

## Animal Psychology Charges Rugged Thug Tale ‘The Drop’

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – For a film adapted from “Mystic River” and “Gone Baby Gone” author Dennis Lehane, there are no children in danger in “The Drop,” but there is a pit bull puppy named Rocco. The dog’s involvement in the story, an animal who gets as many closeups this side of a Charles Martin Smith film, invites the uncharacteristically blunt metaphor of how creatures fight for power, or even just the impression of power. Dogs bark; thugs try to stand tall.

“The Drop” tells of a neighborhood watering hole in Brooklyn owned by a guy nicknamed Cousin Marv (James Gandolfini), while his low-key cousin Bob (Tom Hardy) meekly tends the bar. Their lives are a microcosm of American small business in a 1% society, with Marv’s bar now owned by a Chechen gang. They use his place primarily as a “drop” to house their ever-exchanging bookkeep money. Even the church that Bob visits often without ever receiving communion is set to be torn down, the holy territory converted into condos.

Marv’s business is hit with a huge setback when it is robbed after being designated as a drop, a pulsing moment that doesn’t scare Marv and Bob, so much as leave them confused as to who would be naive enough to steal from their vicious boss. The Chechens start their own investigation, while Bob tries to dodge questions from a curious investigator (John Ortiz) of whom Bob also has a non-verbal acquaintanceship with at their shared church.

Bob’s quiet existence of living alone in his childhood home is complicated when he discovers an abandoned pit bull puppy in a trash can outside the house of a woman named Nadia (an underutilized Noomi Rapace), that he soon befriends. His impromptu pet Rocco brings him closer together with Nadia, but it also causes the sporadic visit from a strange ruffian (Matthias Schoenaerts) who often steps into Bob’s personal space, claiming to be the dog’s rightful owner.



‘The Drop’

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

Towards the film’s revealing third act, Hardy’s mysterious character Bob speaks a crucial line in the film, which might have more grit it didn’t feel so literal - “everybody has a past.” While director Michael R. Röksam casts his English-language debut with actors of distinct charisma and ever-evolving shapes, the fortitude behind these creatures of the underworld can be a bit shaky. Gandolfini’s Marv is its most significant example, an entity who becomes a progressively large investment for the story, but one whose twisting arc feels automatic, as if steered by the course of similar Lehane characters. Even the film’s center mystery, not that of what’s going on in the story, but just who the hell is Bob, makes for a weird question mark until a fulfilling third act. As expressed during Röksam’s gradual pacing, the dryness behind Bob’s presentation edges on tedious, especially as Hardy’s cold embodiment of Bob teases references to “Drive”-era Ryan Gosling, sans a close-up of the former Mouseketeer’s clenched fist.

Hardy and Gandolfini provide “The Drop” a stirring context, but it is Schoenaerts’ supporting performance that gives the story its vital context. His character is the film’s most intricate piece of evidence concerning its thesis on Thuggery. Following an arc of shady pest to slice of anarchy, Schoenaerts’ character provides a crux to the film’s chilly, gritty atmosphere. Schoenaerts is a discovery within this role that immediately demands more attention to his future work.

Lehane’s adaptation of his short story “Animal Rescue” has a scope of the underground comparatively minimized to the headline dramas of “Gone Baby Gone” and “Mystic River.” The stress within this story does not involve the danger of children as “Gone Baby Gone” and “Mystic River” or even “Shutter Island” so vividly expressed. Nor does the violence within these moments happen with the same headline magnitude, in which the outside world becomes involved with impulsive acts from underground that ricochet in the neighborhood and into the media. With “The Drop,” the underground and the past are private bits embedded into the characters, and even outsiders like Ortiz’s investigators can only coyly understand the bigger picture.



Tom Hardy & Matthias Schoenaerts  
Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

This isn't to say that "The Drop" is a minimal project, but that it takes a microscope to magnify the intricate thug psychology of the underworld, where vital impressions of power come from conjuring intimidating, chaotic presences. For whatever Röksam's adaptation of Lehane lacks in narrative electricity, he has compensation with these charged interactions of clashing matter-of-fact thuggery, displays of men distracting themselves from their own vulnerability by becoming actors, playing characters that are exaggerations of themselves, in hopes of getting their audience to believe them. Even a scene in Eric abruptly shows up at Bob's front door, and then insists on coming inside, aligns with the film's vivid perception on aggression. It presents how people try to survive when they are clashing small enterprises working for intangible larger aspirations. They just muster up a louder bark.

*"The Drop" opens in Chicago on September 12. Featuring Tom Hardy, James Gandolfini, Noomi Rapace, Matthias Schoenaerts and John Ortiz. Written by Dennis Lehane, adapted from his short story "Animal Rescue." Directed by Michael R. Röksam. Rated "R"*



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