DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2025/26 SEASON

TORNADO

(Language: English, Japanese)

Director:	John Maclean
UK Release:	26 February 2025
Running time:	90 minutes
Presented by:	Dorchester Film Society, 11 March, 2026

"John Maclean's new movie is a dour, pessimistic, almost surrealistically downbeat revenge western set in Scotland in the late 18th century – but it could as well be happening in some post-apocalyptic landscape of the distant future or on another planet. This is the follow-up to his debut *Slow West*, and as with that film it is shot by Robbie Ryan with music by Jed Kurzel (director Justin's brother and collaborator). I have to admit, though, that this does not quite have the energy or the fluency of that previous film, perhaps not the same production resources either – and by comparison it is more strenuously contrived. Yet the pure strangeness of the movie commands attention and there is a charismatic lead performance by Japanese actor-musician Mitsuki Kimura, or Kôki.

She plays a dancer called Tornado, who travels around what looks like utterly empty terrain with her impresario father Fujin (Takehiro Hira) in a covered wagon, putting on a samurai show. They perform with puppets, whose little lopped-off heads and limbs squirt out fake blood with tiny ingenious pumps; they also demonstrate samurai sword-twirling combat themselves. They appear to have once been part of a travelling circus encamped elsewhere. And who do they perform to? A crowd of people show up out of nowhere, having presumably walked many miles from the (unseen) villages where they live.

Among this crowd is a sinister, motley gang of violent thieves led by Sugarman – a solidly uningratiating and menacing performance from Tim Roth – and his quasi-son (or perhaps actual son) Little Sugar (Jack Lowden), whom he bullies mercilessly. They are so diverted by Tornado's show that a little kid steals two bags of stolen gold at their feet, and so they set out on a brutal expedition to reclaim their loot and punish the kid, which leads into a violent confrontation with Tornado whose samurai skills and martial arts moves are not just for show.

It really is a weird drama, made the weirder for a timeline-shuffling effect at the beginning for an episode that takes us to the local manor house, whose laird is played by Alex Macqueen. Many scenes are played out to the accompaniment of high, sometimes almost gale-force winds. And the gang themselves do not travel by horseback: they simply walk everywhere, a disturbing itinerant caravan of bandits on foot who never need to eat or sleep or take shelter. In

some ways, they are the evil version of the travelling players whom they are pitted against and the confrontation has the quality of a peculiar lucid dream. It's a puzzle of a film in many ways, but it shows that Maclean has his own film-making language."

Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 26 February 2025

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"Tornado is a samurai spaghetti western starring Tim Roth, Jack Lowden and Takehiro Hira (among others). Samurai spaghetti westerns aren't anything new. In fact, we wouldn't have spaghetti westerns if it weren't for the samurai genre – Sergio Leone's *Fistful of Dollars* (1964) was, as Clint Eastwood conceded, an 'obvious rip-off'* of Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (1961) – yet this may be the first one set in 1790 and filmed in Scotland. It may also be the first one to feature thick woollens and tweed. That makes it sound twee which it isn't. It's a super-bloody revenge story filmed in just 25 days with a running time of 90 minutes. We love a 90-minute film, so I feel bad saying this, but it does feel as if it needed more time to cook.

It comes flying out the gate flying, opening mid-chase with an adolescent girl (played by Koki, a famous Japanese singer-songwriter and model) running from the gang of outlaws who are on her trail. The outlaws are led by Sugarman (Roth) who would slit your throat at the drop of a hat. (The endless violence is darkly comic; expect chopped off limbs and geysers of spurting blood.) He has a resentful son, Little Sugar (Lowden), while the other woollen- and tweed-clad gang members have Guy Ritchie-esque names like Kitten (Rory McCann) or Squid Lips (Jack Morris). This is the sort of film Tom Hardy should be in but isn't. The gang pursue the girl through the forest into a mansion where she hides. What has she done? Questions are answered with a jump back in time to events earlier that day. (It turns out the opening 20 minutes come from the middle section of the story. We're doing middle, back, then forwards. I think chronological storytelling may well be over. I blame Christopher Nolan).

The Japanese girl is not the Japanese girl with no name. She is called Tornado, and she and her father (Hira) are travelling puppeteers with a marionette act that stages samurai combat. It's an impoverished existence, not to her liking. She is bored and resists her father's attempt to teach her Japanese culture, honour and sword skills. Teenagers: when have they ever realised how boring *they* are? She wants a way out so when she crosses paths with Sugarman's gang she steals their bag of gold. She is not given to making good decisions, this wee lassie.

