

WINNER
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LOS ANGELES FILM AWARDS
2024

WINNER
Festigious
INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL
MONTHLY EDITION
2024

*"We are drawn into the two different worlds
of privilege and the other of the lower class
and want to witness what happens as these
two worlds begin to merge"*

Screen Craft

"cliffhangers that drive the story forward"
Cannes Film Festival Review

Burke and Hare

The West Port Murders

2 Men. 2 Women. 16 Murders

In the dark alleys of Edinburgh in 1828, a plan has been hatched by Burke and Hare to escape the desperate poverty that risks their very survival.

With the help of their wives, they entice poor and vulnerable victims to their lair, where they are murdered and their bodies supplied to the anatomist, Dr. Knox for payment beyond their wildest dreams.

Meanwhile Archibald Johnson, reporter for the Edinburgh Courant, has been contracted by the city's Fathers to identify the perpetrators who are robbing bodies from the local graveyards.

This leads him into a dangerous journey of discovery, where he confronts Andrew Merrilees (leader of a vicious organised crime gang who rule the under belly of the city) and ultimately back to the university, the destination of the bodies that are being supplied, and the source of information on the murder of Mary Paterson, which draws him deeper into the investigation.

Assuming there is a link to Merrilees, Johnson is drawn closer to the activities of Burke and Hare, that results in the revelation of their heinous crimes.

On capture, Hare and his wife double cross their accomplices by providing King's Evidence to escape trial, resulting in the hanging of Burke.

The story highlights the desperate needs of the antagonists to survive by any means, the disparity between the snobbery of the rich, the survivalism of the poor and the internal rivalries amongst both the murderers and the university professors that reside in a melting pot of greed and power.



The Characters

Burke

A 29 year old Irish immigrant who served in the army and worked as a labourer. Uneducated, he relies more on his brawn than his head. Easily led, he has a vulnerability to his character, but he can be impulsive.

He sometimes thinks he is cleverer than he really is, which can lead him to become argumentative and aggressive. His head is easily muddled, resulting in fluctuating emotions between greed and guilt.

Dedicated to his partner, Helen McDougal, he wants to provide her with a life more prosperous than the one they have.

He initially possesses an unquestionable respect for Hare, but this is soon tested.



The Characters

Hare

A 28 year old Irish immigrant who served in the army and worked as a labourer. He may be uneducated, but he is cunning, manipulative and psychopathic.

His only interests are in his self and he will do anything to achieve his objectives.

Married to Margaret, their partnership, to him, is only one of convenience. Uncouth at heart, he can change character depending on the situation from subservient to aggressor.

He is the one who drives forward the plan that is hatched and he will take no prisoners in his personal journey.



The Characters

Archibald Johnson

28 year old who works for the Edinburgh Courant as a reporter, he is a man of moral conviction and trustworthy.

His over confidence can lead him into taking risks, which can impact on others, even if well intentioned.

This is a man who is determined and driven to achieve his objectives. Well respected, others see him as someone who is reliable and capable of delivering any task given to him.

Although he is one to refrain from violence, if push comes to shove there is an inner part of him that can cross the Rubicon into a darker place.



The Characters

Margaret Hare

An Irish immigrant, mother and owner of the lodgings where the foursome live, Margaret has a streak of selfishness that is only matched by her sense of entitlement.

Although devoted to Hare, she sees herself as the matriarch and is not shy to remind him who is boss, that can result in a battle of wills with her companion.

Her greed for wealth drives her to enthusiastically play her part in the plan with the expectation that anyone who shows signs contrary to her commitment is eyed with suspicion.

Helen McDougal

The youngest of the foursome, Helen comes from a solid family background based in the Scottish countryside that has formed a moral compass in her character. Even so, there is a lack of strength in character that can allow her to submit to the opinion of the majority, allowing her head to be clouded by pressure, but when forced into a corner her sense of survivalism can reveal a hard edge willing to revert to violence.



