



# Dogman

**Director:** Matteo Garrone

**Country:** Italy

**Date:** 2017

*A review by David Fear for Rolling Stone:*

The angry canine is bearing its teeth, barking loudly and ready to bite. Marcello (Marcello Fonte), however, isn't the least bit phased. A dog groomer who plies his trade in a small beachside town in Southern Italy, he has the ability to calm the angriest of hounds; despite the quaint little storefront business he runs, he's earned the nickname "Dogman." Marcello's loves his daughter (Alida Baldari Calabria), the scuba-diving trips they take off the coast and his weekly evening soccer games. For a little extra cash, he deals coke to his friends and fellow business owners on the strip.

Life is good. Or it would be, were it not for Simone (Edoardo Gero). A hulking brute with a pugilist's punched-in nose and an imposing Easter Island mug, he has a tendency to take whatever he wants by force and headbutt anyone who gets in his way. Worse, he has a knack for zeroing in on Marcello, the nice-guy weakest of the herd. When Simone is not hassling the dogman for blow, he's bullying him into aiding his criminal endeavors. (Whether or not you'd like impart symbolic importance on the fact that this aggro monster wears a jacket with the words "Uncle Sam/U.S." strewn across the back is up to you.) Eventually, the meek mutt-whisperer is made to cross a line he doesn't want to cross. The law gets involved. He's forced to go away for a year. The dogman is considered a rat. And when Marcello returns, a pariah in his old neighborhood, you can tell he's ... changed. There's one thing on his mind. Hint: It's a dish best served cold.



This is the bare-bones breakdown of Matteo Garrone's David-and-Goliath parable, which hardly does justice to the violent agony and modest ecstasy you get on screen, or the keen eye behind it. One of the few major lights in modern Italian cinema, he's a writer-director with a talent for lacing a genre movie with captured-on-the-fly docu-journalism, or maybe vice versa. Reductionist auteurs [raises hand] may be tempted to try sorting him into comparative context — the current De Sica to Paolo Sorrentino's Fellini — but he's a wonderfully tough artist to categorize. His best-known work, the sprawling 2008 gangster epic *Gomorrah*, is a big canvas that connects the dots between politicians, polizia, Mafia chiefs, street soldiers and the average Naples citizens caught in the crossfire. But he's also logged in offbeat character studies (*The Embalmer*), a romance that dips into body horror (*First Love*), meta-media commentary (*Reality*) and a historical-lit phantasmagoria (*Tale of Tales*) that would make Pasolini nod approvingly. You can't pin Garrone down.

*Dogman* also has more than a few everyday-life touches to qualify as neorealistic and just enough everyman-pushed-too-far narrative borrowings that you could file it under "revenge story." But the movie and its maker (along with co-writers Ugo Chitti and Massimo Gaudioso) are less interested in ticking off boxes than following this central character as he tries to deal with a situation that goes from untenable to life-threatening. Marcello is a man for whom kindness to all living things is the default factory setting, and

even when his tormentor suffers a near-fatal injury — the perfect chance for him to ensure this troublemaker will never bother anyone again — he's the one who skirts him to safety. (In one incredible sequence, Marcello breaks into an apartment where a pet has been shoved into a freezer and singlehandedly nurses the frozen animal back to life.) Such tendencies can be confused for weakness, especially by those who view the world in terms of predator and prey. But mad dogs have to be put down eventually, and who better to do that than someone who deals with man's best friends all day?



This is where Fonte comes in. An actor who can make Marcello seem like a pitiful beta-male grotesque one second and a noble, sympathetic hero the next, he's the thrumming motor behind this fairy tale of dogs and monsters. It's hard to underestimate how his award-winning performance — good call, Cannes Film Festival — shapes the film and sets its humanistic tone, or how he makes you feel tension as Marcello's attempts to pacify someone who he (and we) know is a raging bull end in collateral damage. Garrone wisely gives

him space to work as opposed to burying him in spectacle and visual business, and the result is that you see Fonte give the character the gift of thinking, listening, weighing decisions, knowing when to push back and when to hold back. You understand why this kind man slowly comes around to do what he has to do. And he's the one who has you rethinking that first shot as you leave the theater. Maybe the canine baring his teeth wasn't the wild animal we thought he was. Maybe he was just an ordinary creature protecting what was his from a cruel world.

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