

EIFF 2015: Iona (Scott Graham, 2015)



When Iona and her son make the journey through the night from her Glasgow family home to the sand swept sights of the Scottish isles, barely a word is said. There's a power in this silence that says so much; deeply wounded from the very first frame. Another work of character driven beauty by the fantastic Scott Graham, he squeezes a grand emotive force from his script and lead star.

A woman and her son find themselves stuck and confused after a violent incident that instantaneously shapes their future. In order to avoid confrontation from the authorities, the pair escape to the island on which the woman was born; encountering the people they grew up with that never wanted, or managed to leave.

The effortless doyenne of Iona is Ruth Negga. Tackling the eponymous role with a quiet conviction, she's utterly hypnotic as a woman who has survived a torn childhood and grew up not knowing how to recover. Whether she is under the watch of the lens or not, you find that all of Iona's characters are influenced by this woman. With her arrival in the town, she sends things into a subtle imbalance; one that Graham allows the viewer to watch unfold over time making it all the more intriguing.

There is near enough no musical score either. Only hymnal choruses are ever heard as the film develops; signalling a movement from the film's torn familial tones to one of Christian existentialism. It marks Iona out to be a film of thematic breadth, and allows them to intertwine; something that a lot of films fail to do.

The constraints of the island's tight knit community come down on Iona with tenuous force. Both her and her child are obviously unwelcome here. As Billy, Iona's son, becomes close friends with Sarah (the daughter of Iona's adopted sister, Elizabeth), the result becomes maybe a little too predictable. This relationship's believability is dragged down by an all-too subtle performance from newcomer Ben Gallagher. His scarce, woodenly delivered lines indicate a character shocked by trauma maybe a little too strongly.

Paired with a series of plot holes that can be a little too obvious at times (this is the Scottish Highlands, remember, not the dark ages), it can be a little hard to consistently invest in the characters and their situations. The religious tones are often subtly scathing. But, we're never lost on it. It's artistic vision of rural Scotland and the people that reside there is always a beguiling watch.

On the surface, Iona is a weathered, subtle jeremiad; an ode to family, reliance and how childhood memories haunt us.



Iona was the Closing Night film of the Edinburgh International Film Festival 2015