

## REVIEWS FOR MEN WHO SWIM I ENGLAND – June 2010

**Daily Mirror**

‘Wonderful.’

**The Observer**

‘A gem..’

**The Scotsman.**

‘a personal, poignant and funny treatise on growing old and re-establishing your place in the world. . . *like Spinal Tap in Swimming Trunks*’

**Evening Standard**

‘Williams’s gloriously downbeat documentary. . . a funny, melancholy, beautifully observed jewel of a film’

**Radio Time Documentary Of The Week’**

‘poignant and charming’

**Time Out. Critics Choice. \*\*\*\* (4 stars).**

‘....an absolutely lovely film’

**Daily Mail – 4 STARS! Best Documentary of the Week**

The delightful, strangely beautiful story of a Welshman who moved to Stockholm for love, and the struggling Swedish men’s synchronized swimming team he joins.

**Evening Standard**

‘a small jewel of a film.’

**The Guardian Guide. Pick of The Day**

‘What ‘Anvil! The Story of Anvil’ is to heavy Metal So this is to Male Synchronised Swimming’

**And Simon Horsford from The Telegraph**

‘Dylan William’s insightful film Is about many things...most amusingly a male synchronised swimming team’

**The Sunday Times Choice**

‘...highly enjoyable.’

**Metro. Highlights**

‘...heartfelt and quietly moving’

**Sunday Times - Choice**

Highly enjoyable documentary . . .about existential angst and synchronized swimming.

**Time out Critics Choice**

Quirky, charming look at a group of Swedish men who faced down their mid-life crisis by forming a synchronized swimming team.

**The Sunday Times**

‘...highly enjoyable’

**The Scotsman**

The resilience of the human spirit is celebrated in another BBC 4 documentary this week, STORYVILLE – SYNC OR SWIM, which tells the unlikely story of a Swedish all-male synchronised swimming team. Directed by British filmmaker Dylan Williams, it's a personal, poignant and funny treatise on growing old and re-establishing your place in the world.

All pushing 40, the amateur athletes from Stockholm Art Swim Gents (I can only assume their name sounds less clumsy in Swedish) have decided that, rather than grow a ponytail or date a 21-year-old, the best way to surmount a mid-life crisis is to prove their worth in a sport traditionally dominated by women; or, in the words of an almost apoplectic Italian DJ who interviews them: "a sport for homosexuals!"

Since relocating to Sweden for love, Williams has been frustrated by his inability to find substantial work. Desperate to support his family and find a renewed sense of purpose, he falls in with a group of likeminded men with similarly thwarted ambitions. But will

synchronised swimming help to kick-start the second half of their lives?

Sincerely dedicated but woefully inadequate, the team spend the first half of the film bickering among themselves in an amusingly deadpan manner, like Spinal Tap in swimming trunks.

Chief among the dissenters is Rickard, a temperamental meatpacker who, with typically Scandinavian jollity, describes the purpose of the team as "a protest against the meaningless of life". If Ingmar Bergman had ever made a film about synchronised swimming, then it would probably have looked a bit like this.

But when the team are given a golden opportunity to prove themselves, the mood brightens as they begin to appreciate the possibilities of their unique bond.

Sync or Swim is a charming film which, although it follows the structure of most sporting documentaries, is far more modest than most. Ultimately, it's about friendship and the small yet significant ways our lives can improve when we least expect it

#### **Metro**

A fish out of water in a foreign pool in which he was floundering, it would have been easy for about-to-hit-40 Welshman Dylan Williams to hit the vodka bottle when his new life in Sweden looked like hitting rock bottom. But he didn't. He joined a male synchronised swimming team instead.

The result of his novel twist on the midlife crisis was Storyville: Sync Or Swim (BBC4) in which Williams, a trained film-maker with a propensity for intensity, charted how he and a bunch of similarly moody Stockholm male menopausers worked out their angst about lives treading water by attempting intricate human patterns at their local baths.

At first, they simply sank.

Slowly, though, they started waving, not drowning. As their fledgling moves took tentative aquatic flight, Williams dryly noted: 'We'd become a real team... albeit not a very good one.' Good enough, though, to represent Sweden (there was no competition) at the Unofficial Male Synchronised Swimming World Championships in Italy. And it was here that Sync Or Swim turned into a cheer-on-the-underdog sports movie as warm and uplifting as *Breaking Away*.

It was impossible not to root for Williams and the Stockholm Art Swim Gents – a fabulous name which made them sound like they should be sharing a festival bill with New Young Pony Club and Ou Est Le Swimming Pool, not splashing about in Speedos – as they battled with Lycra-clad Germans and shark-slick French. 'We're wary of Holland,' noted the Art Swim Gents coach. 'Their lift hasn't looked good but they do have shaved legs.'

