



When in Rome....

Words: Gar O'Brien

Dispatches from the 11th Irish Film Festa

There's something delightfully surreal about walking into the main theatre of the Casa del Cinema in Rome.

A large, modern arthouse cinema, situated in the middle of one of Rome's largest public parks, Villa Borghese, the Casa del Cinema hosts the annual Irish Film Festa Roma, Italy's only dedicated Irish Film Festival. It's a wonderful venue and its surroundings provide a delightful backdrop for the sight of hundreds of Italian cineastes, eagerly queueing up to take in some of the best in new Irish Cinema.

Inside the building, and just before the main theatre, there is a large, open space where cinema-goers congregate before screenings. What makes it a slightly surreal occasion is that upon entering you find yourself under the watchful gaze of a formidable cross-section of Irish Cinema. Impressive black and white framed portraits of everyone from

Lelia Doolan, Bob Quinn, Fionnula Flanagan and Jim Sheridan and onto Martin McCann, Caoilfhionn Dunne, Moe Dunford, and many more, cover the room's walls. It's hard not to feel that they are looking directly at you or, in the case of Terry McMahon's picture (which for some reason seems to be a photo of him in front of a photo of a boat), possibly staring directly into your soul.

As a spectacle it's at once slightly strange (and not just McMahon's eyes somehow trailing you around the room, like a demented Captain Birdseye) but also incredibly welcoming, conveying not just a knowledge or awareness of the Irish Film Industry at large, but a very real affection and appreciation for the people who make it all happen. That these are all past attendees of the festival speaks volumes of the festival and the genuine passion its organisers hold for Irish Cinema.

Now in its 11th year, Irish Film Festa Roma is a grassroots institution built entirely upon a deep love of Irish Cinema. The festival is the brainchild of Susanna Pellis, a film critic, lecturer in film at Rome's La Sapienza University, author of *A Brief History of Irish Cinema* and, according to her twitter bio, a former footballer turned boxer. That last part is unsurprising given the energy, enthusiasm and 'never-say-die' attitude required to run an event of this type, let alone one which aspires to be more than the random overview of new Irish Cinema that such festivals can often become. Indeed the curated films and events on display comprise a rich and detailed interrogation of the state of Irish Cinema, encompassing both industry-produced and more independent work from the entire island of Ireland. The latter is

something Pellis was keen to emphasise when asked about her inspiration for the festival.

"Irish Film Festa started in 2007, originating from my desire to present Irish films (and actors!) to Italy, where nobody knew anything about Irish cinema. The festival has grown year after year since then, and so has Irish cinema, which is now very creative, inspiring, and full of surprises: I am very pleased because I knew this was coming. I am very happy also with the festival's selection this year, the quality of the features and particularly of the shorts is very high. Moreover, a large part of selection comes from Northern Ireland, confirming and reinforcing the 'All Ireland' spirit of our festival."

The 'creative, inspiring and surprising' output of Irish Cinema over the last number of years was on full display at the festival which opened on Wednesday 21st March with John Butler's sublime *Handsome Devil*. This was preceded by a welcome address by the Irish Ambassador to Italy, S.E. Colm Ó Floinn to an audience which was made up more by interested Italian cinephiles, film students, and the general public than the usually high numbers of the Irish diaspora which often attend this sort of event. Over the course of the week it became more and more fascinating hearing the perspective of a wide cross-section of Italians of all ages on the current crop of Irish Cinema.

Thursday kicked off with a unique insight into The Short Film Sector of the Irish Film Industry with the Panel Making Shorts. Despite a city-wide transport strike the event was full of aspiring Italian filmmakers eager to glean all the insight they could from the panelists Derry O'Brien, Short Film Distributor and Managing director of Network Ireland Television, and Eibh Collins, Ireland's unofficial Short-film ambassador, Shorts programmer at the Galway Film Fleadh, manager of IndieCork, Irish Screen New York and LA, and has programmer of Irish shorts in places ranging from Malta to Luxembourg to everywhere in between.* O'Brien displayed all of his near three decades of experience in the sector with an engaging and informative overview of the do's and don'ts of short film distribution. With countless Oscar winners on his slate,

few are better placed to do so. Collins, who has seen virtually every Irish Short film over the last five years, gave her own advice on the avoidable pitfalls that she sees on an almost daily basis. (Pro tip: Stop opening with drone shots, we get it, Ireland has trees.) That this wide-ranging and detailed discussion was translated on the fly to the audience and panelists via headsets and a translator seemingly well versed in Irish idioms and swearing was doubly impressive. The discussion continued long after the panel with eager young Italian filmmakers chatting in the cinema bar with the panelists for an hour after the screening.



