

*There is the famously Irish instinct for dealing with human eccentricity as well as the whimsical and magical.*

## Irish Movies: a Renaissance



Jim Sheridan's 1989 Irish film, **My Left Foot**, brought Academy Awards to Brenda Fricker (left), as the mother of Christy Brown, who is played by Daniel Day-Lewis, winner of the Best Actor award.

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By JAMES W. ARNOLD

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SOMETHING IS GOING ON with the Irish and movies. If you think you've been seeing more Irish movies lately, from "My Left Foot" and "The Crying Game" to "The Secret of Roan Inish," "In the

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JAMES W. ARNOLD, professor emeritus of journalism and film at Marquette University, has reviewed films for St. Anthony Messenger for 30 years.

Name of the Father" and "Michael Collins," you're right.

There is an "Irish spring" happening in the cinema, but it has nothing to do with Colgate-Palmolive or bath soap.

These are just a few of the major Irish films that have been accessible to American audiences in theaters during the 1990's. Many are available on video, as are a score of other titles from the last decade, some familiar, some not, like "Cal," "Mona Lisa," "The Field," "Hear My Song," "The Playboys," "The Commitments," "The Snapper," "Widow's Peak," "Frankie Starlight," "Circle of Friends," "Into the West." They're all "Irish" in the sense that they're about the Irish, substantially produced in Ireland, and/or (more and more commonly) created by Irish companies and talent.

"Frankie Starlight," for example, is produced by Irishman Noel Pearson but adapted from American Chet Raymo's novel, *The Dork of Cork*. It's about a dwarf who grows up in Ireland after World War II, the son of a Frenchwoman and an American G.I., discovers astronomy, becomes a famous author and finds true love. It was made mostly in Ireland with an international cast directed by Michael Lindsay-Hogg, who, although English, is the accomplished son (he directed the "Brideshead Revisited" miniseries for British television) of the durable Irish-born actress Geraldine Fitzgerald.

Another characteristic of these films is that, for the most part, they have a charm and humanity, an infectious, "real people" quality that distinguishes them from, say, the more pretentious, sensational, special-effects driven American movie product. Irish films are not yet "big business" with a mega-

bucks psychology.

But even these more identifiable titles are just the surface of a native Irish film industry bursting with creative energy. These other films Americans haven't yet had a chance to see.

This development is important for American Catholics who love movies because it brings "on line," metaphorically speaking, a fourth country with a rich Catholic culture as a major player in the art and industry of cinema. Until now, most movies linked to a Catholic world-view have come from France, Spain or Italy.

Irish movies can be expected to be different, to be unique, just as Irish stories, novels and plays have been. Indeed, few Irish films are about traditional religious subjects like biblical figures, saints, clerics or theological dilemmas. But Catholicism—and Catholic culture and family life—are basic in Ireland and, indeed, in Irish films.

It has taken a while for Irish films to get started. Fewer than 100 movies were made in Ireland during the first 100 years since the invention of cinema. (The country has, for much of this century, been isolated from world culture). That compares with more than 2,000 films about the Irish or Irish expatriates made by or in other countries (mostly the United States and Britain). Of these, the most memorable and famous range from "Troubles" sagas like the multi-Oscar-winning "The Informer" (1935) and "Odd Man Out" (1947) to musicals like "Finian's Rainbow" (1968) and sentimental comedies like "Going My Way" (1944). Perhaps the most famous Hollywood-Irish, "St. Patrick's Day" movie of all is the John Wayne-Maureen O'Hara classic, "The Quiet Man" (1952), directed by John Ford.

They all have contributed to Irish stereotypes, from leprechauns and Irish cops and pals to stern rural patriarchs and I.R.A. assassins, with "backwardness" a major part of the image. According to Kevin Rockett, author of the stunningly comprehensive *The Irish Filmography 1896-1996*, "Ireland is largely represented [in movies] as a pre-modern, pre-industrial society."