I'm not going to spoil the ending as you really should try to catch up with a film chock-full of edgy characters such as Rickard who, confronted by an Italian radio interviewer suggesting that synchro was only for homosexuals, resisted the temptation to deck him and responded: 'Any sport is for homosexuals and any sport is for heterosexuals.'

It was just one top moment in a splendid film that, at heart, was about learning to stop worrying where you are going and, instead, remember to appreciate where you are, in the here and now. It made me want to read Sartre in the deep end, sporting a nose clip while simultaneously perfecting the Egg Beater. Calm down, it's a synchro trick.

#### **Time Out Critics Choice – Four Stars**

Lets give 'Smack My Pony a try.' Not a suggestion you'd expect your average sporting international to make to a teammate. But Dylan Williams and his friends are unusual. Williams is a Welshman abroad and adrift, struggling to find his feet in Stockholm and provide for his wife and young son. In desperation, he and his similarly disillusioned Swedish friends form a synchronized swimming and embark on an eccentric journey that ends at the ad hoc World Championships, apparently in a municipal pool in Milan.

Being Swedish they've taken up the pastime as a rebellion against the meaninglessness of modern life; more prosaically, as a means of escape from work, routine or singledom. A fascinating group of characters emerge, but this is Williams's film, and he's a winning subject if not as psychologically intriguing as some of his more troubled fellows. It's a lovely film, a low-key charmer replete with the sort of deep self-analysis and crises of faith which, you feel seldom trouble the simpler minds of messers Terry or Defoe.

#### **From David Chater at The Times...**

One of the secrets of happiness, it seems, comes from a sense of belonging. When the film maker Dylan Williams moved to Sweden, he found himself at the age of 40 doing a series of dead-end jobs and feeling alienated from his adopted country. Of all unlikely cures, he joined a male synchronised swimming team, which was made up of a bunch of middle-aged oddballs desperate for release from the stress or boredom of their lives. They're a chaotic, unpunctual, bad-tempered lot who can't agree on anything, and none of whom could even remotely be described as Olympic material. But by the end of this wry and gentle film, they have found a shared purpose and achieved a common goal, becoming genuinely synchronised as a group. **It's an unusual, low-key lovely film.**

#### **Pick of the Day: Sky TV magazine**

A pretty unique proposition, even by Storyville's standards, this documentary follows Welsh ex-pat Dylan Williams who, after failing to find work following a move to Sweden, joins an all male synchronised swimming team. Both **poignant and funny**, the documentary follows the triumphs and trails of this unique team.

**The Times**  
**Last Night's TV: Sync or Swim**

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As anyone who has ever enjoyed one of Henning Mankell's Kurt Wallander books knows, no one does damp introspection quite like the Swedes. **Sync or Swim**, the story of one man's search for the truth via the medium of male synchronised swimming, took the concept of slightly wet naval gazing one step farther.

Dylan Williams, a recent expat film-maker living with his Swedish wife and their two small children in Stockholm, is not finding his new life as straightforward as he had hoped. As well as dealing with a new language and a new set of customs, he is having to revise his financial and career expectations downwards. It's not easy to go from a job in the media to one sweeping floors, and Williams is foundering. In an attempt to find some kind of anchor, he joins a club: Stockholm Arts Swim Gents, a men's synchronised swimming club.

As if enduring a mid-life crisis weren't stressful enough, Williams decides to have his in a pair of slightly too-tight swimming trunks, in the company of ten other men in similar situations. Like all such stories, the swimming itself is not the point of this yarn, merely the catalyst. For these troubled mid-lifers, learning to flap their arms in time with one another is not just a way of keeping fit, but also a psychological outlet. In this chlorine-soaked atmosphere of hope, tempers soar and egos clash, and there is much male philosophising in the sauna. It's basically *The Full Monty* with verrucas.

Like all good life-affirming, rites-of-passage tales, it ends with an uplifting surprise: in Milan, at the international male synchronised swimming championships, the team wins gold — much to the consternation of their trainer Katalin. This rather confirmed my suspicion, niggling all along, that Williams and his crew weren't quite the useless lot they made themselves out to be. After all, not only did they turn out to be rather good at synchronised swimming, they also managed to make a very entertaining film about it.

**Guardian**

**Storyville: Sync or Swim** (BBC4) was nice. A Welshman goes to live in Sweden, can't find work or friends, has a mid-life crisis. So he joins a club, meets men of a similar age who are going through the same thing, makes friends, and his life regains meaning and direction. The surprise is that it's a synchronised swimming club, the only male one in Sweden.

It's sort of *The Full Monty*, only wetter and more subtle. More Swedish, too: there's an understated humour and melancholy about Dylan's new pals that could only be Scandinavian. Male friendship can be a surprisingly lovely thing, and this was a surprisingly lovely film.

