



**[Also Ran](#) : A Spider Project Production**

Screened at [FACT](#) , Directed by Paula Currie, Produced by Phil Thornton and Peter Naylor

Reviewed by [Denis Joe](#) December 2011

*Also Ran* is the latest production from the [Spider Project](#) in Liverpool and the Wirral, a grassroots organisation with a consistency in producing quality work. Relying on people with no prior artistic experience, the **Spider Project** has shown itself to be amongst the most creative organisations of its kind in the region.

*Also Ran* is a short film: an improvisation based on the James Kelman short story *Greyhound for Breakfast*.

As with much of Kelman's work, the story concerns that of ordinary people in ordinary situations. The beauty of Kelman is his ability to make something special out of his material. This is, perhaps, why I never thought that his works could be filmic, the power of the works seemed so impossible to be taken out of the printed page.

For this reason it is wise that the Spider Project have filmed an adaption rather than a retelling of the story. On the face of it the story is straight forward enough: Gary buys a greyhound, we are never sure why, and perhaps he is not sure himself, but we are left with the feeling that this is an investment, not simply in financial terms, but also a spiritual one: we can imagine that a winning greyhound would make life materially better, but it seems that the most important thing is actually hope itself. It seems to be the very thing that provides meaning, especially as his son has taken himself off to London to find work.



There is a great scene, filmed on the Wirral side of the Mersey, where Gary is exercising his dog and he starts to see the potential as the dog gambols around, off its leash. In the background we also get to see the changing Liverpool waterfront that suggests the City is freeing itself from the past. Both city and Gary seem to look towards a positive future.

The genius of this film is that it is a portrayal of the demise of working-class masculinity, something many social commentators are glad to see the back of, and who applaud its passing, ignoring the positive aspects and throwing the baby out with the bathwater. *Also Ran* has a greater depth to it than viewing masculinity as the cause of women's oppression, and we get to see the working class male, not as the patronising and crass caricature of *Shameless*,

nor the vile images of working-class men as potential wife beaters, that are peddled by organisations such as Alcohol Concern, but as human beings coming to terms with the loss of something that defined them.

Mass unemployment seriously destroyed the certainties of working class families, where the man was the bread-winner and, as such, the main authority figure. This is brought home to Gary when his wife, Jackie, after seeing off their son, reminds him that the son is going to London to get a job, and earlier, in a remark by Kevin, when he is with his mates in the pub.

His mates in the pub take the piss out of Gary for buying the greyhound and he takes it in good faith, because this is what binds them. The cruelty of the banter might be seen as bullying, but it is nothing more than an awareness that they are all in the same boat: unemployed and powerless; and that the joshing is the last bit of 'power' they have left. It is only when Kevin crosses a boundary, and gets personal (even though his resentment is justifiable), do we see the group assert itself as to where the lines are drawn and Kevin (as well as the audience) are left in no doubt that the line has been crossed.

It would have been easy to have given the film a pathetic and pessimistic feel, but this is not the case. What we see is a man trying to make things better in his life and a group of men making the best out of life. We are left, not feeling sorry for the characters; we can do little but admire their fortitude. In one sense *Also Ran* works as an elegy and, as with the best elegies, it does not simply say how sad it is that someone or something has died, but it offers a glimpse of something that may be worth keeping alive.

This film is a real triumph for all involved. It shows what can be achieved with a relatively small budget and a group of enthusiastic people. What must be said is that quality is not sacrificed. The acting is superb in its naturalness. The camera captures some excellent scenes, but it also catches those facial expressions that tell us so much more than action, on its own, could ever achieve. The story treats its audience as intelligent, it doesn't preach and there is no agenda other than making a great film.

This screening was held in the Box at FACT cinema and there will be another screening in the New Year. For information on that and future events, click on this [Spider Project](#) link.