

GFF 2014: Starred Up (David Mackenzie, 2013)



I woke up this morning still to find myself in the confined space of Starred Up. Isolating, dangerous and cut-throat, it's a realistic outing into the prison genre after years of being near destroyed by hyperbolic stories and substandard acting efforts (we're not pointing fingers, Mr. Dyer).

Surpassing the young offenders' institutions, Eric winds up a high risk inmate at a British prison. His 19 year-old mind still racing from the outside world, he struggles to understand how this incarcerated world works. As he meets his fellow inmate father for the first time in years, tensions heighten to an unbearable levels as he forms a rivalry rather than embracing the only recognisable figure.

Credit is most due here to the sublime Jack O'Connell, whose lead performance as Eric is absolutely astounding. His work here embodies a vindictive, violent figure who veers on the edge of being so infamous he becomes vulnerable. O'Connell's undeniable skill almost effortlessly melds into this role, as if he's been waiting to play Eric his whole life.

What makes Starred Up so different from its prison depicting predecessors is the fact that its solid script veers into the shocking but never overdoes it. The characters feel familiar, yet not clichéd. This is Jonathan Asser's work. His first feature outing as a screenwriter is due almost entirely to his work as a prison therapist before he wrote the film. The very little that seems predictable is perhaps a true depiction of what prison life is really like, and we as an audience have been the ignorant ones after all.

Starred Up is a vindictive, stark piece of British cinema that

refuses to let go days after you've seen it. Cold and haunting, you will never look at prison dramas in the same way again.

Starred Up has its UK release on March 21st