

ADVERTISEMENT

The School of The New York Times

Discover Online Explorations

Introductory online courses for high school students. Scholarships and financial aid available.

EXPLORE



CRITIC'S PICK

'Down With the King' Review: A Rapper in the Wilderness

In Diego Ongaro's patient and subtle new film, Freddie Gibbs plays a hip-hop artist struggling with a career malaise.

Give this article Share Bookmark



The real-life rapper Freddie Gibbs stars as the hip-hop artist Money Merc in "Down With the King," directed by Diego Ongaro. Sony Pictures Entertainment



By A.O. Scott

Published June 28, 2022 Updated June 29, 2022, 9:39 a.m. ET

Down With the King NYT Critic's Pick Directed by Diego Ongaro Drama R 1h 40m

FIND TICKETS

When you purchase a ticket for an independently reviewed film through our site, we earn an affiliate commission.

Sign up for the Watching newsletter, for Times subscribers only. Streaming TV and movie recommendations from critic Margaret Lyons and friends. Get it in your inbox.

"Down With the King" is the first movie I've seen that confronts the Great Resignation, if not as a social phenomenon then at least as a mood. Money Merc, a hip-hop artist sensitively played by the real-life rapper Freddie Gibbs, struggles with a career crisis specific to his personality and profession that is also likely to resonate with anyone who has ever felt trapped, overwhelmed or just plain tired out by work.

Merc has retreated to a lovely, secluded spot in rural New England, ostensibly to work on material for a contractually mandated new album. He clearly enjoys the solitude, the company of at least a few of the locals and some of the chores and routines of country life. He clears deadfall with a chain saw, helps a neighbor butcher a hog (and later, with less success, a steer) and gazes thoughtfully on the hillsides in their autumnal glory. But in the midst of the pastoral calm and natural beauty, you feel the pull of his melancholy, the weight of his malaise.

Merc's mother (Sharon Washington) named him Mercury, after the Roman god, and a kitschy plaster statue of the deity is part of the décor in Merc's spacious Berkshires getaway. Mercury is a perpetually busy mythical figure, associated with commerce, speed and movement — everything his namesake wants to escape.



The director, Diego Ongaro, a French filmmaker who lives and works in New England, doesn't overdramatize Merc's situation, or tether him to the machinery of a plot. Merc is a Black man in a very white place, a fact that the movie deals with bluntly, and also subtly. "Down With the King," which shares its title with a Run-DMC comeback classic, isn't a fish-out-of-water comedy or a culture-war melodrama. The story emerges slowly and organically, following the rhythm of days spent trying to get stuff done and to find ways to avoid doing it. Merc is visited by his mother, various friends and a manager (David Krumholtz) who pushes him to stay on track. There are money at stake and a reputation to uphold.

More than that, Merc isn't entirely alienated from a creative pursuit that has brought him fulfillment as well as success. His verbal and musical skills are still in evidence, as is the slow-burning charisma that keeps the fans engaged on social media. He's expected — and expects himself — to use his rustication as a chance to recharge, and then to step right back onto the relentless escalator of his career.

What's the alternative? Merc falls into a romance with Michaele (Jamie Neumann), who works at a hardware store and hopes to resume her education after being knocked sideways by addiction. He develops a friendship with a local farmer — played by Bob Tarasuk, an actual Berkshires farmer who starred in Ongaro's previous feature, "Bob and the Trees" — that bridges differences of age and background. These relationships are sweet and surprising, but the movie doesn't overstate their transformative potential.

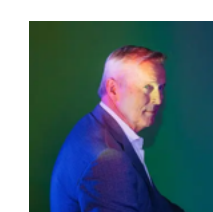
The trait "Down With the King" exhibits most powerfully is patience, something in short supply in modern cinema or, for that matter, the modern world. Instead of pushing to resolve conflicts or simplify contradictions, it asks us to examine how we live by walking for a while in someone else's shoes and feeling how they no longer fit.

Down With the King Rated R. Rap lyrics, racial slurs and (legal) weed. Running time: 1 hour 40 minutes. Rent or buy on Apple TV, Google Play and other streaming platforms and pay TV operators.

Editors' Picks

Developers Embrace Passion for Pickleball

Not All Champions Become Dynasties. Here's Why Golden State Did.



John Grisham Is Still Battling His Southern Demons

ADVERTISEMENT