woman in Bondi, a nearby beachfront suburb. Unaware that Pando and his thugs have killed his brother for fumbling a job, Jimmy readily agrees and borrows a car from one of the gangsters to deliver the money.

Unable to elicit a response from the woman's apartment—she has collapsed and is dying on the floor—Jimmy decides to wait on the beach before trying again later. He sees a pretty young girl and decides to bury the cash in the sand so that he can go swimming and meet her. Two adolescent kids notice what he is doing and make off with the money. Fearing for his life, and with no convincing explanation to console Pando about how he lost the money, Jimmy seeks refuge with Diedre, his brother's widow.

Jimmy's only hope is to quickly replace the money, and so he gets involved in a bank robbery with two of Diedre's bumbling friends. Naturally, the hold-up goes astray. Jimmy is now on the run from the police as well as the gangsters. The story ends with Jimmy miraculously escaping death at the hands of Pando's thugs, evading the police, and finally escaping north, to Queensland, with Alex (Rose Byrne), his newfound and sweetly innocent girlfriend.

Despite a few moments of inspired comedy, *Two Hands* is disappointing. While it casts a certain comic light on the activities of Pando, and his gang, and

punctures the media-generated myth that big-time gangsters are complex and intelligent individuals, the comedy, which is not very black, is formulaic and often banal. Little is demanded of its audience and the film's actors.

Performances by Brian Brown as Pando, and Tom Long as Wally, his main offsider, provide the film with its more successful scenes. Brown and Long are capable and experienced local actors who deliver an amusing mix of criminal brutishness with a ridiculously unlikely knowledge of modern family values and politically correct parenting techniques.

But director Jordan, who one suspects is a little infatuated by the criminal underworld, does not explore some of the more interesting comedic possibilities within the story and settles for some conventional belly laughs and a romantic sub-plot, verging on soap opera, between Jimmy and Alex.

Two Hands also relies on some well-worn clichés and fairly pedestrian comic exaggerations. Heath Ledger's studied innocence is forced and quickly grates while Alex is uniformly pure and wholesome with no contradictions. The two thugs Jimmy joins with to rob a bank are just too stupid. Even granted that Jordan is attempting to make light of some absurd discussions between inept gangsters who think robbing a bank is as simple as collecting the groceries, this scene is embarrassingly heavy-handed and obvious.

But the most irritating aspect of the film is the ghost of Jimmy's dead brother (Steven Vidler). This character, who appears during the film's opening credits digging his way out of hell to the earth's surface, acts as Jimmy's guardian angel and provides an intermittent and largely irrelevant narrative to the film. It is not clear why Jordan felt it necessary to introduce a character whose inane comments, delivered in a gruff

voice, contribute nothing to the film, tend to interrupt the comedy and leave the viewer wondering whether the film is a comedy or B-grade horror movie.

Trite and largely forgettable advice from Jimmy's brother, such as "if you've been through some crap, the chances are some guy has been through it before and written about it", or "one wrong decision can change your life", are two examples of the banalities. Sadly, a lot of the film relies on this sort of thin gruel.

These weaknesses, however, have not prevented *Two Hands* from becoming the Australian film industry's financial success story for 1999. The low-budget film, which has been picked up by the Mirimax Corporation and heavily promoted, grossed over \$4.5 million in the first five weeks of its release, a sizeable amount for an Australian film and comparable only with Paul Hogan's crass comedy, *Crocodile Dundee*.

As one industry head opined, *Two Hands* got away from the art house cinemas by striking the right balance of action, comedy and romance for box office success in the multiplexes (suburban cinemas). *Two Hands* has also received 11 nominations, including for best film, in this year's annual Australian Film Industry awards.

Australian film critics, even more thoughtful ones, have praised the film, claiming it to be a penetrating examination of the "Australian male psyche" and a break with what some claimed was an over abundance of gloomy films about social life. Some have compared the film with *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* and *Pulp Fiction*.

Comments by Evan Williams, writing for the *Australian*, are typical. Describing the film as "a masterwork" he wrote: "There is something marvellously and unmaliciously authentic [in *Two Hands* '] ... depiction of Australian suburbia, the thongs-and-shorts culture of a brash and ugly Sydney, the boozy junk food rituals of the tattooed classes."

Lynden Barber, for the same newspaper, described the film as a "dialogue between two generations of male archetype". Jimmy's "feminine and masculine sides come into balance", Barber writes, through his "desire to do the right thing by a beautiful woman".

Director Jordan, of course, is not responsible for this fatuous praise or the sneering comments from Williams about the "tattooed classes". He should, however, pay little regard to such overblown tributes, which have more to do with generating box office receipts and

profits than improving the skills and artistic acumen of young filmmakers.

Two Hands is the 33-year-old Jordan's first feature. Notwithstanding its flaws, *Two Hands* does show that this young director, still at the beginning of his filmmaking career and perhaps a little unsure of what to focus on, has talent and potential. One hopes he will rise above the myopic and unhelpful praise of the Australian critics, and that his next effort will be a more defined and substantial work.



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