

PAT O'CONNOR

FILM DIRECTOR

DONALD BRADY

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Pat O'Connor

Pat O'Connor was born in Ardmore, and is the son of the late Michael and Peggy O'Connor. The O'Connor family while resident in Lismore spent significant "holiday" periods in Ardmore and it was there that Pat was born on 3rd of October 1943. Michael was a business man, involved in the wool trade, and was born in Tallow. He had a family of six, all of whom are still alive. Pat's sister Ann was for a time a member of the well known group "**The Bards**" for whom she took on the character of Julia for "Lanigan's Ball." The other members of the family are John, James, Thomas and Rena.

Pat was educated in the local CBS School and had as a classmate well known local author George O'Brien. His interest in film was stimulated by visits to the local Lismore Cinema with his father. The importance of these trips is suggested by Pat himself in an interview he gave while promoting "A month in the country." Between the age of 14 and 17 Pat went to several secondary schools before leaving for London. From there he proceeded to UCLA to study film but was unable to finish his course due to personal circumstances. He returned to London and filled several positions including insurance clerk, wine-cellar salesman and like most Irish males [myself included] in England "navvy".

An opportunity to study film at the Ryerson Institute in Toronto was avidly taken and having completed his course he returned to Ireland to work as a producer with RTE. Pat was initially assigned to the Current Affairs and documentary areas and for over 6 years was involved in many of the flagship programmes of that era. The following is a list of some of the programmes in which he participated:

- Report "**Once you have friends you're OK – Sheriff Street**" Produced by Pat, shown November 26th 1970
- **Personality Sidney Czira** (nee Gifford, sister of Grace) produced September 25th 1970, aired May 19th 1971
- **Tangents "The mod"** Produced November 30th 1973 20.47 minutes This was produced by Pat featured an Art programme from Scotland in which the reporter was Doireann Ni Bhriain.
- **Landmark: Farming in Donegal** Produced November 14th 1972 – 19.04 with interviews by Michael Ryan
- **Landmark – Viable Farms** April 3 1973 a programme on small farms in Mayo and their future. Produced by Pat.
- **Scope: The four roads** – a focus on Itinerants. Produced December 13th 1973 25 minutes
- **Feach: Sinn Fein Ard Fheis – O'Riada Commemoration** Produced by Sean O Mordha and Pat O'Connor, September 30th 1974. This programme involved Eamon De Buitlear, John Montague, Cearbhaill O Dalaigh, and the reporter was Doireann Ni Bhriain
- **A Personal account: Sense of outrage. An Interview with Dr Paddy Leahy** – 26.38 minutes. A programme which focused on contraception and alcoholism in the Ballyfermot area. It was produced on October 18th 1974 and the reporter was Paddy Gallagher.

- ***Wheels of the world: Life in North Kerry.*** This programme was produced on November 4th 1974 and runs for 30.15 minutes. The script was by Con Houlihan and the narrator was Eamon Keane. In the context of recent history an interesting segment features Bishop Eamon Casey who was then Bishop of Kerry.
- ***Stolen Years: Dinny Desmond.*** A programme which profiles a “young Dublin juvenile delinquent. It was produced on April 4th 1975 and runs for 32,12 minutes.
- ***Feach: Factory workers learn Irish.*** A programme looking at workers in Jacobs Factory who were learning Irish. It was produced on May 5th 1975 and runs for 10.29 minutes
- ***Seven Days: Shankill Road.*** Seven Days was the predecessor of Prime Time. This edition was produced on October 12th 1976 and runs for 34.20 minutes
- ***Would you believe: Programme 3 “Taking a stand”*** A programme which again profiles the lives of itinerants. It includes footage taken by Pat O’Connor at the Ballinasloe Horse Fair years before. The programme aired on May 13th 1993.

