

'Free Fire' entertains expertly, if uncomfortably

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: ««« out of 4 stars

Running Time: 90 min.

Some features have “cult movie” written all over them. The new independent feature *Free Fire* is pretty certain to attain that title in the near future. It’s a gritty, grimy and punchy little picture that makes the most of a simple set-up and is filled with entertainingly oddball characters. You certainly wouldn’t want to hang out with any of the disagreeable hooligans featured, but watching them at their worst is a real hoot.

Set in the 70s, IRA members Frank (Michael Smiley) and Chris (Cillian Murphy) are in Boston attempting to secure arms for their cause. Along with gang members Stevo (Sam Riley) and Bernie (Enzo Cilenti), the team use intermediary Justine (Brie Larson) to get in touch with weapons dealer Vernon (Sharlto Copley) and representative Ord (Armie Hammer). Also on the scene are crewmembers Martin (Babou Ceesay), Gordon (Noah Taylor) and Harry (Jack Reynor). Let’s just say that most are not only heavily armed, but also not the sharpest knives in the drawer. Soon, shots ring out and all end up firing on one another.

The tale definitely bears some plot similarities to the 1992 feature *Reservoir Dogs*. However, they are significantly different in terms of tone and intent. There’s far more of an emphasis on humor in this production. This is notable right from the set up, with the posturing in funky 70s duds and soft period lighting, along with the particular kind of bickering and insults being thrown, even as the locale is being shot up (to the soothing sounds of John Denver, no less).

Amazingly, the entire tale is set within a single place; a dirty, dusty and abandoned warehouse.

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This also adds some amusing and distinctive camera angles, often low-down with the actors and following them mere feet and sometimes inches from the ground. After all, most of the characters are forced to slowly crawl around as they try to get the upper hand or just get out of the place without being turned into a piece of human Swiss cheese. It's a whole lot tougher than it initially appears, as nearly everyone involved takes a beating in one way or another.

As impressive as it looks, a movie like this is really all about the characters. Thankfully, the cast is absolutely first rate here. The movie devolves into chaos quickly and the faces on display lend for some immediate familiarity with the characters, allowing for the story, conflict and action to proceed on the spot. The events are often confusing for the participants as well. At times, they don't know who is on their side and can't even remember who has fired at them or who they should be taking aim at.

Everyone seems to have a moment or two to stand out. Vernon's germ-phobia and eccentricities lead to laughs. Other noteworthy moments include a decision made by Stevo to take some illicit drugs in order to help him endure the crisis (or at least put him in a strange stupor for it). The entire exercise is pared to the bone, but the performances are so strong that it's a great deal of fun just to watch them all growl and roll their eyes at one another. The performers appear to be having a great time and the sense of demented fun is quickly transferred to the viewer.

Admittedly, this isn't the type of movie that will appeal to all. It's foul-mouthed and starts off violently, escalating as it progresses before climaxing with some particularly nasty and wince-inducing altercations. It also doesn't appear to be a deep examination of the human condition. Instead, the movie comes across as a gnarly, over-the-top comedy poking fun at shoot-outs and other tropes of action cinema. Regardless, *Free Fire* does its job expertly, and is an awfully entertaining ride (or more accurately, crawl).

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For the Sun***