She runs; they chase, and if you are awaiting a big twist, it doesn't come. It is light on story as well as dialogue. Thankfully, characters arrive fully formed in

the hands of actors like Roth. Joanne Whalley pops up at one point and even though she only has two or three lines max, her character is fully formed. Koki, meanwhile, delivers a strong performance but Tornado may well be underwritten. Why is she so oblivious to the rising body count caused by her actions? Come the final act, which effectively turns into a superhero origins story, it turns out that she was listening to her father all along. We are meant to be rooting for her but I'm not sure I ever was. I wanted a lot more Kitten, as well as a conflict that wasn't solved by lopping someone's arm off.

That said, the film is assured. It has a terrific soundtrack by Jed Kurzel, which is all pounding percussion and jagged strings with hints of Morricone, while the cinematography by Robbie Ryan delivers a beautiful yet bleak landscape beset by shimmering lochs.

Deborah Ross, *The Spectator,* 13 June 2025

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"There's a scene with a puppet show in *Tornado* where the storyteller narrates the thematic underpinning of his story, explaining his villain's motivation for his murderous deeds as "the most evil of all reasons: no reason at all." It's an interesting idea that sounds cool, yet it has no real connection to this story (the bad guys have reasons aplenty in this one). This is fitting, though, because this movie is full of interesting ideas and images without any meaningful connection to them.

Tornado starts in medias res, with the eponymous teenager (Kôki) running from a group of thieves tracking her across a sparsely populated British island territory circa 1790. A flashback reveals that these same bandits carelessly left the gold from their recent heist lying about during a puppet show Tornado and her father performed, which allowed a small boy (Nathan Malone) to make off with the loot. The gang's leader, Sugar (Tim Roth), initiates a search that leads to violence, mayhem, and the chase featured in the opening minutes, all of which is complicated by his adult son, Little Sugar (Jack Lowden), and that young man's flirtation with betrayal.

So, yeah, the bad guys have plenty of reasons for doing the things that they do, here (the "good" guys, too). In fact, the only person who's following this overt thematic edict is writer/director John Maclean (*Slow West*), who has crafted a story with plenty of conflict yet with characters that have the narrative propulsion of an unmanned canoe. Because *Tornado* opens mid-story, there is no chance for the audience to find a reason to care about what happens before

shit begins to pop off, which might have been okay if the rest of the story provided a purpose to this end…which it never does.

Tornado and the Boy pile mistake upon mistake while everyone around them suffers for it, leading to a dilemma for the audience, as there aren't many people worth rooting for, here. What's worse, abrupt cuts in the action and a tendency to have the camera look away or zoom out at the moment of impact robs many of the exciting scenes of any urgency or payoff. And while the basic elements of the story keep things moderately interesting insofar as this is a gorgeous movie about simple, visually legible things, there's just not a lot of fun to be had with it all.

The time period also raises a number of questions, as the speech, mannerisms, and clothing place this closer to 1990 than to 1790. There's a mix of weapons featured in the story that do play an important part in the events (arrows, swords, pistols), and while the late-18th century lends itself well to this plot element (an active revolution in killing technology), it fails to do so in any other relevant area.

Strong performances by the actors and the work of D.P. Robbie Ryan keep things palatable, though, and at a crisp 90-minute runtime, *Tornado* feels longer than it is and looks better than it has any right to. The stark Autumnal landscape sets the color palette for the characters and set pieces, robbing them of color while opening up a universe of light and shade for Ryan's camera. It's a visual feast from start to finish, and Ryan's work provides the depth, warmth, and nuance lacking in the dialogue-sparse script.

Kôki holds the screen well as the spoiled teenager forced to grow up in a hurry, and Roth's performance as the put-upon thief king is quiet but never dull. Channeling a sort of menacing criminality that's more akin to someone supervising a DMV location, his Sugar character seems more exhausted than evil. Takehiro Hira also does strong work in his limited screentime as Tornado's father, and does his best to paper over all the gaps in the script with his pearls of "eastern" wisdom.

Which is all to say that Maclean has made a very handsome movie with good performances that struggle to find purchase in a script that doesn't know what to do with them. A basic lost-and-found loot movie that's thin on character and even thinner on new ideas for what amounts to little more than a genre exercise, *Tornado* doesn't have many new or unique ideas (and doesn't connect the dots of the ones it has). Pleasant enough to look at but impossible to care about, this movie isn't bad because it fails at what it sets out to do, but because of the most evil of all reasons: it never figures out its reason to be at all."

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Warren Cantrell, *The Playlist*, May 30, 2025

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