

VARIETY

Venice Film Review: 'Locke'



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Writer-director [Steven Knight](#)'s sophomore feature, "[Locke](#)," is basically just Tom Hardy driving a car while making a bunch of phone calls, and yet this ingeniously executed study in cinematic minimalism has depth, beauty and poise. A finely tuned showcase for Hardy's exceptional acting skills, Bluetooth-enabled dashboard displays and the dynamic range of the Red Epic camera, the pic tracks a dark night of the soul for a construction-site manager en route from Birmingham to London. But if the disappointing performance of pics like "Buried" is any indication, one-handers are a tough sell theatrically, and "Locke" will need fine marketing calibration to click with audiences.

Apart from an annoyed truck driver just glimpsed for a second at the beginning, the bearded visage of Ivan Locke (Hardy) is the only human face seen throughout the film's brisk 84-minute running time. At first it's hard to read his near-inscrutable expressions, or to pick up anything more than the slightest tremor of tension in his Welsh-accented voice as he calls home to tell his teenage sons Eddie (Tom Holland) and Sean (Bill Milner) to say he won't be home that night to watch a soccer match with the family. But as he tools down the M6 motorway and merges onto the M1 bound for London in his BMW, the conversations piped through the car speakers from his cell phone gradually make clear what's going on.

Apparently, tomorrow morning Locke is meant to be supervising the concrete pour for a ginormous skyscraper, a crucial step in the construction process involving intricate logistical problems that it is his job to smooth and sort. But for reasons incrementally revealed, he's left work suddenly to be at the side of a woman named Bethan (voiced by the redoubtable Olivia Colman), who's giving birth to Locke's baby at St. Mary's Hospital in London. Unfortunately, Locke is not married to Bethan but to Katrina (Ruth Wilson), who's devastated when Locke fesses up to what's really going on. Katrina is not in the slightest bit reassured by his protestations that he only slept with Bethan once. "The difference between never and once is the difference between good and bad," she insists, a point that Locke, a buttoned-up, devoted father, can't really bring himself to argue with.

Locke's colleagues Donal (Andrew Scott, the Irish-accented Moriarty in "Sherlock") and Gareth (Ben Daniels) are also none too pleased with this out-of-character display of what they perceive as irresponsibility. Our hero has to do some hard managerial maneuvering to ensure the right kind of concrete is being trucked to the site, that the necessary road blocks have been approved by the right politicians, and that the right Polish builder is found to help with a bit of emergency rebar rebuilding. As with his scripts for "Dirty Pretty Things" and "Eastern Promises," Knight likes showing off how much research he's done into the world of work at hand, to the extent

that audiences paying close enough attention could by the end elucidate the advantages of C6 over C5 concrete.

Where Knight's script goes a little wrong is its tendency to oversell a point, presumably for slower-witted viewers in the back. Only that would explain why he feels it necessary to give Locke several rants directed at his deadbeat dead father, whom he imagines sitting in the car's backseat, inveighing against his old man's lack of paternal feeling in order to justify his own insistence on standing by Bethan, a woman he insists he barely knows, and to whom he refuses to make false promises of love. Fortunately, Hardy is gifted enough as an actor to sell these speeches, and editor Justine Wright cuts them in such a way as to suggest he's partly saying this stuff in his own head, reducing the staginess of the device.

Wright is unable to save another too-on-the-nose moment toward the end, in a contrived scene in which Holland's delivery is just a little too sappy. But these are forgivable missteps in an otherwise very fine film.

In terms of execution, the pic's m.o. is so spare that one needn't be a tech-credit geek to appreciate the quality of craftsmanship on display. Every artistic decision seems precise and correct, from the painstaking modulations in focus in Haris Zambarloukos' lensing (nearly rivaling Dion Beebe and Paul Cameron's work with automotive metal and street-light reflections in "Collateral") to costume designer Nigel Egerton's just-right choice to give Locke a checked shirt, suggesting his obsession with form and structure.