

Unfunny 'Burke and Hare' Wastes Top-Notch Cast

Submitted by [mattmovieman](#) [1] on September 9, 2011 - 7:22am

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Rating: **2.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – There are few sights more depressing than a game cast all dressed up with nowhere to go and no good jokes to share. “Burke and Hare” is the sort of comedy Mel Brooks was making in the '90s. All the ingredients are on hand for a promising comedy, and yet something's missing—namely, laughter. The timing is off, the punch-lines are obvious and the actors are bored beyond belief.

What makes “Burke and Hare” doubly unfortunate is the fact that it was directed by John Landis, the same man responsible for a true American classic (“Animal House”) and one of the all-time great escapist entertainments (“The Blues Brothers”). This picture marks his first feature directorial effort since 1998's soulless “Blues Brothers 2000” and the largely unseen “Susan's Plan.” It's interesting to note that Landis has shot his recent work (including the upcoming farce “The Rivals”) in Britain, which may provide an indication that the aging director has gone overseas to revive his creative juices a la Woody Allen.

Unfortunately, “Hare” is as stale as a dried crumpet. It tells the fact-based tale of two murderers in late 1820's-era Scotland who kill unsuspecting victims and sell their corpses to doctors for medical demonstrations. This material was tackled in Vernon's Sewell's 1972 horror flick of the same name, but Landis is clearly aiming for a seamless mixture of morbid humor, gruesome bloodletting and genuinely affecting characterizations. Landis pulled this tonal amalgam off famously in 1981's “An American Werewolf in London,” but “Hare” proves that his skill has not improved with age. Any attempt made to humanize these reprehensible characters is utterly laughable, while the gory stabs at satire are generally laughless. Multiple scenes in which William Burke (Simon Pegg) and William Hare (Andy Serkis) haplessly off their innocent prey aren't scary or funny. They just amount to mean-spirited slapstick that leaves a particularly rancid taste in the mouths of viewers. Serkis smiles his marvelously ghoulish grin while Pegg frets and moans with his signature neuroses, but no matter how hard the actors try to be lovable, the leaden material undermines them every step of the way. Imagine a slapstick comedy about Leopold and Loeb directed by Carl Reiner, and you'll have a fair approximation of how wince-inducing this mess truly is.



Simon Pegg and Andy Serkis star in John Landis's *Burke and Hare*.

Photo credit: IFC Films

One of the few redeeming qualities about the picture is Simon Elliott's handsome production design infused with the decadent elegance and spirit of the similarly themed "Sweeney Todd." The film's depiction of Edinburgh is quite disturbing indeed, since virtually every inhabitant is either corrupt or hideously self-involved, though that doesn't make their deaths any less appalling. Citizens enjoy the daily activity of gathering around the latest ill-fated felons and mindlessly cheering their hangings before resuming their regular routines. *Burke and Hare* may turn homicidal for a risky get-rich-quick scheme, but Pegg and Serkis never emerge as credible serial killers, even as they squeeze the life out of a senile Christopher Lee, one of many overqualified actors assigned a thankless cameo. Surely the most criminal waste of talent is the hiring of Stephen Merchant, the brilliant co-creator of "The Office" and "Extras," to literally just stand in frame, much like Paul Reubens in "Blues Brothers." Ray Harryhausen, Costa-Gavras, and "Werewolf" star Jenny Agutter also appear briefly before promptly vanishing. I suspect Merchant could write a new episode of "Extras" based solely on his experiences on this set. It would certainly be more diverting than this film's interminable 91 minutes.

Though Hare is depicted as a cold-blooded con man with a wife that's an unholy cross between Lady Macbeth and Susie Essman from "Curb Your Enthusiasm" (though nowhere near as hysterical), the deeply flawed script by Piers Ashworth and Nick Moorcroft bends over backwards to make Burke a mere misguided soul. He didn't murder those 17 human beings just for kicks. He did it for love...or shall I say, the primal desire to get laid. Here's a typical example of the film's originality (or utter lack thereof): Landis illustrates that Burke has found the lust of life, Ginny (Isla Fisher), by having the camera slowly close in on her as a Hallelujah chorus swells. I kept waiting for Burke to holler an Elwoodian delivery of, "I See The Light!" before promptly bouncing on a trampoline. Like Burke, Ginny is a shameless opportunist who flirts with men in hopes of acquiring funds for her all-female production of "Macbeth." Of course, for Burke to acquire the funds, he must gather bodies fresh for dissection and submit them to the unkindly Doctor Knox (Tom Wilkinson), much to the chagrin of rival Doc Monroe (Tim Curry). Anytime Wilkinson and Curry share the screen, one wishes that the entire film had been about their malicious feud. When a stream of blood hits one of Doctor Monroe's students straight in the eye, it's doubtful any actor could deliver the subsequent line quite like Curry: "That would be an artery..."



Burke and Hare opened Sept. 9 in New York.

Photo credit: IFC Films

It must be admitted that there is one great shot in the film. It takes place after all the action is over, as Landis's camera glides through the modern-day University of Edinburgh and closes in on Burke's skeleton, thus allowing the unsettling reality of the preceding events to finally sink in. Too bad the film is such a juvenile looney tune replete with groan-worthy gross-out gags, flat innuendo and cute doggie double-takes. The only elements in the film that earn genuine laughter are little touches, such as the way a ludicrously contorted corpse rests on a table, or the slow delivery of the word, "Ow," by a man who made the ill-advised decision to forcefully place his foot in a door. Though Landis made some of the most enjoyable films of the late '70s and early '80s, "Burke and Hare" provides enough evidence that the once prolific director is running on empty. For a supreme example of comedy and violence melded in exquisite fashion, viewers are advised to check out James Gunn's "Super," or better yet, "An American Werewolf in London."

'Burke and Hare' stars Simon Pegg, Andy Serkis, Isla Fisher, Tom Wilkinson, Tim Curry and Bill Bailey. It was written by Piers Ashworth and Nick Moorcroft and directed by John Landis. It opened Sept. 9 in New York. It is not rated.



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