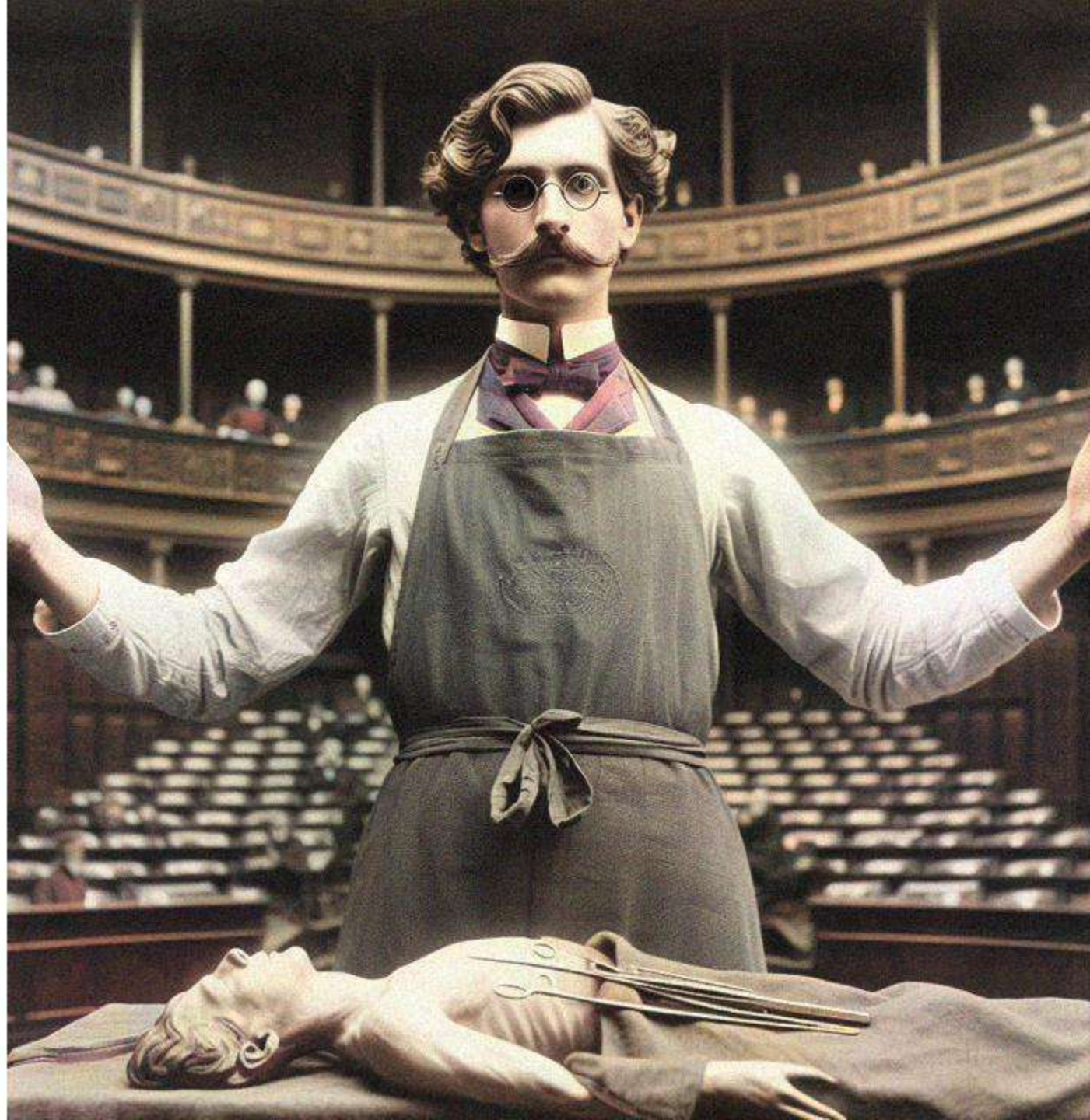
The Characters

Doctor Robert Knox

Educated and self confident, Knox sees himself as a man of destiny. Driven to reach his career objectives within the world of anatomy, his morals can be bypassed if it means success in his achievements.

His pomposity reveals his discard for others, but he has the self control to expose it depending on the circumstances and company he keeps.

Sharp of mind, he revels in the adoration afforded by his students, projecting himself as a man of authority and mentor to all who will follow with the power of his status dazzling others to bid his will.



