

REVIEW: THE WIND THAT SHAKES THE BARLEY

Written by Dave Howard

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Interview with Cillian Murphy conducted 2-27-2007



We recently sat down with CILLIAN MURPHY to discuss his new film Ken Loach's latest film, THE WIND THAT SHAKES THE BARLEY, explores a widely undocumented age of World History. Both a family melodrama and war film, the 2006 Palme d'Or winner sheds light on the nexus of the struggle of the Irish in the 20

th

century.

Cillian Murphy plays "Damien" a pacifist doctor whose leaves his small town to study in London. After witnessing a series of sadistic acts by the British, Damien abandons his plans to defend his country. He joins his brother Teddy (Padraic Delaney) in a guerrilla campaign with the newly formed Irish Republican Army. The brothers take arms and find themselves in world of escalating violence against the Black and Tans. When the Treaty of 1921 is implemented, the two brothers find themselves on opposite ends of a Civil War that hinges on the definition of "Freedom."

The most powerful aspect in this film is its authenticity. It is shot beautifully, mostly in natural light, on location in County Cork, Ireland. By limiting his area to a small town, it allows us to accessibility into each of the characters lives. There are no faceless soldiers; each one has an inferred history by merely living in this town. The audience feels as if they are citizens and simply watching the events unfold.

By choosing fictional over historical figures, it gives a compelling look at how the decisions of

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the politicians change the lives of the average Mick on the street. County Cork and its people are a long way from Dublin and Michael Collin's negotiating table.

Often glossed over in films about war are the various viewpoints. Unlike any of the World Wars, this is a fight that has evolved over hundreds of years with only the occasional victory. Yet every victory opens a new multi layered conflict.

There is never an easy answer. Every single character in this movie is faced with a crossroads.

Even in Blockbusters as BATMAN BEYOND and RED EYE, no one can argue Cillian Murphy's commitment to his characters. He brings that same commitment to the conflicted Doctor who must kill and heal. Murphy gives a performance that is honest, vulnerable and understated. Without a doubt, this film establishes him as one of the finest actors out there.

Commitment from Murphy is not a surprise. However, the performances of the non-actors are equally impressive. An older woman, in her only scene, speaks to a victim tortured by the British. She repeatedly states "I need to clean the chicken coop." It's devastating and you feel as if you have known this woman since you were a kid. This scene stuck to me for days.

There was one problem I had. I thought the British atrocities were a bit over dramatic.

Recently, I was talking with this middle aged Brit I just met. I told him I had just seen this new film. I explained it was a work of fiction, but I wasn't sure how much of the brutality of the British Empire was true.

He said "I haven't seen the movie, but it's true."

With St. Patty's day this weekend, take a break from the green beers and catch THE WIND THAT SHAKES THE BARLEY.

We recently sat down with actor Cillian Murphy to discuss the film.

Considering the times we live in, when you watch this film it is hard to distinguish from “freedom fighter” and terrorist.

CM: Yeah that’s a very delicate subject. These people had just won a Democratic Mandate. They had won an election from which they set up their Republic. The Republic had the people behind them. This is what made a difference between “freedom fighter” and terrorist. That’s a tricky one.

You portray a Doctor who makes some agonizing choices.. What that feel like?

CM: It was a struggle and challenge. He’s a doctor who has to take life. It winds up splitting the family. The worst possible choice you have to make is the one between “cause” and family.

All of these things are very difficult to deal with. But it’s a great challenge as an actor. It’s a very meaty role to try.

The film won the Palme d’Or, what’s it like to win the biggest International Prize?

CM: It’s been great. I’m thrilled for the film. Winning at Cannes was something very special and I won’t forget it for some quite time. The film finished and then people stood up for ten minutes. We screened at the beginning of the festival before the other films in competition. And the fact that we won shows that it is was a pretty unanimous decision,

And in Ireland, it’s been the biggest grossing independent film ever. It’s done huge business in the theaters and on DVD. I think that’s very encouraging for a nation to look at that time closely. Enough time has elapsed to look at that. It’s important for people of my generation to see what went on there and to see how it still resonates.

What really intrigued me about WIND THAT SHAKES THE BARLEY is that I had no idea how this war started. I think this is a great learning tool. ☐

CM: Well, you should never get your history from a film. At the same time, it's good to get people to look at that time and to read further about it if they want. Particularly, people in America have a vision of the IRA from the 70's. The gist of the IRA that you see here is very different.

You studied law before you went into acting. In government, are there still things that resonate today in Irish History?

CM: Yes, I studied constitutional law. I was a very bad student and I left. I didn't go to many classes, but I did enjoy constitutional law. That deals a lot with what went on at that time. Like I said, I didn't take much from my brief stint as a law student. I am better off out of it.

One of the interesting aspects of this film is that there was a lot of in fighting between the Irish people. They weren't a united front.

CM: Again, I think it's a classic thing. There is a struggle for freedom and in this case, we got the British to the negotiating table and that's when the infighting began. That's when the civil war began. This happens time and time again and it's a very painful thing when you are so close to achieving freedom. Some people are willing to except a compromised freedom, and like my character in the film, want to push forward for what he sees at complete freedom. That causes the fracture, the civil war. We see that everywhere. And civil war is the most painful event that can happen in a country's history. It tears people apart. In Ireland, the two main political parties trace their history right back to that split. It's very painful. It does split families. It's happened everywhere. It's not a very glorious time in history.

What about the controversy? The British Press has faulted Ken Loach's motive in making this film is to make the British look bad. How do you deal with that? You made a beautiful film, now all of this is coming up as well.

