

1999 Sydney Film Festival

Well-deserved accolades for new Loach film

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My Name is Joe by veteran British director Ken Loach is a compassionate and finely crafted work about Joe Kavanagh, a 37-year-old recovering alcoholic, from Ruchill, a poverty-stricken suburb of Glasgow. The film, which has first-rate performances by its crew of professional and amateur actors, has been widely praised since its release. Peter Mullan, who plays Joe, won the Best Actor prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 1998 and the film has been nominated for several prestigious awards. It was also voted the most popular movie at the Sydney Film Festival, despite only one screening. These honours are well-deserved.

The story is relatively simple. Joe, who has not had a drink in almost a year, is a no-nonsense, warm-hearted but vulnerable man still wrestling with the demons produced by years of wild drinking. He attends Alcoholics Anonymous, coaches a local football team of unemployed workers (infamous as the worst team in Glasgow) and does what he can to assist the players and their families. In quieter moments he tentatively reflects on his future.

Joe meets Sarah (Louise Goodall), a health worker who has been sent to visit Liam (David McKay), a member of the football team, and his wife Sabine (Anne-Marie Kennedy) and young child.

In contrast to Joe's exuberant energy, Sarah is private, independent and, in contrast to the majority of the area's residents, has a job. Both are recovering from previous relationships and are nervous about any new involvement, but life and circumstances draw them closer and into a complex love affair. The relationship is fragile, constantly hovering on the edge of failure.

Like many others, Joe's friends, Liam and Sabine are battling to survive in an area blighted with mass unemployment and poverty. Sabine has a serious heroin habit and is in debt to local gangsters. Liam, a former

addict who was able to end his dependence on the drug, is desperately attempting to save his wife and their marriage. When the gangsters demand Liam repay his wife's debt or they will break his legs with baseball bats, Joe intervenes and strikes a deal that threatens to break up his relationship with Sarah, and which, ultimately produces a terrible tragedy.

Filmed amongst the all-pervading urban decay of Ruchill, with its run down tenements and boarded-up buildings, the potency of Loach's film comes from the authenticity and intensity of its characters—people constantly portrayed in the tabloid press as misfits or losers. Loach subverts these reactionary myths, producing a realistic and moving portrait of those facing almost impossible circumstances but who are able to summon up tremendous humour and solidarity. The scenes dealing with the misadventures of Glasgow's worst performing football team (which refers to itself as West Germany and wears its colours) and the blunt rapid-fire quips between club members are hilarious without degenerating into slapstick.

It would be a mistake though to give any impression that *My Name is Joe* is another version of *Brassed Off* or *The Full Monty*, or is some sort of feel-good movie designed to reassure the audience that comradeship and a healthy disrespect for authority can overcome all difficulties. The film ends tragically with nothing resolved and with Joe and Sarah facing even greater problems.

My Name is Joe is not dealing with new subject matter for Loach—the overwhelming majority of the 12 feature-length films and 22 television dramas and documentaries directed by him since 1964 involve working class life. In fact, Loach's filmography is a cinematic archive of the social issues confronting British working people over the last 35 years.

But in contrast to previous work, Loach has abstained from his habitual and instantly recognisable political references or his tendency towards a passive presentation of "the facts" in semi-documentary style. In *My Name is Joe*, Loach has concentrated his talents and genuine concern for the working class into eliciting vigorous and convincing performances from his actors. The depth of these performances and Paul Laverty's script gives the film a tenderness, humanity and artistic power rarely seen in today's cinema.

Loach draws the audience into the most emotionally difficult moments of Joe's life, where unemployment and poverty are permanent, and keeping body and soul together is a never-ending struggle. From the opening scene, when Joe explains the merry-go-round of drunkenness, petty crime and jail, through to Liam's explanation of the cycle of drug abuse, the film reveals the impossibility of Ruchill's residents escaping poverty and its consequences.

As Joe explains to a friend who is trying to persuade him to invite Sarah out, "I'm 37 years old and what have I got? Nothing. Joe Kavanagh is all I've got." This is a world where a wrong decision, big or small, can destroy one's life, where establishing a relationship is relatively easy but maintaining it is much more difficult and emotionally demanding.

One of the more memorable scenes in the film is when Joe explains to Sarah his alcoholism, why he quit and how he attempts to deal with the deep residue of trauma and pain. Only the most cold-hearted could leave a screening of this film without a deep sense of compassion for Joe, Sarah, and countless others, and real anger against a society that produces such wanton human destruction.



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