The Characters

Andrew Merrilees

Here stands a man vicious to the core. Leader of an organised crime gang, he holds no respect to life or law. Viewing the world through his prism of greed and power, there are no boundaries in his psyche.

Cunning and intimidating, his presence wreaks fear, as he lurks in the shadows where authorities will not tread.

Described as one who “sits with the devil”, Merrilees is not a man to be crossed for to do so would surely result in a risk to life.



The Characters

Sergeant Fisher

A no nonsense man, Fisher exudes authority and control as he runs the police station with an iron grip.

Broad in stature with hands like shovels, he doesn't suffer fools gladly and is intimidated by no-one, irrespective of their status.

He strides forth, bringing order and reassurance to the people of the city among the streets where crowds part in his presence for he is the law and woe betide anyone who falls foul of his judgement.



The Characters

Dapper

Scuttling in the shadows, Dapper keeps his ear to the ground. A sneaky, devious snitch, he is the last person you would want to trust.

Unkempt with a body odour that could empty a room, this delinquent is always looking to make a fast buck. He will greet you with an uncomfortable smile, but behind his beady eyes he is nurturing a cunning plan.



The Characters

David Paterson

Knox's doorman and all round dog's body is a sleekit individual. Organised and hard working, he seeks opportunity to please his master who he is indefatigably loyal to.

He is a solitary figure who lives alone in the same poor West Port vicinity, content with his lot. Although receiving a regular wage, if there is a chance to earn a few more coins, he will grasp the moment.

With a reserved admiration for Burke and Hare, murder is not beyond his means.



The Episodes

Episode 1

Archibald Johnson, reporter for the Edinburgh Courant, interviews Dr Knox, during which he raises the subject of grave robbing and the appropriation of dead bodies. This is also a common cause for concern amongst the university professors who are seen as rivals to Knox.

Meanwhile Burke and Hare, on providing the dead body of Old Donald who has died from natural causes (for which they are paid handsomely) hatch a plan of murder to supply their benefactor, Dr Knox, with the bodies. Persuading their wives that the plan will enable them to escape poverty and the threat of their very survival through another harsh winter, the foursome embark on their murderous journey.

Knox attends a gathering with other professors, including rival Professor Munro, where the conversation becomes uncomfortable as some accuse Knox of obtaining too many bodies which impacts on their own lectures.

Johnson approaches Munro about his suspicions of Knox, who suggests metaphorically that there is indeed something worth investigating.

Having supplied his editor with the interview for the next edition, Johnson indicates his interest in pursuing his suspicions of Knox and subsequently visits a graveyard where bodies have been stolen. He discovers a scrap of paper, which has been discarded by the resurrectionists, suggesting a connection to Knox and the university.

Knox's sisters receive an invitation to a charity bazaar, at which Sir Walter Scott is due to attend. He leaves the residency he shares with them to visit his pregnant wife Susan, who is regarded by his sisters as below their status. She urges Knox to show no weakness in his rivalry with his colleagues.

Burke and Hare attract the attentions of an old lady and her grandson, luring them into their lodgings. In the presence of the sleeping child, they murder the old lady, only to discover (after the act) that the child has witnessed their terrible deeds.

Burke and Hare
The West Port Murders



The Episodes

Episode 2

After an aggressive argument between Hare and the women, he takes it upon himself to murder the boy much to their consternation. It is the first sign of fractures within the group.

Johnson is contracted by the city's Fathers to investigate who is behind the grave robbing, with an offer of money and unrestricted access to any prosecutions that result.

Student Dr Lonsdale is part of a group of revellers in a tavern which includes both Janet Brown and Mary Paterson.

Meanwhile Johnson meets with Dapper, a local snitch, and requests an audience is arranged with Andrew Merrilees, the leader of a crime gang.

Days later, Janet and Mary come upon Burke who invites them to the lodgings. Eventually overcome with alcohol, Mary is unconscious on the bed as Helen walks in on the scene causing a commotion. Aggressively ejected, Helen seeks solace from Margaret Hare while Burke makes speedy haste from the lodgings with Janet to escape the furore.

Johnson confronts Knox's assistant, Paterson, with the note he found and questions their association with the grave robbing. Hare arrives at the lodgings with the women, to find the comatose Mary, and is angry with Burke who returns alone. They murder Mary but subsequently they violently fight each other due to their disagreement on who is in charge.

