

The Hollywood Reporter

Veteran social realist director Ken Loach's drama follows a young Glasgow man caught in a destructive cycle of violence, criminality and long-term unemployment.

CANNES - There is love, laughter and whisky galore in **Ken Loach's** unusually joyful comedy drama about delinquent Scottish youths defying the odds society has stacked against them. This is the veteran British social realist's ninth contender for the big prize in Cannes, the Palme d'Or, which he has won only once before in a career spanning over four decades.

Co-produced and co-financed in France, where the 75-year-old director enjoys his biggest commercial audience, *The Angels' Share* opens in Britain June 1 and is already assured a warm welcome across continental Europe. The thick Scottish accents of the protagonists may prove a barrier in some English-speaking territories, especially the U.S., requiring the same English subtitles they had in Cannes. But the sunny tone, plus the tourist-friendly blend of Scotch whisky and picture-postcard scenery, look sure to earn Loach a wider audience than usual.

The story hinges on Robbie, a young Glasgow man caught in a destructive cycle of violence, criminality and long-term unemployment. Soon to become a father for the first time, Robbie is sent by a lenient court judge to atone for his latest crimes on a "community payback" scheme. Here he meets a friendly gang of fellow misfits supervised by Harry (**John Henshaw**), a kindly Englishman and Scotch whisky aficionado. On a day trip to a rural distillery, the group learn about the small percentage of whisky that evaporates during the maturing process, poetically named "the angels' share."

Discovering he has a natural nose as a whisky connoisseur, Robbie spots a chance to turn his life around, earn a decent wage and become a reliable new father. On hearing about an extremely rare cask of whisky set to fetch a million pounds at auction, he hatches an audacious scheme to steal just enough of this liquid gold to finance his escape plans. Mustering his fellow young offenders, he heads for the picture-postcard Scottish Highlands to stage one of the most bizarre and amateurish heists in cinema history.

A Scottish lawyer turned screenwriter, **Paul Laverty** is now Loach's most prolific collaborator, notching up 10 shared credits to date. Like most of their previous films, *The Angels' Share* offers a rare big-screen platform to working-class voices from the impoverished fringes of Scotland's biggest city. But unlike most of the duo's past work together, the prevailing tone here is upbeat and comic, with the generosity of spirit and softening of political dogma that has begun to shape Loach's autumnal output, most notably his 2009 football-themed fantasy *Looking for Eric*.

Laverty acknowledges this shift himself, describing *The Angels' Share* as a "little fable" with a dash of magical realism. To old-school fans of Loach's polemical social dramas, this could be seen as some kind of sell-out. But others, myself included, believe he makes more honest and humane films when he relaxes his schematic leftism a little.

Sticking to his time-tested technique, Loach shoots *The Angels' Share* on 35mm film in an unobtrusively realist manner that sometimes blurs into verite-style documentary. As usual, the script was shot in sequence, with actors drip-fed their lines to maintain emotional spontaneity. Once again, the ensemble cast are largely non-professionals, some with off-screen lives that mirror their characters. In his first ever film role, the wiry and intense **Paul Brannigan** makes a solid effort as Robbie. As the whisky expert Rory McAllister, the delightfully eccentric **Charlie McLean** is a joy to watch. Both are essentially playing themselves.

Loach has been in the movie game long enough now to become his own genre, spawning numerous film-making acolytes including **Shane Meadows**, **Lynne Ramsay**, **Andrea Arnold** and **Paddy Considine**. But with *The Angels' Share*, he looks a little beyond his own rulebook, most obviously invoking Alexander Mackendrick's classic 1949 Ealing Studios comedy, *Whisky Galore!* There are also clear parallels with the Glaswegian director Bill Forsyth and his whimsical snapshots of wily Scottish youth, notably *That Sinking Feeling* and *Gregory's Girl*. Plus maybe a wee dram of Alexander Payne's *Sideways* too.

Laverty and Loach are sometimes criticized for their simplistic political sloganeering, but they can be equally heavy-handed in their comedy too. Much of the humor in *The Angels' Share* relies on labored slapstick and boorish exaggeration, from jokes about vomit and flatulence to tired clichés about Scotsmen wearing no underwear beneath their kilts. The character of Albert in particular is repeatedly mocked as an ignorant clown too stupid to recognize either Edinburgh Castle or The Mona Lisa. This is an oddly mean-spirited caricature from such emphatically socialist film-makers.

The story's tonal shifts are jarringly uneven in places, zigzagging from violent urban thriller to serious social drama to cheery comic caper. The final tying up of loose ends also feels implausibly neat and sweet, like the caramel coloring routinely added to whiskies that most connoisseurs deplore. These victimized characters may deserve their happy ending, but Loach and Laverty have arguably not quite earned theirs.

All the same, a few clumsy touches do not seriously diminish the charm of a film that is ultimately a heart-warming celebration of kindness, friendship and forgiveness. Like a fine whisky, the angry old man of British social realism seems to be mellowing with age. It suits him.

Cannes Film Festival (In Competition)

Venue: London press screening, May 8

Production Companies: Entertainment One, Sixteen Films, Why Not Productions, Wild Bunch

Cast: Paul Brannigan, John Henshaw, Roger Allam, Gary Maitland, Jasmin Riggins, Siobhan Reilly, William Ruane

Director: Ken Loach

Producer: Rebecca O'Brien

Director of photography: Robbie Ryan

Screenplay: Paul Laverty

Sales agent: Wild Bunch

Rating TBC, 106 minutes

First Night: The Angels' Share, Cannes Film Festival

The venerable British director Ken Loach has a reputation as a dour social realist. Even fervent admirers sometimes need to brace themselves for his latest polemical blast. What can be overlooked is the humour and tenderness.