Up next the festival launched its new #IFFbooks section, dedicated to Irish literature, with a conversation with award-winning Irish writer Paul Lynch, author of three novels: *Red Sky in the Morning* (2013) *The Black Snow* (2014, winner in France of the Prix Libria Nous for the best foreign novel and the Prix des Lecteurs Privat) and *Grace* (2017, candidate for Walter Scott Prize). Lynch's style, has been compared to that of Seamus Heaney and Cormac McCarthy and received praise from established Irish writers such as Sebastian Barry and Colm Tóibín. At another festival such a literary event may have stood out like a sore thumb but it fit perfectly with the tone of the festival and bodes well for the future of the festival and potentially incorporating a wider array of Irish culture.

This was followed by a screening of Michael Fanning's *Rocky Ros Muc*. The doc, which won Best Irish Documentary at the Galway Film Fleadh in 2017 is for the most part told in the Irish Language and follows Sean Mannion, an Irish boxer who emigrated from Connemara to Boston in the 70s. The film was preceded by the short *Guard* by Jonathan Harden, the story of a young woman who learns to box from her ex-convict

father. (Both films no doubt a personal delight for our pugilist-turned-programmer, Pellis). Once again it was an energising experience to see a largely indigenous audience experiencing an incredibly personal Irish story (Both in terms of emigration and the Irish Language) and hear their perspective on the fascinating story.

On Friday short films took over for most of the day with both a live action and animation Short Film competition taking centre stage. The former showcased films such as *A Break in the Clouds* from Tristan Heanue, *Captors* by Chris Baugh, director of last year's fantastic *Bad Day for the Cut*, *The Date* by Selina Cartmell, the aforementioned *Guard*, *Gustav* by Denis Fitzpatrick and Ken Williams, *The Jar* by Carleton Rodgers, *Listen* by David Moody, *Lava Lisa* by Edward Cleary, *Marky's Bad Week* by Daniel Holmwood and Padraig Conaty's *You're Not a Man at All*. Galway was well represented with work from two female directors, Amy Joyce-Hastings *QED* and Linda Breathnach's Patrick Bergin-lead *Native*.

Following this Ireland's continued excellence in animation was celebrated with a fine selection of short pieces. Opening proceedings was an out-of-competition screening of Tom Collins' adaption of Flann O'Brien's *An Béal Bocht / The Poor Mouth*. This was preceded by a fascinating and in-depth introduction by John McCourt, professor of English Literature at the University of Macerata, who alternated between English, Italian and Irish throughout. An impressive feat, especially as his obvious passion for the topic, and the warmth and humour with which he delivered it, translating effortlessly across all three languages. The festival's continued juxtaposition of contemporary film with literary interrogation continued to reap dividends and inform a unique aspect of Film Festa Roma. The rest of the programme enchanted the assembled audience with Steve Woods' *Coranna*, Dillon Brannick's *The Line*, *Departure* by Aoife Doyle and Cartoon Saloon's *Late Afternoon* by Louise Bagnall, which had pretty much the whole

audience in bits, though I couldn't be sure as I had something in my eye at the time. Ahem.

Closing out Friday was *Kissing Candice*, directed by Aoife McArdle and featuring a real breakout performance from Ann Skelly. Fresh off the heels of its European premiere at the Berlin International Film Festival in February 2018, having made its international bow in the Discovery section at Toronto last September. It's a complex, fever-dream of a film sure to divide audiences (in the best possible way) and marks the feature debut of director McArdle, best known for her celebrated commercials in the US. On a limited budget it manages to deliver some of the most stunning imagery from an Irish film in recent memory and its brave narrative choices mark McArdle as a real talent for the future. It's inclusion was a real coup for the festival and its surreal, almost magic-realist style provided a nice segue into Saturday's first screening, the now-classic *Into the West*. It was once again hugely informative to talk to the Roman audience on their perspectives on the film, especially as for many it was their first time seeing it. By large they were as impressed with the robust and at times grimly social-social realist aesthetic as they were with the more fantastical elements.



