

Review: Brendan Gleeson lights up raucous comedy/thriller 'The Guard'



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The Guard

Rating:

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Imagine an Irish Tarantino movie that's a little squeamish about violence, but not much else, and you have a pretty good handle on "The Guard," a modestly mounted comedy/thriller opening this week in Albany. Irish actor Brendan Gleeson, best known to American audiences for his recurring role as Professor Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody in the later "Harry Potter" movies, stars as Sergeant Gerry Boyle, an Irish cop with unabashedly politically incorrect attitudes on race, and prodigious appetites for booze and hookers and the odd controlled substance.

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Gleeson shines in John Michael McDonagh's directorial debut, a raucous comedy/thriller that's a little rough around

the edges but never bores. "The Guard" is a comedic, fish-out-of-water tale of murder, blackmail, drug trafficking and rural police corruption, and the two cops who join forces to take on an international drug-smuggling gang. Don Cheadle plays the American FBI agent who's foisted on Boyle, and as in any good buddy movie, they have little in common and no initial use for each other. McDonagh, who also wrote the screenplay to "Ned Kelly," which starred the late Heath Ledger, Orlando Bloom and Geoffrey Rush, is the brother of playwright and director Martin McDonagh who wrote and directed "In Bruges," which also starred Gleeson.

Boyle takes nothing and no one seriously, but when a fellow police officer disappears and the small town Boyle patrols becomes an important location in a major drug-trafficking case, he is forced to deal with a humorless FBI agent (Don Cheadle) assigned to the case. There are resonances of "In the Heat of the Night," if from the view of the racist cop, but in other ways, "The Guard" is a western, and Boyle is cut from pretty much the same cloth as Rooster Cogburn. The music, by Arizona indie band Calexico, has an Ennio Morricone vibe.

Fionnula Flanagan is amusing and affecting as Boyle's mother, an intelligent, literate woman who's dying of cancer. In a marvelous bit of cinematic alchemy, McDonagh manages to take the situation of a middle-aged loner losing his mother and injects some humor into it. Although touching, it isn't depressing, their discussions about Russian lit. are reminiscent of scenes in Tarantino movies where characters stop to debate comic books and pop culture. The constantly working, chameleon-like Mark Strong has several scene-stealing moments as a world-weary gangster who's not happy with the quality of either modern cops or robbers.

Although the tone is reminiscent of Tarantino, McDonagh is not Tarantino's equal as a craftsman. There are some interesting visuals in "The Guard," often making use of the Irish landscape, but the overall effect is unpolished and the editing has a meat cleaver and staple-gun quality. The movie would not have been weakened by a more flamboyant touch with the action. Fair warning, by the way. Thick Irish brogues are the rule, not the exception and some of the dialogue is a little difficult to make out. Fear not, however. Entertaining and never boring, "The Guard" is well worth the effort.



***"The Guard" opens Friday, September 2nd, at the Spectrum 7 Theatre,
Delaware Avenue, Albany.***