

film reviews



Oskar Belton as Werner Lessner, one of the young German prisoners of war who were forced to clear landmines from the west coast of Denmark

Denmark's darkest hours

The story of an awful war crime is devastating to watch, says **Kevin Maher**

Denmark's so-called biggest war crime forms the historical backdrop of this nerve-jangling bomb-disposal drama, a best foreign language film Oscar nominee that makes *The Hurt Locker* look like a Merchant Ivory tea party.

The year is 1945 and, responding to a British military decision, the Danish government has forcibly deployed 2,000 German prisoners of war to the western coast of Denmark to begin the arduous and wildly dangerous task of clearing 1.5 million landmines from the beaches by hand. Goodbye Geneva Convention, hello sudden death.

Written and directed by Martin Zandvliet, the film focuses on a small troop of traumatised teenagers — still in their tattered German army uniforms — and the brutal

Land of Mine

15, 99min
★★★★★

Danish sergeant, Carl Rasmussen (Roland Moller), charged with clearing a sizeable chunk of Jutland's Skallingen peninsula.

The opportunities for high-tension drama are screamingly obvious. As we get to know the soldiers — Helmut (Joel Basman) the tough one, Ernst (Emil Belton) the soft one, Louis (Sebastian Schumann) the smart one, and so on — the scenes of them inching their way, terrified, across the mine-laden beaches (they literally poke the sand with sticks) become increasingly difficult to stomach.

When the deaths do come, always without notice (BOOM!), the effect is never less than shocking and — always upsetting.

And yet what's truly remarkable about the movie, and lifts it above an exploitation thrill ride, is that it also works as a nuanced drama and a delicate character portrait. Step forward Rasmussen, who as the film

progresses begins to feel for the soldiers and bond with them. He starts calling them "my boys", he saves them from a humiliating beating at the hands of some angry locals and he feels every loss in the minefield as a profound personal grief.

By the final act it seems to have shed the war-movie trappings almost completely and has instead become a touching meditation on fathers and sons, and on the primal urge in men to replicate that bond.

Moller's performance is magnificent. Huge and brooding, with swaggering echoes of classic era John Wayne, he commands attention in every scene, but only because there are tantalising hints of softness and sweetness underneath. At one key point of near-savage degradation, he takes Louis aside, looks tenderly into his eyes and whispers softly: "Repeat after me, 'It's almost over. I'll make it home.'" Devastating.

Icarus

15, 110min
★★★★★

A trivial *Super Size Me*-style premise (take performance-enhancing drugs on camera and see if they work!) becomes something far deeper in this thrilling anti-doping documentary from Bryan Fogel, released on Netflix today.

An amateur cyclist who wants to investigate the nature of illegal drug use in sport, Fogel finds his way into the life of Grigory Rodchenkov, the charismatic Russian doctor who was accused of the orchestrated state-sanctioned doping of the Russian national athletics team.

As the film progresses and the pervasiveness of doping becomes more apparent (everyone, the doctor implies, is doping), Rodchenkov becomes a whistleblower and flees for his life (from former KGB agents), with Fogel's help, to America.

Even there Rodchenkov, now an ostensible enemy of Vladimir Putin, is not safe. The witness protection programme beckons. It all gets very Bourne, and it leaves you, unfortunately, with a feeling of profound and unassailable cynicism about the fundamentals of professional sport. **KM**

Maudie

12A, 116min
★★★★★



Ethan Hawke and Sally Hawkins

A difficult and highly mannered performance from Sally Hawkins coupled with a repugnant and profoundly unappealing character played by Ethan Hawke sink this curious, and curiously saccharine, biopic.

The Nova Scotia artist Maud Lewis (Hawkins) is the subject. She paints simplistic naturescapes, suffered from rheumatoid arthritis as a child, and speaks, in Hawkins's bold characterisation, in a smiley, whispery squeak that's somewhere between Björk and Tweety Pie's Granny.

Maud's husband is a boorish tyrant called Everett (Hawke), who is relentlessly cruel, calls her a dog and smacks her in the mouth when she displeases him.

He stays cruel for most of the film. But she keeps smiling, and painting naturescapes in a bizarre and self-contradictory movie from the Irish director Aisling Walsh that seems to celebrate creativity and commitment even as it validates domestic abuse. Just odd. **KM**

England is Mine

15, 94min
★★★★★

You don't have to possess an obsessive knowledge of the early life, musical influences and chart hits of the Mancunian pop icon Morrissey to appreciate *England is Mine*. But it helps. As it happens, I do (more than 30 years of mostly unwavering devotion in the tank), so perhaps I can comprehend the ambitions of the writer-director Mark Gill better than many.

The film attempts to describe the formative, entirely dull life of Steven Patrick Morrissey before he became the flower-flailing face of the Smiths and subsequently a globetrotting solo star (he is, bizarrely, very big in Mexico).

Trapped, like Morrissey, in the limited grimness of 1970s rain-sodden suburbia, with little narrative momentum (Morrissey moans a lot and wants to be famous, and that's it), it envisages biographical scenarios that might soon inform his classic songs.

There's the nightclub scene from *How Soon Is Now* ("So you go and you stand on your own/ And you leave on



Jack Lowden as Morrissey and Laurie Kynaston as Johnny Marr

your own"), the maudlin walks from *Cemetery Gates* ("A dreaded sunny day/ So I meet you at the cemetery gates"), and the fairground altercations from *Rusholme Ruffians* ("A boy is stabbed/ And his money is grabbed").

Which is all lovely. And I know I had a blast. But if you're not a Smiths/Morrissey devotee there can surely be only ambivalence. Watching someone incessantly scribble in notepads while complaining, "I'm sick of being an undiscovered genius," can get you only so far.

Tellingly, you are left with the impression that the rising star Jack Lowden has just done a pitch-perfect Morrissey impression, if not quite a characterisation. Morrissey has been an elusive figure all his life, and he has certainly eluded this film. **KM**



The Times Film Show

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