

Unfocused 'Rust and Bone' Wastes Marion Cotillard

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Rating: **2.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – It's been three years since Jacques Audiard made a sizable splash in American art houses with "A Prophet," a spellbinding picture that certainly ranks as one of the great crime films of the last decade. By following an Arab youth through his punishing sentence in a French prison, it provided audiences with an unforgettable portrait of corrupted innocence.

Devoid of escapist shortcuts, Audiard's anti-hero was forced to commit acts of unspeakable evil in order to ensure his survival. By the time he was freed, the once vulnerable subordinate was a formidable mafia kingpin, thus inferring that the prison system creates criminals rather than cures them. Prison stuck to the film's protagonist like an irreparable wound. The question wasn't how to remedy the wound, it was how to live with it.

That same question lingers over Audiard's follow-up, "Rust and Bone," a morose drama fatally marred by its cluttered collage of disconnected subplots. Though Marion Cotillard has garnered a fair amount of Oscar buzz for her attention-grabbing role as a killer whale trainer, it's too small and distressingly shallow to register as a serious Best Actress contender. The film's real subject is Matthias Schoenaerts, star of Michael R. Roskam's "Bullhead," which might as well be the title of this film (it certainly would've been an upgrade from "Rust and Bone"). Yet "bullhead" is too kind a name for Schoenaerts' character of Alain, a loathsome screw-up who drifts through a series of odd jobs while treating his five-year-old son, Sam (Armand Verdure), like unwanted collateral. After coming upon Sam playing in the dirt, he sprays him down like a dog, and later throws him to the ground, banging his head on a table. One of Audiard's gravest errors is attempting to sentimentalize the supposed bond between Alain and Sam in the film's final reel, after doing such a convincing job of illustrating that no such bond exists. Schoenaerts plays Alain as such a repugnant brute that any threat of redemption rings spectacularly false. Devoid of a salvageable heart or soul, Alain views the world purely in physical terms. No wonder why the profession of kickboxing fits him like a battered glove.



Matthias Schoenaerts and Marion Cotillard star in Jacques Audiard's Rust and Bone.

Photo credit: Roger Arpajou/Why Not Productions, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics

Once Alain falls into the orbit of the drop-dead gorgeous St  phanie (Cotillard), his entire demeanor rapidly changes. For the first time, tenderness and patience materialize on his boorish face. He's all too happy to help the poor woman after she loses both of her legs in a freak work-related accident. When St  phanie wakes up in an empty hospital room to find her legs gone, the moment is appropriately horrifying (evoking Ronald Reagan's infamous yelp, "Where's the rest of me?" in "King's Row"). It's equally startling to see the ever-radiant Cotillard look so brutally ravaged, never more so than when her face is drenched in harsh sunlight. Yet there isn't much to St  phanie beyond her galvanizing injury. We get little sense of what her life was like prior to the tragedy, what appeals to her about marine life and especially why she settles for such atrocious male partners. It's clear that Alain is attracted to her from the get-go, and that his kindness is strategically designed to get him closer and closer toward getting laid. He initially suggests that they have sex merely as an experiment to confirm that her other body parts function normally post-amputation. This scene gets a cheap laugh, but there's nothing amusing about Alain's brazen insensitivity or St  phanie's determination to put up with it.

Though Audiard wraps up the film with tidy narration accompanied by an amber-tinted glow, there's every indication that this unlikely couple's relationship is headed for certain disaster. St  phanie's disability has convinced her that she will fail to attract men, so she has decided to settle for the one guy who stuck by her side, regardless of his self-serving purposes. What an abysmal foundation for a relationship. Audiard and his cinematographer, St  phane Fontaine, spend a troubling amount of the film's two-hour running time lingering on foreboding, desaturated visuals that fail to bring the audience any closer toward understanding the central characters. There are a couple arresting compositions, particularly during the film's admittedly suspenseful climax, that are undercut by the script's frustrating shortcomings. Audiard desperately wants the audience to root for Alain's redemption, but he is entirely unworthy of it. All this guy deserves is a restraining order.



Matthias Schoenaerts stars in Jacques Audiard's *Rust and Bone*.

Photo credit: Roger Arpajou/Why Not Productions, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics

In place of character development, the script co-authored by Audiard and Thomas Bidegain throws several other plot-lines at the audience, none of which are adequately executed. One of the most intriguing involves Alain's long-suffering sister, Louise (C  line Sallette of "House of Pleasures"), who extricated herself from his path of destruction, and with good reason. When Alain proves again to be nothing but trouble, Louise lashes out at him in a scene that may have seemed cruel under different circumstances. Yet no amount of forced tears and hopeful gestures can erase the fact that Louise's biting criticisms are dead-on. As evidenced in "A Prophet," Audiard is skilled at capturing the grit and grime of a world shrouded in bleakness. "Rust and Bone" fails in its half-baked attempt at providing its characters with a light at the end of the tunnel. It's the sort of phony light Wile E. Coyote would charge at before being flattened like a pancake.

'Rust and Bone' stars Matthias Schoenaerts, Marion Cotillard, Armand Verdu  , C  line Sallette, Corinne Masiero and Bouli Lanners. It was written by Jacques Audiard and Thomas Bidegain and directed by Jacques Audiard. It was released December 21st at the Landmark Century Centre Cinema. It is rated R.



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