### *Speaking for Ourselves.*

"We are anxious to speak ourselves and not be spoken about," says Michael Hannigan, director of the Cork Film Festival and a leading figure in Irish film. "We are not ancient Hibernians but modern Europeans." More films by the Irish themselves have been made in the last two decades than in the previous 80 years. In his major 1996 production, "Michael Collins," winner of the top prize at the Venice Film Festival, the director Neil Jordan tells "Irish history through Irish eyes."

Jordan and Jim Sheridan have been perhaps the most visible figures in this Irish surge. Jordan, 46, born in Sligo, raised Catholic and educated at University College, Dublin, was a successful novelist and short story writer. Hired in 1980 as a script consultant for "Excalibur," which was being shot in Ireland, he made a documentary about the making of that film. His many movies since then include "Mona Lisa," "The Crying Game" (based on a short story he wrote years earlier) and "Michael Collins."

Sheridan, a year older and a Dublin native and University College graduate, has been connected with five major films in seven years. He worked in theater in Dublin until he went to New York as artistic director of the city's Irish Arts Center and studied film at New York University. Back in Ireland, he wrote and directed "My Left Foot" (1989), based on the autobiography of the paralyzed Irish artist Christy Brown, and "The Field" (1990). He did the screenplay for "Into the West" (1992), then directed, produced and co-

wrote "In the Name of the Father" (1993), and this year produced the controversial "Some Mother's Son."

Another major figure is the actor (briefly a seminarian) Gabriel Byrne, also familiar in American movies ("The Usual Suspects," "Miller's Crossing"). Besides roles in key Irish films ("Into the West," "Frankie Starlight"), Byrne, 46, with an early background similar to Sheridan's, was executive producer and a major player in the making of "In the Name of the Father." His Dublin-based production company, Mirabilis Films, has three modestly budgeted films in the works. He refuses Hollywood money: "We like to retain our independence."

Irish films of major Catholic interest have traditionally fallen into two broad categories—those with important moral/religious or family aspects or themes, and those with the famously Irish instinct for dealing with human eccentricity as well as the whimsical and magical. Characters in Irish movies tend to be quirky but recognizably human, and the world they inhabit often has a mystery and holiness about it.

Consider a few examples from past and present:

"The Informer" (1939) is a classic story of conscience and moral dilemma, set during the 1916 rising, in which a revolutionary, needing money, betrays his best friend to the British. Its modern counterparts, "Cal" (1984) and "The Crying Game" (1992), are about men in similar tensions: a



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Catholic I.R.A. assassin who falls for a Protestant widow, and a compassionate I.R.A. "soldier" too tolerant and humane for the ruthlessness required of him.

In "My Left Foot" Sheridan tells the story not only of a memorable individual (Christy Brown), who took the one limb he was able to use as a gift and achieved marvelous goals, but of the hunger of the human spirit for love. It's also about an extraordinary mother and large family who cherished Christy, and offers persuasive evidence for an overall Catholic ethic of life.

If that was a "good mother" story, Sheridan then tells a "good father" story in "In the Name of the Father." It's also a "family" story and the quintessential portrait of a loving, traditional father who joins his estranged son in prison (though innocent) and, strong in his mind and Catholic faith, gives his own life to help them endure.

In David Lean's "Ryan's Daughter" (1970), set in 1916 in a small West country village, a married woman falls in love with a British major; a central figure is the town's dominant pastor (Trevor Howard)—an archetypal Irish plot. In a modern variation, "The Playboys" (1992), the independent heroine in a County Cavan village battles priest, convention, community pressure and even the men who love her to make her own decisions and arrange a future for herself and her infant son. The priest fears change and the spirit of the times.

Complex priest characters are common. In "The Field"

the young pastor can't get through to his hard-headed rural flock about justice. In "The Commitments" (1991), in which blue collar guys from North Dublin form a "soul" band, the young priest is an avid pop music fan and the hero's dad has two pictures on the wall—Elvis and the Pope. In "Prayer for the Dying" (1987), a priest becomes an unwitting associate of an I.R.A. hit man hiding out in his church. In "Circle of Friends" (1994), about Catholic girls coming of age in the 1950's, the pastor, stern and pre-conciliar, proves more humane than the real villain, the self-interest of the sophisticated, corrupt upper class.

