EXAM

You've never had a job interview as tough as this...

→RELEASED January 8
CERTIFICATE TBC
DIRECTOR/SCREENWRITER
Stuart Hazeldine
CAST Luke Mably, Jimi Mistry, Colin Salmon, Pollyanna McIntosh, Nathalie Cox, Adar Beck, Chuk Iwuji
RUNNING TIME 97 mins.
→PLOT In a windowless room, under armed guard, eight candidates gather for an exam to see who can secure a job at a mysterious corporation. They turn over their papers and... there is no question. They have 80 minutes to figure it out... and find the answer.

Justin Timberlake's new video was well bum.

⊙ **GETTING A JOB CAN OFTEN BE** a bastard. The forms, the interviews, the questions, the ruthless socio-psychological test where you're pitted against other contenders in a clinical Kubrickian room under the beady eyes of a scarily blank-faced, gun-wielding guard. You know the sort of thing... Perhaps this is the future. It is certainly a version of it, with writer/director Stuart Hazeldine setting his story "soon", as an opening subtitle tells us. Right now, in these credit-crunched times, people

are desperate for work. But what about next year, next decade? If it came down to it, what would you do for a job — say, if someone put a gun to your head?

It is, appropriately enough, a question with no simple answer. And there are no simple answers in Exam, though there's a message if you care to look for it. This is a modern morality tale in the sleek guise of a sci-fi-tinged thriller. The setting is modest, the ambition is big. Of course, it's simple to stick eight characters in a room: it

keeps the budget down, it saves on petrol. But it's also incredibly difficult to grip an audience with such a situation and attempts often become, at best, performance pieces better suited to the stage (hello, 44 Inch Chest). It's to Hazeldine's credit, then, that though Exam doesn't leave these four walls, it never feels theatrical. Claustrophobic but agile, its pulsing, pristine visuals pound up the pressure. Once Colin Salmon's invigilator sets the task, what follows is a fascinating battle of wits, as the candidates collaborate

and conflict. And just when you're wondering what the hell they can do next, another surprise is waiting in the wings.

A story like this works with an all or no-star cast and it has, almost, the latter. Only Jimi Mistry is well-known and he doesn't unbalance things, thanks to his smart, see-sawing character. There are a few creaky turns elsewhere, compensated for by the emotional centre provided by Pollyanna McIntosh, as 'Brunette', and the charismatic Luke Mably, as 'White'. As the wideboy who gives the candidates their pseudonyms, Mably somehow provides a sense of soul beneath the swagger, making this bully both abhorrent yet somehow empathetic. Quite how he does it is, well, another question entirely.
NEV PIERCE

⊙ **VERDICT**
An assured debut feature with a superb performance from Luke Mably — it makes The Apprentice look like Blue Peter.

★★★★

ALVIN AND THE CHIPMUNKS: THE SQUEAKWEL

→DETAILS U/88 mins./Out now
DIRECTOR Betty Thomas
CAST Justin Long, Jason Lee, Zachary Levi

⊙ **THE CGI SINGING RODENTS** return in this disposable kidflick. Jason Lee gets crippled early, and mostly sits out the film, entrusting his chipmunk pals to cousin Zachary Levi who sends them to school, where Alvin (Justin Long) becomes a jock and turns his tail on his meeker siblings. Meanwhile, the band's evil ex-manager promotes rivals The Chipettes (voiced by Amy Poehler, Christina Applegate and Anna Faris), who are no more computer-augmented than many other girl groups. Alvin must be the most unsympathetic lead in any kiddie franchise, and having him do squeaked-up De Niro impersonations doesn't help. **KN**

★★

MUGABE AND THE WHITE AFRICAN

→DETAILS TBC/90 mins./January 8
DIRECTORS Lucy Bailey, Andrew Thompson
CAST Mike Campbell, Ben Freeth

⊙ **LONG-LISTED FOR THE 2010** Best Documentary Oscar, this exposé of Mugabe's Zimbabwe is nerve-shattering, tremendously moving cinema. Shot covertly due to a blanket media ban, it tells the story of Mike Campbell, a white farmer trying to hold on to his land in the face of Mugabe's Land Reform Act, a nexus of intimidation and violence. Andrew Thompson and Lucy Bailey's film never forgets the people within the politics as Campbell's plight becomes part thriller, part courtroom drama, part agonising weepie. Even if the end is too neat, this shows the tenacity of the human spirit better than 99.9 per cent of Oscar-baiting dramas. **IF**

★★★★

PLANET 51

→DETAILS U/ 90 mins./Out now
DIRECTORS Jorge Blanco, Javier Abad, Marcos Martinez
CAST (VOICES) Dwayne Johnson, Jessica Biel, Gary Oldman

⊙ **ASTRONAUT CHUCK BAKER** (Dwayne Johnson) lands on a planet populated by little green people whose culture parallels Earth circa 1959. They've seen so many films about human invaders they want to blast Chuck before he eats their brains. Teen Lem (Justin Long) tries to help Chuck get back to his ship before he's taken for dissection... This Anglo-Spanish CG cartoon isn't quite as slick as the likes of Monsters Vs Aliens, but compensates with a wider range of humour: the platitudes about seizing the day slide past conventionally, but a lot of neat, funny, downright inspired little elements are sneaked in. **KN**

★★★

BLUR: NO DISTANCE LEFT TO RUN

→DETAILS TBC/90 mins./January 22
DIRECTORS Dylan Southern, Will Lovelace
CAST Damon Albarn, Graham Coxon, Alex James, Dave Rowntree

⊙ **ALTHOUGH OSTENSIBLY THE** tale of Blur's rise, fall and rebirth, this is the story of four friends who found themselves in extraordinary circumstances. No Distance follows their reformation after a seven-year hiatus, trailing them from rehearsals to back into the public eye. The live footage is stunning, but most compelling are the frank interviews and admission that even the brightest musicians can stumble over every rock 'n' roll cliché there is: heroin, alcoholism, stunted by their own success... They came back though, reforming not for the cash, but because they missed their best friends. **PW**

★★★★