

Film Review: 'Welcome to the Punch'



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James McAvoy-starrer aims to class up the cops-and-robbers formula with more distinguished thespians

*Guy Lodge (<http://variety.com/author/guy-lodge/>)
[@guylodge](http://twitter.com/@guylodge) (<http://twitter.com/@guylodge>)*

In 2008, [Eran Creevy](http://variety.com/t/eran-creevy/)'s bristly, assured microbudget debut "Shifty" set higher expectations than those fulfilled by his flashier follow-up "[Welcome to the Punch](http://variety.com/t/welcome/)." A proficient but personality-free policer that demands little of either its audience or its enviable best-of-British cast, this simplistic urban morality tale miscasts the appealing [James McAvoy](http://variety.com/t/james-mcavoy/) as one good cop whose dogged pursuit of [Mark Strong](http://variety.com/t/mark-strong/)'s alpha criminal only uncovers the rot within police ranks. The slickly crafted pic resembles a particularly pumped-up episode of U.K. procedural "The Bill," but should perform well enough in Blighty to secure Creevy further big-ticket genre assignments.

In 2012, [Nick Love](http://variety.com/t/nick-love/) (<http://variety.com/t/nick-love/>)'s adaptation of smallscreen stalwart "[The Sweeney](http://variety.com/t/the-sweeney/) (<http://variety.com/t/the-sweeney/>)" proved U.K. auds' enduring appetite for testosterone-enhanced cops-and-robbers fare. But where that sleeper hit wore its B-movie credentials on its sleeve, "[Welcome to the Punch](http://variety.com/t/welcome-to-the-punch/) (<http://variety.com/t/welcome-to-the-punch/>)" (which boasts Ridley Scott among its executive producers) aims to class up the formula with more distinguished thespians and an undercooked, even naive political subplot. To what extent it succeeds depends in part on how willing viewers are to accept the eternally boyish McAvoy as a hardened crime fighter. The 2008 blockbuster "Wanted" made a knowing virtue of the actor's lack of action-man qualifications, but he seems less comfortable with this more po-faced material.

The slam-bang opening sequence sets up the rather basic running conflict between McAvoy's Max, a scruffy but honest detective in central London, and Strong's Jacob, a wily crime boss whose crimes are rather vaguely defined throughout; character detail in Creevy's bland script doesn't extend far beyond "good" or "bad." After an elaborately choreographed car-and-motorcycle chase through the deserted streets and subways of London's business district that wouldn't have been entirely out of place in a James Bond pic, Jacob escapes when Max is felled by a bullet to the knee, an injury still plaguing him physically and psychologically when the narrative jumps forward three years.

Jacob is still at large, having retired to a good view of the Northern Lights in Iceland. Max, now partnered with brazenly idealistic junior cop Sarah (a game but underused [Andrea Riseborough](http://variety.com/t/andrea-riseborough/) (<http://variety.com/t/andrea-riseborough/>)) has largely submitted to his superiors in resigned disappointment over letting his man slip through his fingers. Hope resurfaces when Jacob's teenage son Ruan (Elyes Gabel) is taken into custody following a botched heist, luring his dad back to London for a final showdown.

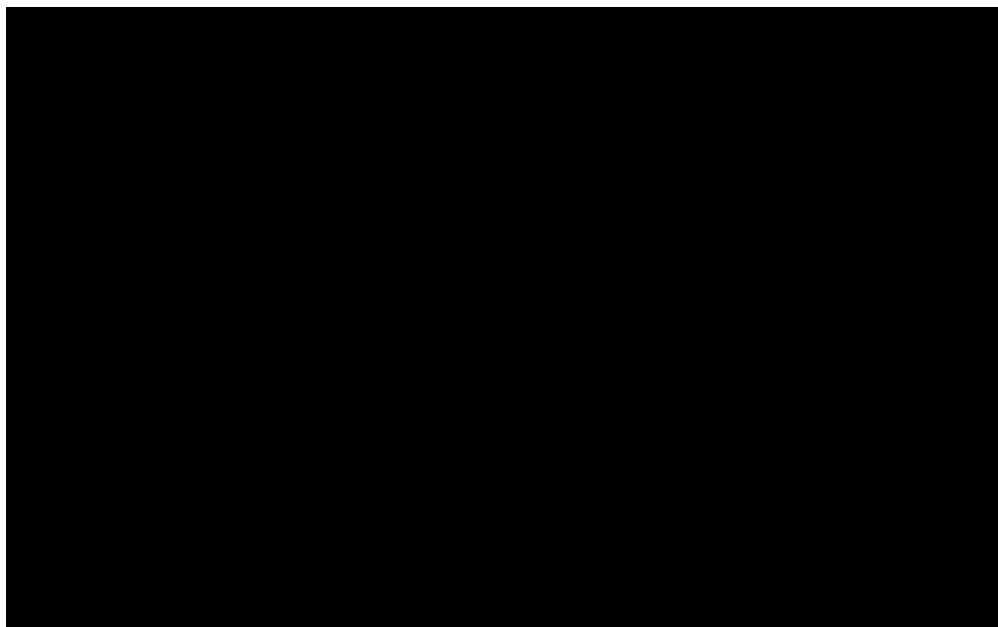
Viewers won't be surprised, however, that Max's corrupt employers pose an even greater danger to him than Jacob does — a would-be twist telegraphed practically from the outset, as police chief Geiger ([David Morrissey](http://variety.com/t/david-morrissey/) (<http://variety.com/t/david-morrissey/>)) is shown to be in questionable cahoots with a shadow Home Secretary (Robert Portal) on the campaign trail. This narrative shift into "State of Play"-style political thriller territory is ill-defined and short on specifics: Creevy's script doesn't name a party, though Conservatives won't be happy with the politicians' color-coding.

