

 '71 is a compulsive thriller movie set in Belfast as the city tips from civil unrest into the all-out horror of The Troubles. In the confusion of a riot, Hook, a young British squaddie (Jack O'Connell), is cut off from his unit, beaten, and barely escapes an execution. Disoriented and traumatised, Hook, barely out of boyhood, is caught between local warlords, psychotic gangsters, and the deadly agendas of his own side's undercover operators. "One of the most extraordinary films I've seen this year, a knuckle-mashing, head-smashing, Tommy-bashing tour de force" (Camilla Long, The Sunday Times).

Hook battles to stay alive on these treacherous city streets, but every safe haven he finds collapses in the rot of terror, mistrust and the ruthless momentum of civil war. If we struggle with the complexities of the sectarian politics and uneasy alliances, our bewilderment is identical with that of O'Connell's raw, untested Hook. As in all guerrilla wars, the enemy is hidden among the people, because the enemy is the people. Families live in ignorance of what is happening to their own. This is beautifully illustrated in this film, when a teenage assassin arrives home with the blood of a young soldier still wet on his clothes, to his mother's cheery enquiry, How was college ? Elayne Jude reviews the film.

The action catapults forwards with an unstable, unstoppable velocity. Hook's fate is determined less by his own survival skills than by the random kindness of strangers, the bloody turf wars of rival factions, and the cold calculations of British intelligence, whose operations Hook has unwittingly compromised. We have less idea than he does whether he will live out the night.

Supported by a uniformly excellent cast and crew, first time Anglo-French director Yann Demange, previously best known for his TV series 'Top Boy', and Jack O'Connell, graduate of 'Skins' and fresh from an extraordinary performance in this year's 'Starred Up', have both delivered work which puts their careers in the big league.

"Set in Belfast in 1971, but really it might be anywhere ♦ Sarajevo in the 1990s or Homs in the present day. The best war films always feel much bigger than any single conflict: this is so frightening and wild and real, it could have been done in a single bloody take." ( Camilla Long, Sunday Times).

Universal Soldier  
Director Yann Demange found the original idea "muscular, visceral and utterly engaging. Above all, the idea of young men sent to fight dirty wars also struck me as pertinent". The vanished backstreets of Belfast are brought to uneasy life among the bleak brick terraces of Liverpool, Blackburn and Sheffield; feeling fully authentic while sounding wider resonances, such as the night hunt scenes in 'The Hurt Locker', set in Baghdad. The claustrophobic alleys, outhouses and dead ends, shot by night in near-monochrome, are reminiscent of Carol Reed's classic 'Odd Man Out', in which wounded IRA gunman Johnny McQueen (James Mason) stumbles through a nightmarish labyrinth of Expressionist shadow, a dead man walking, ripped and quarrelled over by a pack of grotesques.

Raw Recruit  
Playwright Gregory Burke - best known for the Iraq play 'Black Watch', the National Theatre of Scotland's most celebrated production - was hired for his ability to deliver authentic voices. O'Connell's role was stripped like a racing machine of any extraneous dialogue, giving the actor no hiding place, and propelling him into a riveting performance that balances instinctive masculine toughness with wide-eyed vulnerability.

Light Thickens  
Hard men cut deals in smoke-filled backrooms, their faces, washed in sickly sodium oranges and murky greys, shadowy as their loyalties. The turf wars and horsetrading raging between these petty chieftans is mired in gloom, the unforgiving angles of the streets and alleys muffled in the literal fog of war and the sulphurous aftermath of violence. Credit for the brooding atmosphere goes to award winning cinematographer Tat Radcliffe (music videos for Anton Corbijn and John

Maybury, Casanova, The Shadow Line, and Top Boy with Demange). The music by Belfast-born composer David Holmes, ("Thankfully devoid of the cliched Celtic folkery most Ulster-set films are burdened with" Trevor Johnston, Sight and Sound), was scored before shooting. Demange listened to it on headphones on set, helping him intuit pace and tone, fine tune his ominous images.

Judgement Day: Deferred

'71 is spare on detail and words, instead bursting with kinetic energy and the chaos of civil war. Under a hand-held camera, the riot scenes are a blur of fear and dislocation, the soldiers washed back and forth on a tide of anger they cannot comprehend." (Kate Muir, The Times )

Jack O'Connell 's reading of script found "no answers, no attempt to shift the blame". The film 'adopts an apolitical nihilism' (Mark Kermode, Observer.) Laconic Hook is not given any cathartic monologue of final understanding. He does not know if he is Catholic or Protestant; he does not find out. The canniest analysis comes from the Catholic doctor who, during a wincingly suggestive scene of improvised surgery involving a darning needle and a rag between the teeth, reveals that he is a former Army medic, and pronounces that the Army is a "bunch of rich c\*\*\*\* telling a bunch of thick c\*\*\*\* to kill poor c\*\*\*\*". The situation is a mess, and years of mess will follow. "The cast is split into people who don't know what they're doing and people who really don't know what they're doing; and the result is the delicious, sweating, petrol-driven tang of chaos" (Camilla Long, Sunday Times).