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The Guard

(Ireland)

By [Justin Chang](#)

An Element Pictures Distribution (in Ireland)/Optimum Releasing (in U.K.) release of a Reprisal Films and Element Pictures production in association with Prescience, Aegis Film Fund, U.K. Film Council, Crescendo Prods. and Eos Pictures, with the participation of the Irish Film Board. (International sales: Metropolis Films, London.) Produced by Chris Clark, Flora Fernandez Marengo, Ed Guiney, Andrew Lowe. Executive producers, Martin McDonagh, Don Cheadle, Lenore Zerman, Ralph Kamp, Tim Smith, Paul Brett, David Nash. Directed, written by John Michael McDonagh.

With: Brendan Gleeson, Don Cheadle, Liam Cunningham, David Wilmot, Rory Keenan, Mark Strong, Fionnula Flanagan, Dominique McElligott, Sarah Greene, Katarina Cas.

A crusty jewel of a performance by Brendan Gleeson goes a long way toward enlivening an otherwise routine tale of murder, blackmail, drug trafficking and rural police corruption in "The Guard." Rudely funny and faintly melancholic, both qualities stemming from the atmospheric backdrop of Ireland's west coast, screenwriter John Michael McDonagh's directorial debut is a stylish lark whose many disparate elements somehow manage to go down as smoothly as Guinness. Casting of Don Cheadle in a buddy-cop role opposite Gleeson should translate into a healthy theatrical profile abroad, though some of the caustic rogues-with-brogues dialogue would benefit from subtitles.

A fast-and-furious opening sequence, featuring two kids in a red sports car speeding recklessly along the Irish coast, seems to promise an entirely different film from the one that emerges. In short order, the camera slows down to settle on the figure of Garda Sgt. Gerry Boyle (Gleeson), an aging, irascible member of Galway's police force, as he wryly surveys the wreckage of the teenagers' joyride. Yet the picture maintains a brisk pulse and a steady flow of intrigue as Boyle and his youthful partner, McBride (Rory Keenan), discover the corpse of a man apparently connected to half a billion dollars or so in drug money (it's one of the script's running jokes that no one seems to remember exactly how much).

The seriousness of the investigation is signaled by the arrival of FBI Agent Wendell Everett (Cheadle), who is Boyle's opposite in almost every respect -- sober, straight-laced and professional whereas the Irishman is vulgar, undisciplined and known to cavort with prostitutes in the wee and not-so-wee hours. The differences between the two men, race being arguably the least of them, are so comically pronounced that Everett seems almost too obvious a foil for Boyle. Sure enough, after some crude but amusing culture-clash comedy (Boyle asks Everett if he grew up in the projects), the two bond over a pint, as well as the dawning realization that the rising body count can be traced back to Boyle's superiors.

In the twilight of an undistinguished law-enforcement career, Boyle becomes a classic figure of lone-ranger justice, battling institutional corruption with the help of a principled outsider. Fleshing out the role from an earlier short film, McDonagh (brother of playwright and "In Bruges" filmmaker Martin McDonagh) is clearly more interested in Boyle than in the standard police-procedural tropes he surrounds the character with, which is why the story never generates much in the way of suspense, or even a real sense of mystery: The chief villains (played by Liam Cunningham, Mark Strong and a scene-stealing David Wilmot) are revealed early on, in almost blase fashion.

Yet in lieu of an especially fresh or surprising crime yarn, "The Guard" offers fairly irresistible compensations. The filmmaking crackles with energy, from Chris Gill's crisp editing and Calexico's ever-inventive score to d.p. Larry Smith's dynamic camerawork, alternating between bright, almost candy-colored interiors and shots of Galway's gray, rugged landscape. A key action sequence is remarkable not only for its visual coherence, but for the beauty of the pier on which it's staged.

If the script is never as shockingly funny as "In Bruges" (which also starred Gleeson) in its profane-poetic way with language, it does demonstrate a firmer sense of tonal control. McDonagh is an equal-opportunity mocker, and at times, the plot seems to serve as a mere pretext for him to squeeze in every possible jab at the various nationalities and constituencies represented onscreen (local viewers may especially enjoy the casual put-downs of Dublin as a disease-ridden hellhole).

Fionnula Flanagan (as Boyle's sickly mum) and Katarina Cas (as McBride's Romanian wife) do poignant work in brief roles, and Cheadle makes an excellent straight man in a context that wisely lets him retain his American accent. But it's Gleeson who rightly owns the screen as a beer-swilling, crotch-grabbing, Derringer-firing crusader with one hell of a filthy mouth to go along with his heart of gold.

Camera (Technicolor, widescreen), Larry Smith; editor, Chris Gill; music, Calexico; music supervisor, Liz Gallacher; production designer, John Paul Kelly; art director, Lucy van Lonkhuyzen; costume designer, Eimer Ni Mhaoldomhnaigh; sound (Dolby Digital), Robert Flanagan; sound designer, Niall Brady; re-recording mixers, Tom Johnson, Michelle Cuniffe, Ken Galvin; special effects coordinator, Brendan Byrne; stunt coordinator, Donal O'Farrell; line producer, Paul Myler; associate producers, Elizabeth Eves, Lee Magiday; assistant director, Andrew Hegarty; second unit camera, John Gamble; casting, Jina Jay. Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (World Cinema -- competing), Jan. 20, 2011. Running time: 95 MIN.