MAZE
Saturday's next big screening was Stephen Burke's *Maze*. Following the screening there was a thought-provoking Q&A with Burke, producer Jane Doolan and actor Barry Ward. By this point nothing the audience came out with would have surprised me but the knowledge and genuine interest in the nuance of Northern Irish history and Politics was impressive and made for a unique experience. This was followed by Nora Twomey's gorgeous *The Breadwinner* which was preceded

once again by *Late Afternoon*, and yes something inexplicably found its way into my eye again.

The Festival closed on Sunday 25 March with another strong selection of work. Pat Collins singular *Song of Granite* introduced by celebrated Irish singer and long-term Italian resident Kay McCarthy. The film's focus on traditional singing was just the latest in the wide array of Irish culture celebrated through cinema at the festival. Similarly, *My Astonishing Self: Gabriel Byrne on George Bernard Shaw* was a canny inclusion as the RTE/BBC co-production hadn't been seen in Italy and again showcased a core element of Ireland's literary landscape in both Shaw and Byrne.

Before the festival closed with Padraig Conaty's *No Part for Billy Burns* there was an award ceremony for the shorts competition which saw Conaty win for his very funny and surprisingly moving mockumentary *You're Not a Man at All*. Louise Bagnall took home the animation award for *Late Afternoon* (Which was mercifully not shown again as by this point I would just have made a show of myself.)

On to the closer then. *No Party for Billy Burns*, which premiered in the Galway Fleadh last summer and stars Kevin McGahern as the titular character. Billy lives in rural Cavan, but imagines himself as an old-school gunslinger from the Wild West. Shy and quiet, Billy lives a lonely life with only his grandfather and his own imagination for company. It alternates from humour to tragedy throughout as Billy remains largely on the periphery of events going on around him.

The film may seem, upon first reflection, a slightly odd choice to close the festival but is in many ways a perfect encapsulation of a core aspect of modern Ireland, with its focus on rural isolation. It's also a wonderful example of the kind of grassroots cinema which plays a vital role in reflecting rural communities on screen, something that's still all too rare in contemporary Irish cinema. The film took some six years to complete, costing somewhere between €7,000–8,000, and is clearly a deeply personal passion project on

the part of the filmmakers. It was shot in their hometown of Cavan, and maintains a fierce sense of authenticity throughout, capturing both the humour and the paralysing isolation of many rural communities. Talking before the screening, director Conaty mentioned how the film had played for three weeks in the Odeon in Cavan with local audiences deeply moved to see their lives reflected on screen, arguably for the very first time. This kind of indigenous, independent cinema experience cannot be underestimated, either in the importance of showing lives we can connect with on screen or in showing an authentic portrayal of an underrepresented community. In this sense the film proved to be a clever closer and another canny move for a festival which aims to not just show a selection of Irish films but to really celebrate Ireland and its people through its cinema.

It was somewhat surreal then, having spent some 90 minutes in Cavan Town, to leave the screening (Again under the watchful eyes of Lelia, Fionnula, Bob et al.) and find ourselves once back in the surroundings of Villa Borghese in Rome.

Reflecting on a festival experience that showed a mad diversity of not just Irish Cinema but an astonishing array of Irish life, society and culture on screen one can't help but be impressed. Pellis and her team have not only brought a consistently potent selection of Irish films, filmmakers, actors, and industry professionals to Rome over the years but have developed and cultivated a smart, engaged and loyal Italian audience for Irish Cinema in the heart of Rome. It's a remarkable achievement and one which helps remind us of the trojan work being done by the many Irish film festivals around the world, to showcase Irish Cinema and develop a passion for our cinematic output in new audiences.

More of this.

* Full disclosure, this correspondent is in a relationship with Ms. Collins and is more than likely related to O'Brien because, well, Ireland.

