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Review: Love Is Wild, if Not Pretty, in ‘God’s Own Country

GOD’S OWN COUNTRY | NYT Critic’s Pick | Directed by Francis Lee | Drama, Romance | 1h 44m

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Josh O’Connor, left, and Alec Secareanu in “God’s Own Country.”
Agatha A. Nitecka/Orion Pictures, Samuel Goldwyn Films

Trapped between skies like beaten tin and earth scrubbed raw by wind and rain, the characters in “God’s Own Country” are well used to harshness. Like Johnny (Josh O’Connor), who labors on his struggling family farm in Yorkshire under the critical eyes of his sick father (Ian Hart) and stolid grandmother (Gemma Jones). For relief, he vents his frustrations in binge-drinking and furtive, feral sex with random young men.

These taciturn encounters, unfolding as unsentimentally as the internal exam he gives a pregnant heifer, suggest someone disgusted by his own sorry self. But this bracing, sometimes brutal movie — the feature debut of the writer and director Francis Lee — doesn't present Johnny's sexuality as the cause of his self-loathing. Rather, it's his imprisonment by a legacy he's not sure he wants that ties his tongue and clots his emotions.

Both are about to be loosened. The arrival of Gheorghe (Alec Secareanu), a gentle, darkly handsome Romanian migrant worker, softens Johnny's heart and the movie's tone. Their passion isn't pretty, but awkward and pasty and explicit: two frantic strangers grappling in the muck of the moors. Yet Gheorghe is skilled at handling more than newborn lambs; and as the men grow closer, the glowering light grows warmer and the whole picture seems to briefly exhale.

Filmed with a naturalism that recalls Andrea Arnold's 2012 dive into "Wuthering Heights," "God's Own Country" weaves a rough magic from Joshua James Richards's biting cinematography and the story's slow, unsteady arc from bitter to hopeful. Bodily fluids — bestial and human — stain the screen, punctuating a story that's as much about rediscovering place as finding love. So when Gheorghe looks out at the brooding countryside and murmurs "It's beautiful here," we sense that Johnny really doesn't need persuading.

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Director Francis Lee

Running Time 1h 44m

Writer Francis Lee

Genres Drama, Romance

Stars Josh O'Connor, Gemma Jones,
Harry Lister Smith, Ian Hart, Alec Secareanu



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