During his period as a producer of the RTE flagship current affairs programme, *Seven Days*, Pat had as a young Research Assistant Charlie Bird.¹ In his biography Bird recounts with clear affection a trip to Russia and Armenia to produce a programme to mark the 60th anniversary of the foundation of the Soviet Union. His comment on Pat is worth mention:

*“The soft-spoken Waterford man was one of the most affable people.”*²

In 1976 Pat transferred to the Drama Department where his talents as producer and Director were immediately apparent. While 6 major productions are well known, Pat also worked on many of the programmes of the day including “***The Riordans.***” The following is a list of the most important of his Directorial output of that time:

- ***Mobile Homes*** [1979]
- ***Miracles and Miss Langan*** Based on a story by Neil Jordan – 1979
- ***Gale Day*** – by Eugene McCabe. It is an RTE and Abbey Theatre co-production and was aired on November 19th 1979. It runs for 1.09.40. It was produced by Pat O’Connor and the cast includes Des Cave, Ray McAnally, Barry McGovern Maire O’Neill. It is a stimulating and provocative production which provides: “A dramatic examination of Patrick Pearse’s character and motivation in contemporary terms”
- ***The Babysitters*** – Peter Driscoll - 1980
- ***Winter music*** – by Eugene McCabe – 1981
- ***Night in Tunisia*** [1982] by Neil Jordan. Pat O’Connor was both Director and producer and it was first presented on November 9th 1983. In the cast was Mick Lally. It is an RTE production in association with Channel 4 and runs for 52.02 minutes

¹ *This is Charlie Bird.* Charlie Bird with Kevin Rafter. Gill & Macmillan, 2006 p.28

² do. p.34

Ballroom of Romance 1982

This film represents the directorial breakthrough for Pat O'Connor. It also marks the first of three major collaborations with William Trevor.

"The Ballroom of Romance and other stories" by Trevor was published in 1972. It is a series of stories focussed on relationships written in a depressing, staccato and disjointed prose of immense power and vision. Virtually none of the characters are fulfilled or complete and the theme of sex is central but in many ways undefined. In addition to the title story, "The Forty Seventh Saturday", in its portrayal of a man without scruples who will do anything to avoid a relationship, and "Going home" in its explosive exploration of misunderstood expectations and understanding between a child and adult, are extremely evocative and successful examples of the genre of the short story. It is noteworthy that O'Connor's next film, "One of Ourselves" is also from this collection.

The film was produced by Kenneth Trodd and edited by Maurice Healy. The script was provided by William Trevor. The cast included Brenda Fricker, as Bridie, John Kavanagh as Bowser Egan, Joe Pilkington Cyril Cusack as Mr. Dwyer, Michael Lally, as Dano Ryan, and Pat Leavy. The film runs for just 65 minutes.

The story based in 1971 suggests that "human relationships are predicated on economic necessity." It tells the story of Bridie a 36 year old "spinster" whose father is an invalid, is totally dependant on his daughter and has not left the farm for over 16 years. Bridie's only outlet is a weekly visit to "the ballroom of Romance." On this visit she realises that there are only four men there with whom she has any chance of developing a relationship. The drummer in the band, Dano Ryan, would be her first choice, and a poor one, but he is lodged with a widow of almost 50 and her child, and is she thinks "spoken for." Then the three other bachelors arrive and they:

"would never marry, the girls of the dance-hall considered, they were wedded already, to stout and whiskey and laziness, to three old mothers somewhere up in the hills."³

Bridie considers that Bowser Egan would marry her but only after his mother had died. Then he would sell the farm and drink the proceeds before settling down with her.

"He would always be drinking, she thought. He'd be lazy and useless, sitting in the kitchen with the Irish Press."

She concludes that she will never go to Ballroom again –

"and never would ride again because she'd reached a certain age. She would wait now and in time Bowser Egan would seek her out...She would marry Bowser Egan because it would be lonesome being by herself in the farmhouse."⁴

In March 1984 Pat O'Connor won the BAFTA award for his direction of the RTE/BBC co-production. He also won a Jacobs award:

³ The Ballroom of Romance: and other stories. By William Trevor. Ireland: Independent Books, 2005 pg. 51

⁴ Do pg. 63

“For blending the technology of television with the skills of a superb cast – to bring to the screen a memorable evocation of a time and place most of us instantly recognised.”