Having sought the help of Mrs Lawrie, who both Janet and Mary worked for, Janet returns to the lodgings with Mrs Lawrie's maid, seeking Mary. Janet decides to remain alone and wait for the return of Mary (whom she assumes is alive) but only just escapes her own murder with the return of the maid who impresses on her to leave the lodgings at once.

Some time later, Dr Lonsdale attends a lecture by Knox and recognises the dead body of Mary Paterson lying on the plinth, raising his concern of her death.



The Episodes

Episode 3

Knox's sisters attend the charity bazaar where they meet Sir Walter Scott, who in quiet conversation with his associate questions rumours about Knox's ethics.

Johnson is accompanied with Dapper who escapes the scene as Merrilees and his thugs appear. Merrilees is aware of who Johnson really is (rather than the anatomist he claims to be) and Johnson is brutally attacked.

Hare suggests to Helen that Burke is weak while at the lodgings, having woken from a terrifying dream, the trembling Burke is offered the suggestion by Margaret Hare that he should murder Helen who is suspected of being a threat to their union.

Days later, Johnson, bruised and battered, enters the university seeking anyone who knows Merrilees but is confronted by Knox who ridicules him amongst the students. Johnson is ejected but subsequently approached by Dr Lonsdale who informs him of Mary Paterson.

This leads Johnson to search for Janet on the assumption the murder is related to Merrilees, but on finding her, he discovers the existence of Burke and Hare and he request she show him where they reside.

Having left the city to visit family, Burke and Helen return and inform Hare they are moving to a new residence in the same alley. Before they move, they murder the young, disabled Daft Jamie during a tense scuffle in which Jamie nearly escapes.

Knox's sister, Mary, discovers Knox knows Burke and Hare who had previously accosted Jessie Knox in the street.

Janet leads Johnson to the lodgings where they are confronted by Hare in a tense face-off.

The two murderers kill their final victim, Mrs Docherty in Burke and Helen's lodgings.



The Episodes

Episode 4

Mr and Mrs Gray discover the body of Mrs Docherty and despite protestations from Helen and Margaret they inform the police.

There is commotion at the lodgings with the arrival of the police (witnessed by Johnson) while Hare hides in the cellar with the dead body of Mrs Docherty.

Sgt Fisher questions Burke and the two women in a tense atmosphere but with no body to be found they leave, only for Johnson, later, to approach Sgt Fisher indicating Knox may be involved. Fisher visits Knox at the Surgeons Hall and find the murdered victim leading them to return to the lodgings and arrest the four perpetrators.

Hare and Margaret double cross Burke and Helen by providing King's Evidence and so elude being charged, much to Burke's anger.

The trial ensues and, through flashback, the final murder reveals the lies Hare provides as a witness compared to the actual events.

Helen is found not guilty but Burke is sentenced to hang.

Prior to the hanging, Johnson visits Burke in his cell, offering him the chance to provide his story.

In front of a crowd of 30,000 on a dark, stormy day, Burke is hanged while the others escape the city. Meanwhile Sir Walter Scott protests Knox's intentions to provide a presentation to the Royal Society which leads to the downfall of his career.

Professor Munro, a rival to Dr. Knox stands in from of an audience of students (identical to one in the opening scenes) and reveals the body of Burke lying on the plinth to loud applause.



Scenes



Burke and Hare meet with priest to arrange burial of Old Donald, but intend to remove His body from the coffin.



Archibald Johnson enters the slums to find Janet Brown. Crossing a courtyard, children run past dressed for Halloween.



Dr. Knox and Professor Munro discuss the appropriation of bodies at a gentlemen's club.



Scenes



Andrew Merrilees appears from out of the shadows to meet Archibald Johnson.



Burke and Hare pull a cart with a tea chest containing a body through the dark streets.



Mary Paterson talks to Archibald Johnson in tavern.



Scenes



Hare hides in the cellar with a tea chest containing a body.



Sgt. Fisher confronts Burke in the lodgings.



A victim wails in terror as Hare approaches.

Scenes



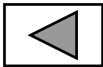
Jessie and Mary Knox meet Sir Walter Scott at charity bazaar.