CM: It's very clear why the British establishment would not view this film very positively. It's also why this period of history is not detailed very well in school. Most of that stuff came from columnists who didn't see even the film.

Also, the "hoopla" was countered by the fact that no one contested that these events happened and that the British Army behaved in this way. No one contested it because it was fact. It also gave a kind of forum to talk about this film. Anytime he (Loach) came face to face with these detractors, He was so eloquently able to deal with them and have fact on his side.

For me, I was thrilled with the controversy and it has done very well in Britain. It did the best business of any Irish film in Britain; it did huge business in France. Right wing British papers, mostly Murdoch led papers are always going to be like this. It's not surprising.

It's not a documentary. It's a film that speaks with historical accuracy. Do you find that it becomes more than just entertainment?

It was very nice to be involved with a film that wasn't purely entertainment. I'm all for the blockbusters and switching off. It was great to be a part of a film that had a high conscience and a different kind of agenda. It also works on a human level, a story that people can relate to and it has a very profound point of view. Also, you can join the journey these characters take. I don't think it won the Palme d'Or because of it's politics. I think it won because it's a great film. It's a film that makes you think and ask questions.

You said this period is not covered in the Irish History books. Why is that?

It was only two generations ago and it's the main two political parties. The two parties have fought against the same policies and they are both secular parties. They can never be the same because they are split by civil war politics.

I suppose it very hard to be objective about this Civil War, because the treaty was ratified under the threat of a war with the British. There is no complete definitive account of what happened. I think we are getting away from it now and I think that the success of this film shows that we are

better, but it's still tricky.

Ken Loach's movies look amazing.. What is it like to work with him?

CW: He is a true artist; he works in a very unique way. He shoots everything chronologically; I never saw a finished script. We only got lines on the day of shooting the scene. He only uses one or two cameras but they are always miles and miles away. He never says action. There is no hair and make up on set.

It's a very unique way of filmmaking, far away from all the nonsense of we generally associate with filmmaking ...hierarchy and all that nonsense. He has crew that he has worked with for twenty years. They know him, trust him and everyone is very efficient.

The set is a very special place. The actors are treated with a huge amount of respect. The crew turns their back on you when you do the scenes. Sometimes Ken just listens, it's quite remarkable. I've never experienced a film like this. In my opinion, it's the way a film should be made. But that's not the case.

Did it take you some time to get used to that?

CW: It was pure bliss. It's so pure. It's all designed to get the most honest performance from the actors. Also, a lot of people in the film had never acted before. It's real raw energy you are getting. There is a degree of improvisation you are allowed and it's very special.

Can you contrast that with some of the mainstream features you've worked on?

Ken makes the kind of films he wants. They aren't made by committee, not financed by a huge studio. He has group of independent investors which gives him enough to make what he wants to make. He quietly goes about it and he releases them. It's very, very rare.

Then you go and work on a big movie and it's a very different environment; lots of executives and producers and all that sort of stuff. It's equally exciting. I don't have a preference. I just try to choose project by project. Whether it's a \$20 million movie or a small film it's about the story. They are two different worlds.

Coming we get to see your comic side in WATCHING THE DETECTIVES. I don't think we have seen your comic side? ☐

CM: I suppose not. INTERMISSIONS was a black comedy I suppose. In WATCHING THE DETECTIVES, I play a character who works in a video store and he is a kind of a film noir buff. I won't call him a geek, but he has quite "specialized interests." She comes in and they have crazy adventures. It was a really fun shoot. Again, it was a small little independent film and had a great director. It was a fun to go to work and just goof around. I've done a lot of heavy material, which I am proud of, but it takes a lot out of you.

It was nice to come home at the end of the day and have some energy.

You've played a transvestite, a psychopath, a comic strip villain and, now, this conflicted Doctor. How do you prepare for a role?

CM: It depends on the role really. For this particular role I did a lot of reading, I spoke to historians about this time in our History. I spoke to Doctors regarding the Hippocratic Oath. You just do what you do to get to that place. It's different for every role.

You grew up in Ireland, how did this affect your performance?☐

CM:: Ken wouldn't have cast me if I wasn't from Cork. If he is doing a movie in Glasgow or London he only casts people from there. It's the only way to keep it authentic. That's why it feels believable; it's like watching real people.

How do you make your decision about what roles you will take?

CM: I just base it on the script and the director. I try to challenge myself and to play different types of characters. I don't have a specific career plan, but I do know what I don't want to do. That gets rid of a lot of things really quickly.

When people see the film they are startled over how authentic it is. Is Daniel Based on a real Person?

CM: There are no historical figures in the film, Michael Collins is mentioned. All the events you see in the film, those battles actually happened.

When I saw this, the audience was really involved with the movie. Was it as easy to get that involved with it as an actor?

CM: That's what Ken tries to create. For example, there is a scene where (SPOILER DELETED) in front of the cottage.

We didn't know that was happening. We came over the hill and saw this unfold in front of us. Our reactions to that scene are completely as you see them. They're not manufactured. We were watching that happen as it unfolded.

That's what he tries to do. At the beginning of the film, when the Black and Tans raid the cottage, I didn't know that was going to happen.

The movie tries to create as close to a real experience as possible. That's why I think it's as visceral and engaging as it is.

How much of script do you have, if this takes you by surprise?

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None. You don't have a script. You just have occasionally, if you have a lot to say, you'll have some of the lines. But I didn't of the things that happened, until they actually happened.

For me I love it, because it's more instinctual. You can get a script and pour over it for weeks. You make all these choices prior to actually doing it. It becomes a bit heavy. With this way of working, it's very in the moment and real.

Last question, will we see you in THE DARK KNIGHT?

(laughs) No comment.