William Trevor won the Bafta for the best single play and also won a Jacobs award:

“for the sensitivity of his evocation of socially impoverished Ireland as depicted in his adaptation of his own short story’.”

Finally the film was also runner up in the Prix D’Italia.

One of Ourselves –1983

This is the second of Pat O'Connor's films based on the Ballroom of Romance collection and is from the story "An evening with John Joe Dempsey." The production was a joint project between RTE and the BBC. It features:

John Joe Dempsey - Steven Mason in the title role.⁵

Quigley – Cyril Cusack

Mr. Lynch – Niall Tóibín

Mrs Dempsey – Frances Quinn

Mr. Daly – Bill Paterson

Brother Leahy – Tom Hickey

Father Deasy – Donall Farmer

Mrs Dwyer – Anita Reeves

Mrs Keogh – Pat Leavy

Mrs O'Brien – Laurie Morton

The filming was carried out in the Cappoquin and Lismore areas and a schedule was published by the Dungarvan Observer in its edition of 22nd of April 1983:

Tuesday 26 April Barrack Street Cappoquin

Wednesday Thursday

Friday April 29th CBS

Later Main Street Lismore – Greehys

Finish May 19th

Other locations: Lili Lynch Farm Monal – Sawmills

The story depicts the life of the central character as he reaches the end of his school days and sees his life ahead in the expectations and needs of adults. This is perhaps most vividly portrayed in the gift of his father's pen to him by his mother, a gift that is laced with strong suggestions of the acceptance of his father's role. Within the story it is perhaps hypocrisy rather than duty that is central and this is an interesting thematic variance with the film. However the central escape mechanism of the imagination is brilliantly evoked in both :

"John Joe Dempsey on his fifteenth birthday closed his eyes and travelled into a world he did not know"⁶

The first major theme is the personal development of John Joe, and his becoming "one of ourselves." This is explored in an analysis of several of the central characters. In the case of Mr. Lynch, he had

"joined the British Army in order to get away from her for a time, only she'd reached out to him from a dream" [his mother]⁷

but he also

⁵ Steven Mason is from Cappoquin and was recommended for the part by his teacher Geraldine Canning. He now works in banking.

⁶ Do, pg. 108

⁷ Ballroom of Romance pg. 124

“spent his life returning to the scenes that obsessed him....Yet he spoke of them only to fatherless boys.”⁸

Quigley on the other hand tells the truth and is

“honest and straightforward and said what was in his mind.”⁹

The most crucial exploration of the entire story occurs at the end and while absolutely explicit in the original story is portrayed in a suggestive manner in the film in the enigmatic smile the overspreads John Joe’s face as he goes to bed:

“He travelled alone, visiting in is way the women of the town, adored and adoring, more alive in his bed than he ever was at the Christian Brothers school, or in the grey Coliseum, or in the chip-shop, or Keogh’s public house, or his mother’s kitchen, more alive than ever he would be at the sawmills. In his bed he entered a paradise: it was grand being alone.”¹⁰

The second major theme is the sexual awakening of John Joe and is extremely well portrayed in the film. Mr. Lynch is at the heart of this exploration. While he does not “indulge in the Piccadilly Tarts” and explicitly questions John Joe as to whether he masturbates, it is Quigley the “old simple minded dwarf” who is more direct. He is portrayed as a Peeping-Tom and it is his suggestions which lead to John Joes dreams of sexual liaisons with many of the Town’s *Older women*, including Mrs. Dwyer.

In the film the local cinema is projected as a major source of stimulus from the outside world and also as a centre of social life. This device is largely the making of Pat O’Connor and is used in an interesting way. Its smokiness, its hard seats, and its location as the centre for a “day-dream” by John Joe serve as a visual representation of much of the internal self-analysis of the original story.

The Cappoquin Boathouse served as the H.Q. for the production and Dan Murray, a member of the Club features as an extra. On completion of the shoot a party was held in the Boathouse, with catering by local Bakery owner Esther Barron. Most of the cast and crew including Pat O’Connor, Cyril Cusack and Frances Quinn attended. In the early period of my sojourn in Lismore I was delighted to attend this wild and extremely stimulating party. The film, which runs for 50 minutes was first shown by RTE and the BBC on November 23rd 1983.