The magical element in the Irish tradition is well displayed in "Into the West" and "Frankie Starlight," as well as in "The Secret of Roan Inish" (1995), a fairy tale about the connection joining Irish fishermen and their families to nature and the traditional myths bonding them with the sea-coast gulls and seals.

While Irish story interests are wide-ranging, a significant segment obviously still focuses on nationalistic conflict. Sheridan's new film, "Some Mother's Son," provoked a storm in May at Cannes. It's about two fictional women with sons involved in the 1981 Bobby Sands hunger strike at the Maze prison. A prominent British critic described it angrily as "propaganda," adding that it "suggests that the Irish Republic is now sponsoring more than a film industry." The Irish responded that the film was "strong, egalitarian and fairminded."

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Given the delicate cease-fire situation in Ireland in 1996, any film relating to the North is likely to stir controversy. Roughly eight big budget films are in various stages of delay. One temporary casualty was Thaddeus O'Sullivan's "Nothing Personal," which deals with an intense 24 hours in Belfast during the 1975 cease-fire. A Catholic (John Lynch) is captured by a group of renegade loyalist thugs hoping to undermine the truce. Although the film was shown in Galway in 1995, O'Sullivan had to cut some violence and characterizations, and release was delayed on both sides of the border until May 1996.

### *Help from the Government.*

Although the Irish are making a splash, like the Australians in earlier decades, they're not about to take over the world movie industry. As in most foreign countries, movies made domestically have a shot at only a small slice of the total box-office because they have to compete with the popular Hollywood product. In Irish theaters, American-made movies take up about 95 percent of the screen time. "Irish audiences are not particularly interested in Irish films," says Paddy Breathnach, a young director of major promise.

But that could change. The all-time box-office champion in Ireland, for instance, "The Commitments," which is a prime example of the Irish film renaissance, was filmed in Ireland with an Irish cast. (The director was Britain's

Alan Parker, but the script was by the Dublin schoolteacher and novelist Roddy Doyle).

In the 1980's, Irish talent began to be noted on the world scene—directors like Jordan and Sheridan and Pat O'Connor ("Cal"), and actors like Byrne, Stephen Rea ("Crying Game"), John Lynch ("Cal," "Roan Inish," "Moll Flanders") and Oscar-winner Brenda Fricker ("My Left Foot," "A Time to Kill"). In 1985, the Dublin Film Festival was founded. There are now also annual fests in Cork and Galway, and magazines for film aficionados like Film West and Film Ireland.

But the real impact was felt in 1993, with an enlightened and unprecedented level of government encouragement and financial support for both Irish film makers and foreign investors. To an American, the idea of government patronage sounds strange. Our tradition is decidedly "hands-off" when it comes to government support for films, both for philosophical reasons and from fear of government use of movies for propaganda. But Ireland lacks America's private resources. Compared with its competitors, Ireland is a small country.

The Irish see a thriving film industry as a way to create jobs and promote the country abroad. Michael D. Higgins, whose title is Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht (the country's Gaelic-speaking areas), says Ireland also fears "colonization of the imagination." It's part of his Government's policy to protect the society by protecting its

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image and insuring that Ireland is not "defined by others."

As a result, immense production is going on, according to John Hill, film scholar at the University of Ulster and co-author of *Cinema and Ireland* (1988). "For the first time we can talk of an Irish film culture, if not quite an industry." On average, about 20 features a year are produced, compared to three a year before 1993. Says Hill, "Overall, this is a very healthy situation."

Still, economics alone cannot account for the vitality in Irish films. "Money is necessary but not sufficient," says Rod Stoneman, chief executive of the Irish Film Board since 1993. He cites the example of Germany, which also offers support but has not had a comparable flowering.

Stoneman says Ireland is undergoing extraordinary and rapid technicalization, which affects the culture in every way. The Irish are becoming more urbanized and social, and sexual mores are changing. It's going "about 350 m.p.h.," he says.