Margaret Hare entices Daft Jamie with an apple.



Lawyer questions witness in the trial.



Awards

Best Script Award – London

Award winner
10 July 2024

Los Angeles Film Awards

Award Winner
9 March 2024

Festigious

Award Winner
7 March 2024

Bridge Fest

Winner for February
8 February 2024

New York Screenwriting Awards

Honorable Mention
20 March 2024

Cinematography & Photography Award

Honorable Mention
27 June 2024

London International Screenwriting Festival

Semi-Finalist
20 December 2023

Cambridge Script Festival

Finalist
23 January 2024

Colortape International Film Festival

Selected
30 January 2024

International Screenwriting Competition New Jersey

Quarter Finalist
12 January 2024

Bridge Fest for 2024

Selected
26 January 2024

Berlin International Screenwriting Festival

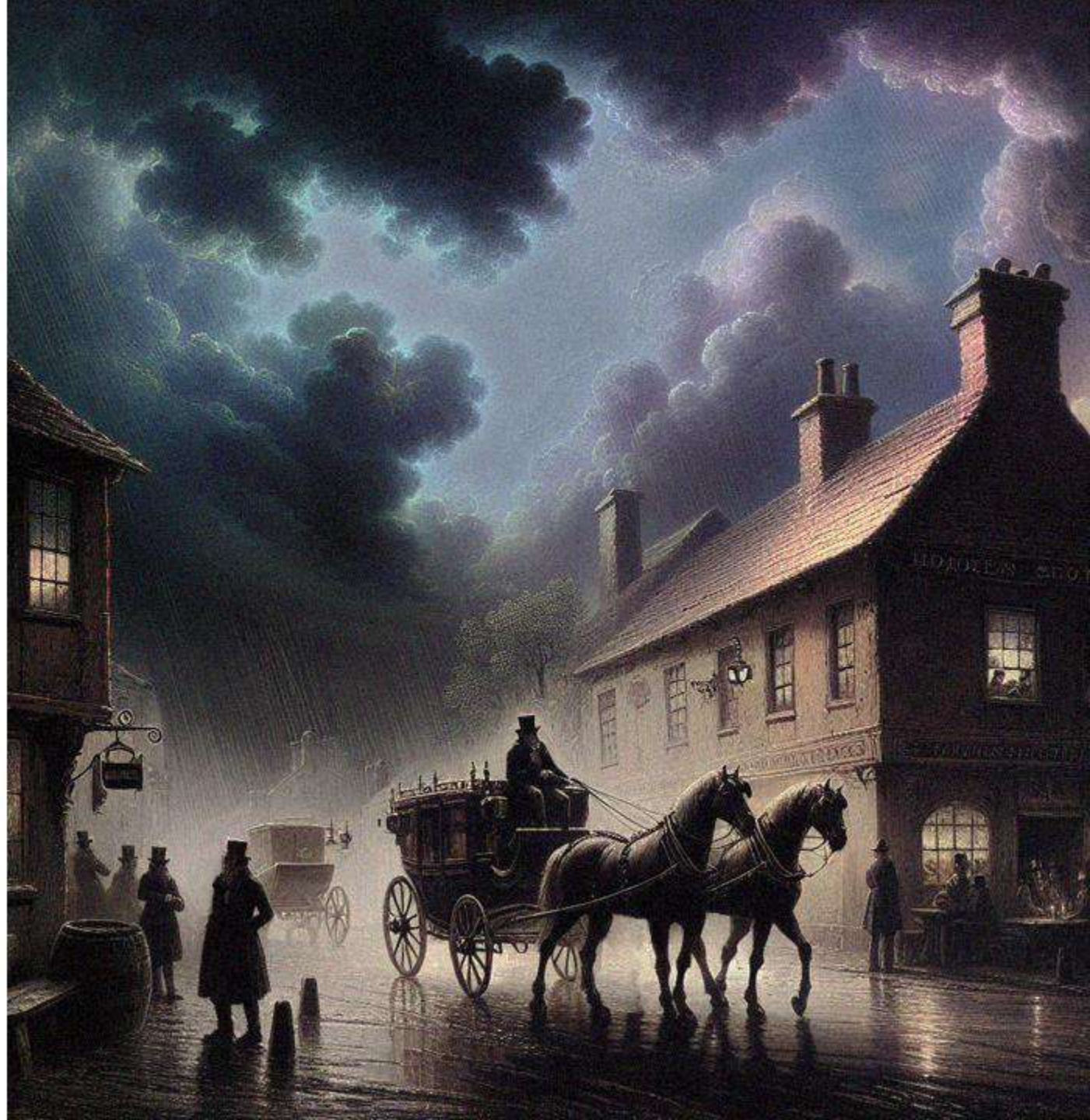
Selected
10 April 2024

Kosice International Film Festival

Selected
27 May 2024

Oxford Script Awards

Selected
22 April 2024



Reviews

Review – Screen Craft (5.1.24)

One of the qualities this project has that makes it stand out from other projects are the really interesting, distinctive, and compelling characters, and their complicated relationships. The characters' needs are clearly revealed, which is necessary in order for us to understand why Knox does what he does, and why Burke and Hare do what they do.

The writer is not afraid for the characters to cross over into the dark side. One set of characters lives with prestige and money. The other set of characters live with degradation and poverty, which creates a wonderful contrast that drives not only the characters, but the story, as well. We are drawn into the two different worlds of privilege and the other of the lower class and want to witness what happens as these two worlds begin to merge.

The distinction between these two worlds is wonderfully rendered, and we experience the war between the classes on an emotional and visceral level. Establishing the differences between Burke and Hare's world and Robert Knox and his colleague's world shows the disparities and the possibilities and impossibilities the characters face and are challenged.

As the story unfolds, we care about the characters more and more, and we wonder what is going to happen to Margaret Hare and Helen McDougal as they join their husbands on the very dangerous and murderous, yet profitable, endeavour.

The dialogue is one of the strongest qualities of the writing. Each character has their unique voice, and we hear the different lilts in the dialects. There are too many examples of the terrific dialogue for the time and space allotted, but Hare's dialogue "...Piss and shit runs through the streets. ... You talk of gallows. I say we're already dead." Hare's point of view and what he suffers on a daily basis couldn't be clearer or better said than in this dialogue. We can relate to his desperation and existential crises and this allows us to engage on an emotional and visceral level, even more.