⁸ Ballroom of romance pg. 127.

⁹ Do. Pg. 126

¹⁰ Do. Pg. 130.

Cal 1984

This is based on the novella by Bernard MacLaverty and

“The film version of *Cal*, starring some of the finest actors in Ireland, including John Lynch, Donal McCann, John Kavanagh and Ray McAnally, was commercially quite successful and established Bernard MacLaverty as a well-known writer.”¹¹

The title role is played by John Lynch and that of Marcella by Helen Mirren, and was produced by Stuart Craig and eminent English Director and producer David Puttnam. The beautifully evocative music is supplied by Mark Knopfler of Dire Straits fame. It was made largely in Drogheda and Navan with the Library Scenes produced in North County Dublin. The film was nominated for two Baftas and in his review, Roger Ebert commented:

“The love scenes in *Cal* are among the loveliest I’ve seen,”

In its depiction of the Northern Troubles the original story could be said to espouse the dictum “*a plague on both your houses?*” and in one passage suggests that if the people of Northern Ireland had been left to their own devices the situation would have been resolved. This is surely to ignore over 50 years in which the political establishment cemented and extended inequity. At the conclusion, while the fate of *Cal* is set out in the starkest terms, the ramifications for *Cal*’s father, Marcella, her daughter Lucy, Mrs Morton, Cyril Crilly and Skeffington are left unresolved. Finally, as a Cavan and Ulster man the placing of Breffni Park in Clones in the story whether due to lack of a check or a deliberately constructed artistic inaccuracy, is more than a little irritating.

In mood the film is absolutely true to the original story, but the enigmatic and unresolved issues raised in the story are perhaps resolved less satisfactorily in the more didactic medium of the film. Helen Mirren won the best actress award at the Cannes Film Festival for her role in the film.

¹¹ A review of “*Matters of Life and death* by Bernard MacLaverty – by Hugh McFadden. Irish Independent June 3rd 2006

A month in the country 1987

Based on the successful novel by J.C Carr, it was filmed in just 28 days in extremely inclement weather conditions. It stars the then upcoming actors Colin Firth as Tom Birkin, Kenneth Branagh as James Moon, Patrick Malahide as the Reverend Keach and Natasha Richardson, wife of Liam Neeson, as Alice Keach.

It portrays two veterans of World War I who have been devastated by their experiences. Birkin, a painting restorer, exorcises many of his demons as he uncovers a hidden medieval painting and parallels with his own life are starkly drawn with that of the original artist as his work progresses. The archaeology of Moon is not just a journey of discovery, but the dig represents a place of repose and shelter. The central themes of partial redemption, un-stated feelings and loneliness are powerfully drawn. None of the characters, with the possible exception of the children [and even they could be said to use music as a communication device] are capable of being direct.

In an interview, O'Connor made several interesting points:

“I was interested in the way that the English...hide what they really feel.”

on Birkin, he:

“can't tell the vicar's wife that he loves her, which he does. He's drowning in his own fear of being damaged any more.”

“What I like about this movie is that there are more hints than anything else.”

In commenting on the actors he most cogently and graphically sets out his own most central cinematic preoccupation

“The human face is the most beautiful thing of all.”

RTE carried an interview by Bibi Baskin with Colin Firth on Evening Extra on December 3rd 1987

Stars and Bars – 1988

This is perhaps one of the least known of O'Connor's films. It is adapted by William Boyd from his novel. It stars Daniel Day Lewis as "an upper-middle class Englishman for whom America is a coast-to-coast Disneyland."¹² It depicts his travels across America and the many eccentric individuals he encounters. In his review Vincent Canby is fulsome in his praise of the star stating that the film offers "further confirmation that Daniel Day Lewis...is well on his way to becoming the actor who really can do anything." He continues indicating that the supporting cast are "some of New York's finest."