#### **Last Night's TV - Storyville: Sync or Swim, BBC4**

The Swedes didn't make it to the football World Cup, suffering the indignity of losing home and away in qualifying games to their less-fancied neighbours, Denmark. But they have the incalculable compensation of being world champions at men's synchronised swimming, a story told in last night's quirkily delightful Storyville documentary, **Sync or Swim**.

The film was made by Dylan Williams, a Welshman who had fallen in love with a Swedish woman, given up his well-paid work in the British media, and followed her to Scandinavia, a romantic impulse that had quickly yielded two children, a series of menial jobs to make ends meet, and a general sense of being a fish out of water. That, as a million herring will tell you, is a well-known condition in Sweden, but Dylan, like any resourceful fish out of water, found a swimming pool, and joined up with a bunch of other middle-aged men who were all suffering in one way or another from existential angst, and had duly decided to form a synchronised swimming team. They called themselves, in that way that foreigners have of randomly lumping together several English words in the evident belief that it sounds cool, Stockholm Art Swim Gents.

There are, of course, other, more tried-and-tested ways for a chap to address a midlife crisis... an earring, a motorbike, a tattoo, an extra-marital affair, a pair of leather trousers, a one-man tent at the Glastonbury festival. But for Dylan, the way out of the burgeoning gloom was provided by the "stork's leg", the "three little triangles" and "smack my pony", those well-known synchronised swimming moves.

Not that, at first, either he or his new friends seemed to get much joy from smacking their ponies. If anything, their very Swedish angst deepened at the essential meaninglessness of making star shapes in the water. Imagine a movie co-directed by Busby Berkeley and Ingmar Bergman and you have it, more or less. After one training session they sat in a sauna invoking football as a metaphor for life, but not in a good way, concluding that they had all embarked on the second half of life's journey, losing 1-0 at half-time. Gradually, though, it began to come together, both in the pool and out. Lars, a tortured musician, fell in love with the team coach, Jane, and she with him. Dylan got a new job, teaching film studies. Then, to their astonishment, Stockholm Art Swim Gents found that they were not the world's only male synchronised swimming team. Even more astonishing, they discovered that there was soon to be a world championship, in Milan. So off they went, representing Sweden, to take on Italy, Japan, France, the Czech Republic and the reigning champs, Holland.

Men, I should add at this juncture, do not entirely suit the sport of synchronised swimming. It hadn't occurred to me that it was a gender thing until my wife observed that you can point as elegantly as you like at the ceiling, but matted underarm hair will still render the spectacle a little unsightly. Indeed, body hair in general is not an asset in aquatic ballet, and nor are small and in some cases large male middle-aged paunches.

Nevertheless, the not-notably lithe men of Stockholm Art Swim Gents clung admirably to the belief that it was their inalienable right to hold hands underwater, never more eloquently than in an interview with a Milanese radio presenter, who rudely asserted that theirs was "a sport for homosexuals". I can't remember whether it was Lars or Jonas or Pontus who replied, witheringly: "Any sport is for homosexuals, and any sport is for heterosexuals." Bravo! And bravo, too, to Dylan Williams. All things considered, this was a nigh-on perfect documentary, even if he was calculatingly disingenuous in the way he presented the team as pretty hopeless right up until the moment they won gold.

**Male bonding by the pool (GLASGOW HERALD)**

**by SUSAN SWARBRICK**

STORYVILLE - SYNC OR SWIM

BBC Four, 10pm

AH, the perennial search for escape from the daily grind of work and family responsibilities. Some people hit the gym, others lounge at the pub watching sport on an SUV-sized television or seek solace in novels, knitting and biting their finger nails to the quick. Not many stick on a nose clip to get their thrills doing high kicks and water ballet with a motley crew of fellow middle-aged men. Well, not in many places, certainly not in Glasgow.

Storyville - Sync Or Swim follows the unlikely band of enthusiasts who are part of Sweden's all-male synchronised swimming team and have set their sights on success on an international stage. Initially believing that they are the only all-male team in the world, they're surprised to discover that countries including France, Germany and Japan also boast a national team (although surely a quick search on Google would have told them that and saved embarrassment before they claimed bragging rights?).

Unperturbed and spurred on by the prospect of victory, the men decide to enter the first unofficial All-Male World Championship in the sport, taking place in Milan in April 2009. It's a milestone year for the team as more than half of them turn 40.

Among the aspiring athletes is Dylan Williams who has left his native Wales for a new life in Sweden. Lured by fond memories of holidays packed with long summer nights and carefree love, a cold, long dark winter, sudden pregnancy (not him, I should clarify), and a series of unfulfilling jobs later, his dreams begin to fade. Then he finds a saviour in the synchronised swimming club. I love a happy ending.