There’s a bit of an unpleasant portrait being painted of the UK by its own cinema right now. In more straightforward fare like EDEN LAKE, F and HARRY BROWN, youth has run amok, becoming its own movement of chaotic and deadly violence. But in the Scottish feature OUTCAST (see review here) and Philip Ridley’s captivating and mind-boggling HEARTLESS (opening today in New York and LA December 3 from IFC Films), the supernatural is added to a very confrontational urban environment, making the real world come across just a bit more monstrous than it already does, creating a beautiful and exciting little niche of films.

In HEARTLESS, Jim Sturgess (from 21 and ACROSS THE UNIVERSE) essays the vulnerable and put-upon Jamie Morgan, a young photographer born with an overwhelmingly large birthmark that covers much of the left side of his face and extends onto his shoulder and arm. Because of this, Jamie hasn’t been the most social or outgoing young man for most of his life, losing himself behind his camera. As “hoodie” violence in his rundown estate reaches staggering new heights, Jamie has an encounter with the vicious gang responsible and, up close, sees they’re actually demons—which soon come searching for Jamie and brutally kill his mother, setting in motion a downward spiral for the young man.

Where it goes from there, however, is to a level of the fantastic that often diverts from itself, heading off on tangents in brief sections that, while consistently visually arresting and intriguing, don’t always seem to link up convincingly, or even make a lot of sense. The aforementioned monsters eventually lead Jamie to a sorcerer/devil/all-powerful being called Papa B (Joseph Mawle), with a young girl (Nikita Mistry) by his side. He offers the world to Jamie with all of the ill intent and trickery of Satan, the start of a whole other portion of the story involving the object of Jamie’s affection, Tia (IN BRUGES’ Clémence Poésy), and a wonderful cameo by SHERLOCK

HOLMES’ Eddie Marsan as “The Weapons Man.”

Ridley, whose eye and direction are stunning, unfortunately loses his footing when it comes to HEARTLESS’ pacing. The film often feels episodic, which can grow a bit tiresome. Nevertheless, it remains a journey that, despite its lack of clear focus at times, is a pleasure (and a fright) to go on. The work of the cast and crew is topnotch: Sturgess and his co-stars are all terrific, and the same can be said of the special makeup FX supervised by SHAUN OF THE DEAD’s Stuart Conran (particularly a moment involving a character who’s been badly burned).

HEARTLESS can feel a bit out of reach to the audience, but then again, I would imagine so can magic and the supernatural—which is why, overall, the movie works very, very well. Ridley has created something gorgeous if a bit abstract, and Sturgess’ Jamie is an affecting and engrossing character worth following. What he encounters will leave you equally mystified, frightened, tickled and possibly a bit hopeful and serene.

{jcomments on}