January Man 1989

This film marked a major change in direction for Pat being a significant Hollywood project, and starring a well established a-list cast. It is a "comedy thriller" which is also a first. It stars Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio in her first collaboration with her future husband O'Connor, Kevin Kline, Susan Sarandon, Harvey Keitel, Rod Steiger and Alan Rickman. While the movie is mainly cast as a thriller it also projects many of O'Connor's preoccupations in how relationships work. This is well illustrated in the first meeting of Kline and Mary when she asks, "why don't people say what they mean", and in another scene when the Mayor explodes and asks "do you know who you're talking to", which though panned for the "overacting" of Rod Steiger, powerfully transmits the essence of how power can be wielded.

Reviews of the film were generally negative including that of Rita Kempley in 1989 when she accused writer John Patrick Shanley [who scripted Moonstruck] and Pat O'Connor of resembling "a couple of artists slumming" and of being "out of their league."

RTE in an Evening Extra special as part of St Patrick's Day Special from New York on March 17th 1988 included interviews with Pat O'Connor, Kevin Kline and Harvey Keitel on the set of the film.

Fools of Fortune 1990

This is the third of O'Connor's films based on the work of William Trevor from a script provided by Michael Hirst. It tells a story of an Anglo-Irish family caught up in a conflict not of their making. Julie Christie plays the matriarch. Iain Glen is the son who has been devastated by the murder of his father by the Black and Tans and Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio the lover of Willie Quinton [Glen] and mother of their child Imelda. It also featured Niamh Cusack, Tom Hickey John Kavanagh and Mick Lally. The film:

"wears a solemn expression that is appropriate for a sad romantic melodrama set against the background of Ireland's fight for Independence. The approach is serious, the performances are sincere and the physical production is impressive."¹³

¹² "Stars and Bars," U.S. as land of the odd. By Vincent Canby. New York Times 18th March 1988.

¹³ Film; Love and pain among the gentry in Ireland. By Vincent Canby. New York Times, 14th September 1990.

From the very start the movie in its use of jerky “period film” evokes a sense of the time. Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio and Julie Christie are positively radiant from their very first scenes. The world of the big house, the life of the Anglo-Irish, and the presence and atmosphere of the “forest” are brilliantly evoked and I believe that the background and heritage of the Waterford born director played an essential role in achieving this. The destruction of the family home and the murders by the Black & Tans are extraordinarily evocative. The meeting with the family’s legal representatives is portrayed in Dickensian terms. The lushness of the rural scenes and the general ambiance is most evocative of the “twilight of the ascendancy.”

In its news broadcast of June 21st 1990, RTE featured the Charity Premiere in Dublin in aid of Children’s Cancer Fund and showed the stars including Julie Christie arriving at the Savoy in Dublin in the company of author William Trevor.

Force of duty 1992

This is a BBC Northern Ireland production in association with RTE. Produced by Robert Cooper it runs for 1.20.20minutes. The cast includes Ingrid Craigie, Adrian Dunbar, Patrick Malahide and Donal McCann. It is, according to RTE,

“a disturbing drama starring Donal McCann as a RUC detective who is haunted by the murder of one of his colleagues and is obsessed with finding the killers”

Zelda 1993

This film is a portrayal of the life of Zelda Fitzgerald and her relationship with the major American novelist F. Scott. The film won an Emmy and was nominated for another. It stars Natasha Richardson as Zelda and Timothy Hutton as F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Circle of friends 1994

103 minutes

This film is based on the hugely successful novel by Maeve Binchy. It stars Chris O’Donnell Minnie Driver Colin Firth, Mick Lally and John Kavanagh.