"Every year [the film situation is] going to get better and better," says Ed Guiney, one of Ireland's brightest young producers ("Ailsa" [1994], "Guiltrip" [1995]). He believes that the Irish can make and develop their own films but not yet sell them, and that is the key problem for now. "The changes have put us on a par with the rest of Europe," adds Trish McAdam, writer-director of "Snakes and Ladders," a \$4.1 million European late 1996 co-production.

Guiney and McAdam are typical of the local talent that burgeoned in the late 1980's with a huge increase in the number and quality of short films being made. (Thirty-three new short films were screened at the Cork Festival in October 1995). Young enthusiasts often work on them for free, learning their craft.

"We look to co-financing as a major source of funds," Guiney says, suggesting that Ireland is unlikely to follow the market-driven commercial road of Hollywood. He and others realize they can't beat Hollywood at its own game and need to develop their own content and style. "We hope to mix the best of the European independent tradition with the U.S. ability to sell its product."

McAdam agrees, noting a "passion" in Irish film makers and a willingness to take risks that make it likely they will follow their own paths. Those paths lead in a different direction than the "romantic Ireland" of popular fantasy and the literary sources of the past.

#### *A Cultural Shift.*

The change is profound. Simply put, a very conserva-

tive country, isolated in much of the 20th century by its own political and cultural conflicts, has in one generation been penetrated by modern influences. Coming in the wake of rural electrification, "Hollywood's version of romantic love has undermined the social rules in rural Ireland," says Luke Gibbons, director of the graduate program in film and television studies at Dublin City University. The pervading theme in today's Irish films, he adds, is "the penetration of the Irish psyche by modernity."

Another veteran academic, the media scholar Martin McLoone of the University of Ulster, puts it, "We are interested in who and what we are.... [There is much] questioning of the national psyche." One way this is expressed in films is in a more questioning attitude toward the church, which many argue is in crisis in Ireland. An early example, Cathal Black's "Our Boys" (1978), which was banned for 10 years, deals semi-autobiographically with brutality in a Catholic school. Black's latest feature, the stunningly cinematic "Korea" (1995), about a

young Irishman killed in the Korean war, demonstrates another trend challenging the deeply imbued romanticism about the land.

Several new films show rural Ireland to be a place of problems and discontent. This appears even in comedy, like Nigel Bristow's hilarious 1995 short, "Everybody's Gone" (a winner at the Chicago film festival), in which a young farmer leaves his home and ancestral land to take up life with some sexy American surfers who happen to be working the waves nearby.

Gibbons says that women are crucial symbols in Irish culture. The maternal home is a symbol of tradition, and the mother stands for conservatism and tradition. "Change is associated with the daughter," he says. "Girls are more open to outside influence."

"Into the West" (1993), scripted by Jim Sheridan, expresses several of these themes. It combines fantasy and realism in a story about two pre-teen brothers, who live with their dissolute and demoralized father (Gabriel Byrne) in a Dublin slum, and touches on urban corruption and media and corporate influences. The boys liberate a magical white stallion, which carries them into the rural West to the grave of their mother. Her spirit eventually saves them from death in the sea.

Thaddeus O'Sullivan's first feature, "December Bride" (1990), which won 15 international awards, illustrates the issues as well. It is about a turn-of-the-century Presby-

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## The Top Dozen "New" Irish Films on Video

**CAL** (1984) (Pat O'Connor): Young Catholic IRA man falls for Protestant widow, with tragic results. John Lynch, Helen Mirren.

**CIRCLE OF FRIENDS** (1994) (Pat O'Connor): Three girlfriends face growing up and religious scruples in town near Dublin. Minnie Driver, Chris O'Donnell.

**THE COMMITMENTS** (1991) (Alan Parker): Working-class kids in Dublin organize a soul music band. From Roddy Doyle's novel.

**THE CRYING GAME** (1992) (Neil Jordan): A compassionate IRA man explores the last relationship of a dead British soldier. Intrigue, with major surprises. Stephen Rea, Jaye Davidson, Forest Whitaker.

