

## Last Orders

*Last Orders* indicates the last round of drinks ordered at a pub's closing. In this new British film of that name, they also mean the last rites accorded to an old and trusted friend. How those rites are observed and how such friends assess their own lives is the occasion for a movie which sports a sextet of some of England's best acting talent.

Of four old inseparable Cockney buddies, themselves all veterans of World War II, one of them, Jack Dodds (Michael Caine) is the first to go. His drinking buddies, Roy, also known as "Lucky" (Bob Hoskins), Lenny (David Hemmings), and Vic (Tom Courtenay), lift one last pint for Jack at the "Coach and Horses," the pub where they have met and lied and commiserated with each other for decades. Joining them is Jack's son, Vince (Ray Winstone), who has become distanced from his butcher father by eschewing the family business to sell used cars. Jack's last wish surprises the fellows, but they are willing to honor it: he has asked that his ashes be taken to the seaside town of Margate, where he had no personal ties but where he always wanted to retire. Surprisingly, Jack's dutiful wife, Amy (Helen Mirren) does not want to accompany the ashes. So the three buddies and Vince set off on a road trip to Margate, a trip which is punctuated by flashbacks that show the friends both during the war years as well as in recent relationships. Those relationships are intricate and touching, with some surprises along the way. An appropriately dank Margate is finally reached, and Jack's last orders carried out.

The story may sound thin, the journey modest, but the fun of *Last Orders* is in watching this bevy of great acting talent (it appears to tap all those British actors available who were not working on Robert Altman's *Gosford Park* - though Helen Mirren does appear in both films!). The movie is based on a prize-winning novel by Graham Swift and is sensitively directed by Fred Schepisi's (*Roxanne*, *The Russia House*, *Six Degrees of Separation*). Its precise dialogue offers an honest sense of small lives, but ones which are emotionally rich, even approaching noble, through the generous performances of its fine ensemble.

There are tell-tale elements to each character - Jack's *joie-de-vivre*, Lenny's liquor-laced pugnaciousness, Vic's calm *gravitas* - and each actor carries them off so naturally that it's hard to single out one performance among them. But single out I will with the work of Bob Hoskin's, who plays a quiet gambler who has always secretly loved Amy. It's a restrained, even sweet turn by an actor who has so often been close to histrionic in his acting. You get the sense that, among these life-long friends, Jack may have been the vibrant spirit of their camaraderie, while Lucky, all along, provided the cement that kept them together.

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