A quick summary can be set out:

“In 1957 three girlfriends eagerly escape the confines of their hometown to attend college in Dublin – where naïve notions of youth collide with the harsh realities of adulthood.” - RTE

However, like all O’Connor’s films the key action is the interplay between the central characters. The film was generally well received. In his review, Roger Ebert [March 24th 1995] described the film as “heart-warming and poignant.” It “glows with intelligence” and “one of the pleasant things about this film is that the characters are allowed to be intelligent and to think for themselves.” In conclusion “Circle of Friends is a real treasure.” However

in his review James Berardinelli describes it as the “motion picture equivalent of a dime store romance novel.” And an Irish review complained that it provided a “John Hinde postcard-styled representation” of Ireland. However it concurs with the general consensus of praise for Minnie Driver while criticising the lack of Irish Cast. The Irish Times on the other hand commented that the film was:

“effortlessly charming and thoroughly engaging”

Inventing the Abbotts 1997

This film focuses on family relationships and juxtaposes preoccupations with financial success with those of love in 1950's America. It stars Liv Tyler, who went on to major success in Lord of the Rings; Joaquin Phoenix, who plays Johnny Cash in the award winning “Walk the Line” and Billy Crudup who recently starred as a villain in MI3.

Dancing at Lughnasa 1998

The play was written by Brian Friel and the screenplay produced by award winning Irish playwright Frank McGuinness. It stars Meryl Streep, Michael Gambon, Catherine McCormack [who played Mel Gibson's wife in Braveheart] and Brid Brennan playing Agnes again a part for which she had received a Tony for her stage performance. It was produced by Noel Pearson and filmed in County Wicklow.

The film portrays a group of sisters, their unhinged brother a Priest and Michael the illegitimate son of one of the sisters who is the narrator. Kate is the head of the household, Maggie the farmer, Rose a simpleton and the least productive, Agnes whose knitting prowess is rendered redundant by the opening of a new factory, Christina and her son Michael and finally Father Jack who after a long sojourn as a missionary in Africa either suffers from a profound medical problem or is used in the story as the endorsement of or presentment with an alternative “pagan” outlook for which it appears he has lost his ministerial post. It is my interpretation that the dancing of the title represents the loss of inhibition and the catharsis of the sisters into a oneness of being. In my discussions with Pat he has indicated that the selection of Michael as the narrator is inevitable as the happenings of the film are largely interpreted through his eyes. In my view the fires and dances of “Lughnasa” must be seen as profoundly central to a rites of passage ritual. The “outsiders” represented by the coming of the factory, the killing of the rooster [whose role cannot but be paralleled with the stabilising influence of Kate who has the nickname at school of “the gander”] by the fox and finally the two key male figures of Father Jack and Michael's father, lead to a dislocation of stability and decimation of the family. The departure of Agnes and Rose leaves Kate “inconsolable” and leads to Christina working all her life in the factory in a job that she hates. The central theme is that love exists in what we do for one another rather than in what we receive.

The film is visually stunning and in his analysis Barry Norman has said that it has:

“An immaculate cast splendidly led by Streep”

Sweet November 2001

This film has a Hollywood a-list cast including Charlize Theron and Keanu Reeves. It is a love story reflecting on issues of identity, the fragility of success and the centrality of concern for others. It was commercially and critically less successful than some of his other work, but reflects the continuity of O'Connor's preoccupations. A scene towards the end of the film as the two main characters part crystallises the essence of being oneself and Charlize intones "remember me as I am"

Conclusion

Currently Pat O'Connor is considering several projects but the status of these is uncertain. We are certainly overdue another Cal or Fools of fortune. Before finishing, it would be remiss of me not to refer to Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio Pat's wife, and mother of their two children Jack and Declan. She is one of today's foremost actresses and through her films such as Class Action, Fools of Fortune, Robin Hood and the cult Scarface is instantly recognisable to cinemagoers.

In viewing the magnificent body of Pat's work several themes are prevalent and are explored with breathtaking depth and with the eye of a master of his craft:

- *Many of the characters are embarked on journeys of self-discovery.*
- *The inter-relationships of the characters are fluidly and effortlessly drawn.*
- *What is communicated through facial expression is very often as important as what is said.*
- *As Pat has said in relation to characters in *A month in the country* "The men I show...are all damaged creatures who are trying to cope with some kind of dignity." This could equally be ascribed to many others.*
- *His eye for Ireland is visually and dramatically brilliant.*

In the Pantheon of Irish and International Film Pat O'Connor's place is undoubtedly at the very top table.

Donald Brady
16th July 2006