



## Belfast: The Film

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I had the pleasure of seeing the film *Belfast* in Belfast. The director, Kenneth Branagh, a native, gave a special welcome to the home audience. The film has a strong autobiographical feel, drawing on his own experience.

Seen through the eyes of the young nine-year-old boy, Buddy, it is a nostalgic look back at the end of the 1960s period and the beginning of what is called 'The Troubles' ('The Great Violence' would be more accurate). It is very close to home, as I was seven years old in 1969 and have vivid memories of the time as well. I remember being in Belfast for a day out with my dad and getting caught up in a riot at a barricade and being tear-gassed accidentally.

Some of the details are just bang on: the small house, the clothes, the TV programmes, the toys, the fascination with cinema and the community lifestyle. What really brought me back was the sound of the church bells, very common in those days. We would have to be home for our tea when the 6pm Angelus bells were rung.

One of the strongest aspects of this film is the role of grandparents in the rearing of children. Through Buddy's eyes we see the close bonds,

the real love, and how they help him understand life and love. What is also accurate and redeeming is the liberal use of humour, sprinkled in good measure through the film. As well as some genuinely brilliant lines, the humour is presented as a necessary coping mechanism in the face of the ugliness of political events and pervasive violence.

The violence of the Troubles is the backdrop to the film. It is manifest in the violence of the streets (the burning out of Catholic families and locals erecting barricades for protection) and the TV news reports that wash over Buddy's head. The perspective of the young boy is important as it illustrates the traumatic effect of witnessing violence first hand. Buddy struggles to understand the sectarian divide and the sudden barriers with his Catholic neighbours. This theme is repeatedly drawn on as Buddy questions his own faith (his church has an apocalyptic preacher), how Catholics and Protestants are different (names don't always tell you), and how senseless the sectarian violence proves (dividing and separating people who were living side by side).


It tells the tragedy of the North through Buddy's eyes in a way that unmask the hypocrisy, the failure of



faith and the empowerment of the violent. This latter fact is critical, the majority of people don't want violence, as the subsequent 1998 peace process proved, but are forced into compromising positions by sectarian attitudes that seek to polarise and divide. Buddy's father is caught in this very position and is forced to choose between emigrating to escape or being pulled into the conflict against his will. Without giving any spoilers, it is a tragedy.

The music of Van Morrison is the soundtrack and while this is obvious and predictable in many ways (I confess to being a huge fan myself), it does tend towards the over-nostalgic i.e. a native looking back from afar.

There were other musical options that might have been better.

In summary, it is an enjoyable trip down memory lane but it doesn't illuminate much of the thorny issues of the Troubles. The end of the film sees a division between 'those who left' and 'those who stayed'. The emphasis is very much on the former (and their reasons for leaving) but doesn't explain much for those who had to live through it all. The real question is how do we recreate that 'lost paradise' of strong community bonds, different families living side by side, and a world of trust and respect. 

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