

BROOKLYN – Film at CONCA VERDE on 17.10.16 – Talk by Tia Peyton

The film

Brooklyn is a 2015 British-Canadian-Irish romantic drama film directed by John Crowley and written by Nick Hornby, based on Colm Tóibín's novel of the same name. The film stars Saoirse Ronan, Emory Cohen, Domhnall Gleeson, Jim Broadbent, and Julie Walters. Set in 1951 and 1952, the film tells the story of a young Irish woman's immigration to Brooklyn, where she quickly falls into a romance. When her past catches up with her, she must choose between two countries and the lives that exist within them for her.

The plot

Young Irish immigrant Eilis Lacey (Saoirse Ronan) navigates her way through 1950s Brooklyn. Lured by the promise of America, Eilis departs Ireland and the comfort of her mother's home for the shores of New York City. The initial shackles of homesickness quickly diminish as a fresh romance sweeps Eilis into the intoxicating charm of love. However, soon her past disrupts her new vivacity, and Eilis must choose between two countries and the lives that exist within.

Connections to actual events

As the star of the new movie Brooklyn, Saoirse Ronan is tasked with portraying an Irish immigrant in 1950s New York City as a singular woman in a unique situation. Transatlantic love triangles aside, the experiences of the fictional Eilis Lacey would have been as common as Irish pubs are in today's Midtown Manhattan.

In the novel on which the movie is based, a best-seller by Colm Tóibín, Eilis moves from small-town Ireland, where she struggles to find work, to Brooklyn. A priest facilitates the move, finds her a job at an Italian-run department store and lodging in an Irish women's boarding house, and sets her up to take night classes in bookkeeping. Such a trajectory would have been typical for an Irish woman moving to New York at the time—but to fully understand Eilis's '50s experience, it's necessary to back up to the first boom of Irish immigration to America, in the 1840s.

When the potato famine sent droves of immigrants to America, New York City saw the beginning of a new immigrant infrastructure in which the Irish would eventually dominate powerful unions, civil service jobs and Catholic institutions in the city. Moreover, they had a firm hold on construction work during a critical period of growth in Manhattan. Meanwhile, economic conditions in Ireland were a different situation. As Irish-American historian and novelist Peter Quinn explains, "The country wasn't in the Second World War, it had been kind of cut off from the rest of the world, and it wasn't part of the Marshall Plan. So it was still a very rural country." The economy was at a standstill, while the U.S. was booming. Some 50,000 immigrants left Ireland for America in the '50s, about a quarter of them settling in New York.

Within that community, women played an important role. During the 19th century, the wave of Irish was "the only immigration where there were a majority of women," Quinn says. Thanks to a culture that supported nuns and teachers, those women were often able to delay marriage and look for jobs. By the mid-20th century, many Irish women—who also benefited from the ability to speak English—were working in supermarkets, utility companies, restaurants and, like Eilis, department stores. The fact that Eilis finds her job through her priest is also typical. "[The Catholic Church] was an employment agency. It was the great transatlantic organization," Quinn says. "If you came from Ireland, everything seemed different, but the church didn't. It was a comfort that way, and it was a connection."

It's fitting, then, that Eilis meets her love interest, the Italian-American Tony, at a parish dance. These were tremendously popular social events where women could meet men while under the protective supervision of their priest. No alcohol would have been on offer, which added another layer of safety. And it's not at all strange that Eilis would strike up with an Italian-American man rather than a fellow Celt. "When people talked about intermarriage in the '50s, they weren't talking about black-white, they were talking about Irish-Italian," Quinn says.

The reviews

Released at the Sundance film festival in January 2015 to rave reviews. The film had an official release date in the UK and Ireland in November 2015. It was nominated for 9 academy awards including best picture and best actress, with critics suggesting it was a nod to old Hollywood and the beautiful films of the 1950s where the protagonist was a strong female. Resembling Betty Davis or Doris Day.

Personal note

As an Irish woman myself of parents born in England to my immigrant grandparents I've listened at first hand to the stories my grandparents told of what it was like to leave your family and enter completely new unknown territory.

My grandfather Tony Brennan often spoke of British racism against the Irish where he would see signs in London with: **"No blacks, no dogs, no Irish!"**

He went instead to work in the Middle East and he and my grandmother Kitty whom he met in London (she herself left Ireland from Tipperary aged only 16) went on to buy a beautiful home in the centre of the London – the city that had once rejected them – where my mother was born in 1957.

My paternal grandmother Harriet saw her dreams of being a teacher destroyed because her sister Eibhlin emigrated to New York. By the way, Eibhlin is Irish for 'Eve' which in Italian is 'Eva'.

My Nanny was the sister similar to the film left behind to take care of aging parents with no money to further her education. She went on to have seven children and run a small farm whilst my grandfather Jim also working in construction, sent money home to her from Birmingham in England.

For me myself now with my own Italian-Irish love story, against all odds and an immigrant of sorts myself, it is with huge admiration I look to the generations of Irish who have contributed so much all over the world. Of course, like scores of Italian emigrants! My boyfriend is from Villa D'Adda, by the way – A Bergamask.

The bravery, talents, skills and friendly outgoing personalities of the Irish emigrants not only have shaped modern America, Britain and Australia but today our small nation stands independent among the richest in the world. Dominating in technology, sport, music, medicine, and the Arts as well as our own national sports and music.

In the film you'll hear a song named Casadh an Tsugain (The Twisting of the Rope). It's about a man's longing to marry the daughter of a small cottage but unfortunately for him the mother being single liked him also and so she locks him out of the house as he's fixing the roof. Therefore his love is never received by the woman he loves.

"If you'll be mine be mine oh treasure of my heart, if you'll be mine be mine before the whole world."

Má bhíonn tú liom, bí liom
A stóirín mo chroí
Ma bhíonn tú liom, bí liom
Os comhair an tsaoil

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The film show

This is the third film in English this year. The next film will be in French – the French title being TROIS SOUVENIRS DE MA JEUNESSE and distributed in Italy as I MIEI GIORNI PIU' BELLI. This will be followed by the film in English THE MAN WHO KNEW INFINITY – L'UOMO CHE VIDE L'INFINITO. There are 12 films altogether till Xmas – 6 in English, 1 in French, 1 in German and 4 in Spanish.

Enjoy the film!