

TwentyFourSeven, a film written and directed by Shane Meadows

A first effort, dangerously praised

By Simon Wheelan
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TwentyFourSeven (24/7) is the first full-length film by young British film director Shane Meadows. It has been widely praised, with one magazine proclaiming Meadows "the greatest film director in the world right now." Others have lauded him as the next John Cassavetes or Martin Scorsese.

The film does not live up to these expansive claims. The BBC financed *24/7*, after Meadows was brought to their attention by the relative success of his first two shorts, *Where's the money Ronnie?* and *Smalltime*. These were shot on a small budget with friends as actors and improvised scripts. These comedies tell the story of workers who become involved in petty crime due to the hardship they confront.

With a £1.5m budget provided by the BBC, Meadows has attempted something more ambitious with this film. In a recent interview, he explained that his aim is to give artistic expression to the lives of working class communities. "A lot of people in the area," he said, "would grow up being looked down on and feel their lives are not filmworthy. I saw it as a window to the world."

Meadows secured leading actor Bob Hoskins to play his main character, Darcy. The title of the film alludes to the banal existence--24 hours a day/seven days a week--of a group of disaffected young men in a deprived area of Nottingham. Set in the 1980s, *TwentyFourSeven* tells the cliched story of an older man, Darcy, who takes it upon himself to teach the "noble art" of boxing to these youth in order to keep them "out of jail."

Darcy speaks about the other side of the "boom" in the 1980s and describes himself as "a casualty" of it. In his youth he was in a boxing club and recalls that this gave him something to hope for. He has lived a lonely existence and takes his aunt out for ballroom dancing

as a substitute for a genuine relationship.

The movie has a comic edge, due to the abrasive humour of some of the characters. Meadows again uses a cast of unknowns, made up of friends and relatives, who acquit themselves adequately. Meadows's own background gives him an affinity with his characters' culture and lifestyle and lends the film authenticity, sadly lacking in much of today's cinema.

The use of black and white film helps depict the oppressive nature of the boys' lives and surroundings as Meadows seeks to paint a canvass of their alienation--not only from society but even from their friends and relatives. The use of location filming adds to the drudgery and greyness of the film's backdrop.

Meadows' film is in the end weak, however, because it does not probe beneath the surface of life. In one interview he explained, "I've had an affection for black and white films ever since I was a little lad. They manage to capture Britain in all its essence. Class becomes so obvious in black and white 1950s films--it was much more apparent in the dress, so I suppose that's what I was after." Whatever the merits, or otherwise, of the films that inspired him, the use of black and white imagery cannot compensate for a superficial approach to complex social and psychological issues.

Meadows falls back on one of the hoariest plot devices in cinema--"boxing as a form of redemption"--and ends up glorifying the brutalisation of working class youth as an expression of rugged individualism and even egalitarianism. Of the film's story line he states, "The idea of a boxing club was so much stronger because you've got to be in there by yourself and fight, even if you are in a team. What Bob Hoskins's character is saying is that it doesn't matter if you're a millionaire or if you've got 1pence--when someone smacks you on

the end of the nose its going to hurt just the same."

None of the characters, with the possible exception of Darcy, are allowed to develop beyond a simplistic one-dimensional image. One is hard pressed to remember more than two of the boys' names because they never rise above the level of caricature. Other characters share this downfall--the profanity-spewing inarticulate father, the "cor-blimey" small-time gangster from London, and the flirty "gangster's moll."

The film's intended theme is alienated youth and solitude, but we never learn of their hopes and fears, their motivations and aspirations. No character is allowed to flourish and their inner torment is merely declared rather than explored.

A case in point. Darcy takes the boys on a trip to Wales, which could have been an opportunity for the characters to reflect on their lives and for the director to explore the dynamics of relationships within the group. Instead, he opts for a few shots of juvenile behaviour, accompanied by a loud sound track that ends up looking like an irritating pop video on MTV.

Like so many British directors before him, Meadows defines an authentic "working class film" as one populated by stereotypes who drink, swear and fight. The workers in these films may be allowed to "feel," but are not allowed to think. The director depicts, but never seeks to illuminate or question.

How then are we to evaluate the uncritical praise bestowed on Meadows by film critics? Perhaps, happy to see their prejudices confirmed by a depiction of the "rawness and brutality" of working class life, they are willing to overlook the film's lack of any real depth or content. This does nobody any favours. Meadows has potential, but to realise this he needs to ignore those who seek to patronise him and develop a more mature and thoughtful approach to the subjects so close to his heart.

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