That said, blue — albeit of a steelier, Michael Mann-referencing shade — is the dominant hue of the entire enterprise, as talented d.p. Ed Wild does his

best to transform London's East End into a sleek action playground more along the lines of Los Angeles or even Hong Kong. (The titular "Punch" refers to a container in a vast shipping yard where the film's tautest suspense sequence plays out.) Oddly, considering the scale of his last project, Creevy is on surer, arguably more credible footing when the film gives in to macho, bullet-riddled excess — bolstered by Harry Escott's percussive, electro-flavored score — than when trading in bureaucratic conspiracy theories.

McAvoy puts a brave face on things, but his closed-off character simply doesn't play to his affable strengths as a leading man; a greater emphasis on Max's barely broached romantic chemistry with Sarah might have helped. Still, he gets more to work with than the reliably stony Strong, here adding a fairly indistinct portrait to his gallery of toughs.

It's the oldest pros in the ensemble, in fact, who come off best: [Peter Mullan](http://variety.com/t/peter-mullan/) (<http://variety.com/t/peter-mullan/>) isn't straining himself as Strong's senior sidekick, but brings a grizzled wink to his line readings. Meanwhile, a deliciously out-of-place Ruth Sheen brings welcome comic relief as a "Calamity Jane"-loving oldster who wouldn't make it five minutes into this violent potboiler.



Welcome to the Punch

(U.K.)

Reviewed at 20th Century-Fox, London, March 11, 2013. Running time: 99 MIN.

A Momentum Pictures (in U.K.) release of a Worldview Entertainment, British Film Institute, IM Global, Alliance Films presentation of a Between the Eyes, Automatik Entertainment, Scott Free Prods. production in association with Quickfire Films. (International sales: IM Global, London.) Produced by Rory Aitken, Ben Pugh, Brian Kavanaugh-Jones. Executive producers, Christopher Woodrow, Molly Conners, Stuart Ford, [Xavier Marchand \(http://variety.com/t/xavier-marchand/\)](http://variety.com/t/xavier-marchand/), Jan Pace, Ridley Scott, [Liza Marshall \(http://variety.com/t/liza-marshall/\)](http://variety.com/t/liza-marshall/), Maria Cestone, Sarah Johnson Redlich, James Atherton. Co-producers, [Andrew Warren \(http://variety.com/t/andrew-warren/\)](http://variety.com/t/andrew-warren/), Jack Arbuthnott. Co-executive producers, Hakan Kousetta.

Directed, written by Eran Creevy. Camera (color, widescreen, HD), Ed Wild; editor, Chris Gill; music, Harry Escott; production designer, Crispian Sallis; art director, Hauke Richter; set decorator, Geraint Powell; costume designer, Natalie Ward; sound (Dolby Digital), Colin Nicolson; supervising sound editor, Joakim Sundstrom; re-recording mixers, Per Bostrom, Fredrik Stalne; visual effects supervisor, Gus Martinez; visual effects, the Brewery; stunt coordinator, Dickey Beer; assistant directors, Joe Geary, Henry Tomlinson; casting, Sasha Robertson, Nina Gold.

With: James McAvoy, Mark Strong, Andrea Riseborough, David Morrissey, Peter Mullan, Dannielle Brent, Johnny Harris, Daniel Mays, Daniel Kaluuya, Ruth Sheen, Jason Maza, Jason Flemyng, Robert Portal, Elyes Gabel, Steve Oram.