

Peterborough Arts Cinema

Films that make you think

Thursday 8th November at 7:30 pm

The Square (2017) Sweden

R | 2h 31min

Director, Ruben Östlund.

Stars Claes Bang, Elizabeth Moss, Dominic West

Christian is the respected curator of a contemporary art museum, a divorced but devoted father of two who drives an electric car and supports good causes. His next show is "The Square", an installation which invites passersby to altruism, reminding them of their role as responsible fellow human beings. But sometimes, it is difficult to live up to your own ideals: Christian's foolish response to the theft of his phone drags him into shameful situations. Meanwhile, the museum's PR agency has created an unexpected campaign for "The Square". The response is overblown and sends Christian, as well as the museum, into an existential crisis.

Winner Palme D'Or Best Director.



Interview **Ruben Östlund.**

Östlund is bearded and ruffled and reeks of the outdoors – a child of nature come to gatecrash high society. He says he loves the Alps; he loves to ski. He spent most of his 20s shooting extreme sport videos. “Then I got bored of resorts. Too many lift queues.” I think the ski slope’s loss might be cinema’s gain. Or possibly he’s just swapped one extreme sport for another. Östlund’s latest film, *The Square*, crash-landed on the festival as a last-minute addition, still warm from the editing suite.

Before it became a film, *The Square* was actually a physical square. Östlund and his producer Kalle Boman [installed it as a social experiment at the Vandalorum Museum](#) in Värnamo, Sweden in 2014. On the opening night, drunken youths stole the plaque. Afterwards the square became a base for buskers, beggars and protesters. Office workers gathered to eat lunch on sunny days. Lovers proposed within its borders. In this way the installation took on a life of its own. “We were no longer in control of the square,” Östlund says. “How it is used is up to the people of the city. If they abuse it, it reveals something about them. If they treat it well, it says something interesting, too.” All these ideas would seed and water his film.

The thing is, Östlund says, he has never regarded himself as a fiction film director. The plan was always to make documentaries. He fell into drama almost by accident and scored a breakout hit with 2014’s avalanche saga [Force Majeure](#), in which a middle-class dad abandons his family at the first whiff of danger – and then compounds the crime by lying about it. Human behaviour is what fascinates him: how people respond to a crisis; how they rub against the wider environment. For better or worse, Östlund’s characters are defined by split-second decisions. “Basically,” he says, “all my films are about people trying to avoid losing face.”

The Square, for instance, contains a fabulous scene in which Dominic West’s artist is interviewed on stage at a theatre. Julian claims to be most fascinated by “human responses to art” and yet he is thrown off his stride by a man with Tourette syndrome, who periodically bellows expletives from the floor. “Fuck off!” the man explodes. “Cocksucker!” The rest of the audience don’t know where to look.

Östlund explains that this episode, too, was lifted from experience. “I have a good friend who’s a theatre director in [Sweden](#),” he says. “And one night I was sitting in the audience watching the play when this guy starts clapping and then shushing himself. Clapping and shushing. But very loudly, you know, everybody could hear him. So we’re all sitting there and our attention is split. What’s more interesting? The play on the stage or the man in the seat? And every time the actors did a loud scene, the man would get more excited. So now the actors are terrified! ‘Oh my God, I’m coming to the scene where I have to raise my voice and that’s only going to set him off’.” Östlund bursts out laughing. “It was probably the best play I’ve ever seen in my life.”

The director was raised far from the hurly-burly – on the small island of Stryö off the southern coast of Sweden. His mother was a teacher and painted landscapes on the side. It was she, he says, who first taught him to trust his vision, to stay true to his instincts. Then later, studying at the Gothenburg film school, he found himself electrified by [Harmony Korine’s](#) *Gummo* and Michael Haneke’s *Code Unknown* – a pair of art-house classics that caught human life in the raw. These, above all, showed him what a fiction film could achieve.

