'Of Gods and Men' and 'Biutiful' viewed at the Cornerhouse

Reviewed by Anne Ryan April 2011

To mark the bank holidays and the long weekends which some of us are enjoying, the Cornerhouse has been showing some of its recent greatest hits - two of which are the most successful foreign language films of 2010, 'Of Gods and Men' and 'Biutiful'.

The first, directed by Xavier Beauvois, stars an ensemble cast of French actors and led by Lambert Wilson and Michael Lonsdale. This Cannes prize winner depicts a group of Trappist monks under threat by fundamentalist terrorists in Algeria who must decide whether to leave their impoverished community or stay and face their fate.

Based on true events in the ongoing civil war in the North African state, the monks are forced to question their faith and their obligations to the Algerians with whom they trade and work, providing vital medical care. Is their obligation to provide succour to the poor and how deep is their faith which must sustain them when facing the threat of death?

It is their fraternity and their faith which sustains them – in a subtle and understated film, which at times transports one to the peace and tranquillity of the community, even while under threat. This is not a film that was ever going to reach a mass audience, and is yet another reason to be grateful to the Cornerhouse, which deserves our continuing support in providing an alternative to the multiplexes.

By contrast to this ensemble film is 'Biutiful' directed by Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritua and dominated by another Cannes award winner Javier Bardem.

The actor almost disappears into the role of a man trying to settle his life before death – he is seeking to arrange the practical and financial future of his children and achieve spiritual redemption. Already struck by cancer he must also deal with his thieving co-workers and unreliable family whom he seeks to rehabilitate to build a family for the children he must leave.

Sometimes the film seeks to take on too many of the global issues which affect the character's life - immigration, health care, crime and urban decay, and is more successful when concentrating on Bardem and his very personal struggles. It is such a towering performance that the other characters are somewhat overshadowed, but it is a wonderful depiction of a man's love for his children.

Perhaps an unusual way to spend a couple of hours on a sunny Bank Holiday, but a very rewarding one, and yet another reason to keep an eye on the Cornerhouse's website for returning favourites.