Reviews

Cannes Film Festival Review (02.04.24)

In the first two episodes, the premise of the project is gripping and well established. The questions asked of “how far one would go in desperation” and “what is the cost for scientific progress” are interesting and make for good conflict. The multiple plot threads weave together fluidly and organically create this world of a city making a name for itself in the fields of science and education, but at a moral cost.

The most successful aspects of these first two episodes is the characters introduced and engaging worldbuilding with little exposition. We dive immediately into everyone’s story and overall the characters and their interactions with each other really shines. Everyone fits into the greater story and the individual interactions make for good entertainment. Even more specifically, the dialogue is particularly well written. Not only does it capture the place in time and the accents, but it often feels authentic and gets to the point of the scene with plenty of great subtextual meaning and character progression.

While there are some moments that seem to move too quickly or story beats that do not quite hit their emotional mark, episodes one and two both end on great cliffhangers that drive the story forward. The involvement of a child is a great moment to show the overstepping of Burke and Hare’s choices.

Additionally, if the reveal of Mary’s body is meant to be the midpoint of the project, it works well. For it is at this moment that now the scientific community, who may have overlooked the malicious endeavors of Knox’s body suppliers, has seen beyond the vale via Dr. Lonsdale.

STORY: 4.5/5

This is an interesting premise that builds great tension in these first two episodes. Each episode ends with a plot point that is furthering the story while also acting as a great cliffhanger.

DIALOGUE: 5/5

The dialogue is fantastic. It feels authentic to the time and the accents work well.

Burke and Hare
The West Port Murders



The Screenwriter

This was a story that has taken over two years to research and create, as my objective was not only to write a compelling screenplay but one that was authentic in capturing the location and society during the period the crimes took place.

A labour of love, it has ignited my desire to produce more screenplays (with another already in production plus an additional four waiting in the wings) while providing me with a greater understanding of the work required to produce such a piece of work.

Stephen Hall

www.hereandback.co.uk/screenplay

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