**HEAR MY SONG** (1991) (Peter Chelsom): Hilarious search from Liverpool to Ireland for a famous tenor. Adrian Dunbar, Ned Beatty.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER** (1993) (Jim Sheridan): Gerry Conlon and the Guildford Four are falsely accused of an I.R.A. bombing. Daniel Day-Lewis, Emma Thompson, Pete Postlethwaite, John Lynch.

**INTO THE WEST** (1992) (Mike Newell): Two slum boys ride an enchanted white horse into the "Wild West" of rural Ireland. Written by Jim Sheridan. With Gabriel Byrne, Ellen Barkin.

**MY LEFT FOOT** (1989) (Jim Sheridan): Cerebral palsy victim Christy Brown triumphs in life. Daniel Day-Lewis, Brenda Fricker.

**THE PLAYBOYS** (1992) (Gilles MacKinnon): A pretty unwed mom in a rural village takes her time choosing among suitors. Robin Wright, Aidan Quinn, Albert Finney, Adrian Dunbar.

**RAINING STONES** (1993) (Ken Loach): A Belfast plumber is obsessed with buying an expensive first Communion dress for his daughter. Bruce Jones, Julie Brown. Best film at Cannes.

**THE SNAPPER** (1993) (Stephen Frears): In Dublin, another unwed mom refuses to name the father, with comic results. From Roddy Doyle's book, a semi-sequel to "The Commitments."

**WIDOW'S PEAK** (1994) (John Irvin): Women in control in a 1920's village run by well-to-do widows. Conflict arises with the arrival of a young, attractive addition to the group. Mia Farrow, Joan Plowright, Natasha Richardson.

terian community and a woman who rebels against its strict conventions and religious laws, refusing to marry and openly living with two rival lovers.

The emergence of a vibrant women's movement has led to an active and outspoken group of women directors whose controversial films explore the changing status of Irish women, gender relationships and the traditional Irish myths about mothers and families. "Mother Ireland," a documentary by Anne Crilly, explicitly considers the perennial use of female images, from Kathleen Ni Houlihan to the Virgin Mary, to personify the country. Crilly, based in Derry, interviews prominent Irish women about this phenomenon and its psychological, social and political implications.

Orla Walsh's 1995 short ("Bent Out of Shape") about a gay man working in a video store satirizes Irish macho concepts of masculinity. It won the prize at Cork for best Irish short film. She says that Irish female-directed films tend to deal more openly with sexual matters and are "dominated by [the subject of] abortion and crisis pregnancies." An example acclaimed at several European festivals is "Hush-A-Bye Baby" (1989), a poignant love story set in Derry with a pregnant 15-year-old heroine. A first feature co-scripted and directed by Margo Harkin, it was based on interviews with women who had experienced pregnancy outside marriage.

Several male-directed films deal powerfully with sexual tensions. In Breathnach's moody, almost hypnotic "Ailsa," which cost Guiney only \$400,000 to produce, a young man becomes obsessed with (but never talks to) a pretty American neighbor, to the point of stealing, reading and carefully keeping a file of her mail. Eventually, she goes home, marries and has a child. Shattered, he commits suicide.

Another outstanding example is the super-tense thriller, "Guiltrip," a first film by writer-director Gerard Stembridge, produced by Guiney for \$1.1 million. Starring Andrew Connolly, a Liam Neeson look-alike, it's about a stern, psychotic military officer who dominates and abuses his wife, then picks up and murders a flirtatious local woman and hopes to get away with it.

Yet humor, characteristically, remains a distinguishing trait, no matter how serious the topic. Typical are two short films. In Kieran Walsh's "Shooting to Stardom" (1992), a struggling Irish comic detained by British police makes the mistake of telling the cops an anti-police joke. Damien O'Donnell's "Thirty Five Aside" (a winner so far of nine major awards at international festivals) is the Buster Keatonish account of a nerdy new kid trying to blend in at a raucous school made up almost exclusively of hopeful football players.

It may be a while before the "new wave" of Irish films is accessible in the United States. Irish film makers are unhappy that their Government is willing to fund films but has so far shown little interest in promoting their distribution. In the meantime, we'll see those deemed to have the "best commercial possibilities."