The Angels' Share is Loach at his most playful and invigorating. Even if it does evoke memories of Whisky Galore, this isn't exactly an Ealing comedy. The early scenes are set against a backdrop of unemployment, poverty and petty crime.

Nonetheless, the film is rousing and often very funny indeed. A Cannes jury headed by Italian director Nanni Moretti may well warm to its winning mix of social comment and whimsy.

Newcomer Paul Brannigan plays Robbie, a young father with a criminal record and an ongoing feud against a local family. His girlfriend's father doesn't want him anywhere near her or the baby. If he is to have any chance of seeing them, he needs to prove he can provide for them. The one man with any trust in him is Harry (John Henshaw), who runs the community service scheme on which Robbie has been placed after his latest brush with the law. Harry introduces him to the world of professional malt whisky tasting, thereby providing him with an unlikely chance of redemption.

As Loach has explained, there is a serious subtext to the film. At a time when youth unemployment has reached record levels, youngsters such as Robbie are being written off. As in *Kes*, Loach is determined to show that such characters have ability and resourcefulness, if only they're allowed to show them.

The scenes of Robbie and his friends making a trip to the Highlands to raid a distillery are observed with a wry humour reminiscent of Bill Forsyth's work. Loach delights in portraying world of the whisky tasters, with its strange rituals. The film combines slapstick and some obvious humour about kilts (and what lies beneath them) with an uplifting story about redemption.

Loach being Loach, you expect it all to end badly but, for once, the storytelling here is more benign than bleak.

Cannes 2012: The Angels' Share – review

Ken Loach's understated comedy uncasks a taste of something real for our times

Ken Loach's latest collaboration with screenwriter Paul Laverty is warm, funny and good-natured. It's a freewheeling social-realist caper – unworldly and at times almost childlike. Loach has for my money found a happy comic register – happier, I think, than his *Looking for Eric* – and it is an unfashionably uncynical and unironic kind of comedy. In many ways this is his most relaxed and successful screen offering for some time. **The Angels' Share** could stand as a companion piece to Loach's *Sweet Sixteen* (2002) or even his early classic *Kes* (1969). Of course, it also draws upon the Ealing picture *Whisky Galore*: an apparently gentle comedy with a harder edge than at first appears.

1. The Angels' Share
2. **Production year:** 2012
3. **Country:** Rest of the world
4. **Cert (UK):** 15
5. **Runtime:** 101 mins
6. **Directors:** Ken Loach
7. **Cast:** Gary Maitland, Jasmin Riggins, John Henshaw, Paul Brannigan, Roger Allam, Siobhan Reilly, William Ruane

Again, Loach has used non-professionals and first-timers: his leading man is newcomer Paul Brannigan, playing Robbie, a violent young Glasgow criminal on an assault charge who is given one last chance in court, owing to the fact that he is about to be a father, and his lawyer argues that he has mended his ways. Robbie gets community service instead of prison and finds himself repainting a community centre with a bunch of lawbreaking dopes and dorks: Mo (Jasmin Riggins), Rhino (William Ruane) and the fantastically stupid Albert (Gary Maitland), whose bizarre comments are treated with the incredulous amusement that Karl Pilkington gets from Steven Merchant and Ricky Gervais.

The supervisor, Harry, played with sympathy and charm by John Henshaw, is a kindly soul who has a connoisseur's passion for whisky and out of the goodness of his heart takes them on an outing to a distillery. Miraculously, Robbie turns out to have a "nose" – an untrained discerning judgment of whisky, perhaps like Billy's ability to train kestrels in *Kes*, although Robbie takes his skill far less seriously.

He is intrigued that some whisky evaporates in the cask: the so-called "angels' share". Given that some of this whisky sells for hundreds of thousands of pounds, the unreconstructed criminal in him wonders how he can get his share.

Loach often stages scenes in a gentle, almost quietist way, certainly compared to the way contemporary television **drama** has to be supercharged with force. Some may find the tendons of the story a little slack occasionally, but for me Loach and Laverty

are speaking with an engaging dramatic voice. A key scene is the one where Robbie is called up on stage at a "blind tasting" and challenged to identify a whisky.

If Ron Howard had been in charge, there would have been much more disapproval of Robbie's working-class appearance and more of a gasp at his Rain Man brilliance. Loach gives us something much more understated and real.

The dramatic climax, with its touch of cheerful implausibility, has to be indulged a little, but as ever, the humanism and optimism of the comedy wins out, providing a solvent to the brutality that Robbie in his muddled way is trying to transcend. Henshaw does a tremendous job as the father-figure, doing his best to show his charges a way of finding their finer selves. He is bemused at the hapless Albert's failure to recognise Edinburgh Castle. "Is there no shortbread in your house?" he asks.

How strange to compare the conclusion of *The Angels' Share* with that of *Kes*. Suffice it to say that the worldview is a little different, and maybe the times are different too. Then there seemed to be no way out – but, though this film is under no illusions about long-term youth unemployment in 2012, this film finds some light, or perhaps it is rather that this film is experimenting with a lighter way of addressing the issue. Robbie and his mates are no angels: but the film finds a way of giving them something that real life can't or won't: a chance.