Toronto International Film Festival 2010

# A conversation with Ken Loach

**David Walsh**
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*David Walsh and Joanne Laurier spoke to director Ken Loach, accompanied by screenwriter Paul Laverty, about his latest film,* Route Irish, *at the recent Toronto film festival.*

David Walsh: What was the origin of the idea for *Route Irish*, which takes an unusual approach to the Iraq war?

Ken Loach: The Iraq war has been a big, unspoken issue, and it's a huge issue for us. And there are a number of traps if you set out to make a film about the Iraq war, or the British involvement in the Iraq war. If you go head-on and make a film about the war's illegality and the massacre of the Iraqis, and the political reasons for the war, and the demand for oil…and so on, and so on…it could be rather predictable.

So what we also talked about was the privatization of war and the privatization of violence, and how that has happened by stealth. And how no one has ever voted for it, the electorate has never said "This is what we want." But nevertheless that's what's happened, the outsourcing of the military.

Paul [Laverty] wrote the character of Fergus, that was the starting-point, I guess. An ex-soldier who goes to work for a private military contractor. And then Paul got the idea of a death of a friend which he has to investigate and the process of the investigation would unravel pretty well everything you want to say about the implications of the privatization of war.

DW: It's a difficult and ambitious approach.

KL: Yes, I think we always knew it was going to be a difficult film to make, a difficult film to pull off, because you're dealing with a hero who is not immediately sympathetic. And it's also dealing with his disintegration, and the post-traumatic stress that he's got. And I found it quite difficult in terms of judging the performances, as we were going through, because the last thing we wanted was a lot of stereotypical "mad acting," where people display all these symptoms, so Mark plays it in a very internal way—so I just hope that communicates.

Something else was a challenge…. One of the things that we felt has been really weak in war movies—whether they've been about Vietnam or other wars that the West has waged—is that the wars are always seen as a tragedy for the West, particularly for the Americans. And, in fact, such a war is a tragedy, first and foremost, for the people who have been invaded.

Our protagonist is English and has his own tragedy, but we wanted to leave the audience with the feeling that it was the Iraqis who had suffered, above all. That balance was really hard to find a way of bringing in…because we couldn't make the film in Iraq—I don't speak the language, you can't get into that world as a filmmaker. But, nevertheless, we wanted the audience to come out feeling that it's the Iraqis who have suffered the tragedy. Hence the character of the mother, the children.…

Paul Laverty: Let me just add one thing, which I think is really important. You keep on hearing people talk about "Iraq fatigue," as if the issue has been done and dusted. Tony Blair, with remarkable hubris, has published his book and he talks about how the West must not lose its confidence because of what's happened in Iraq. He has a lot of.… By the West, he means himself and the UK.

"I didn't see this coming, and it's been a terrible mess, and I'm really sorry," Blair says, in effect, but what's going to happen in the next 10 years? We did a great deal of research, and spent a lot of time with ex-soldiers and charities. One of the organizations is called Combat Stress, and what's remarkable is the people there from other wars, the first Gulf war, from Ireland, and so on. The staff were saying, "We are expecting an enormous wave of people suffering from post-traumatic stress in the next decade." And they are beginning to see people coming through.

The war is coming back in the soldiers' heads to our communities. Again, that's a tragedy that doesn't compare with the absolute devastation of Iraq, but it's something that's going to happen.

DW: That was my next question. Certainly the film suggests that the war will come back to Britain.

KL: This is another idea that we wanted to express, it's certainly an aim in Paul's script: to bring the war to Britain, to bring the actual experience of the war home. This is what the torture represents, and then the car-bomb explosion. You can't do these things over there without consequences here.

DW: The character says, "I can be different people." There seems to be the notion in the film that the terrible things Frankie and Fergus do are not natural to the characters, that what they have done is a terrible burden to them.

PL: It's interesting. We spoke a lot to ex-soldiers, and at the beginning I spent four days in one of these centers. Many conversations come to mind, but there were several that were key to Fergus's character. I was talking to an older nurse, who had spent a life with emotionally disturbed ex-soldiers, and I asked, is there anything they have in common? And she says, "Yes, they're all in mourning for their former selves."

I met this guy who was from the first Iraq war, who was totally traumatized by seeing people he had actually killed, and he had drawn pictures and under them he had written, "I want my old self back."

KL: That line you mention has got a more general application as well. We *are* different people depending on who we're with. You're well-behaved with some people, and not with others.

But, yes, we wanted to point to the terrible things people are capable of, when the culture and the general situation, the ambience, suggests that's what needs to be done, what you should do. The culture and the

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society are making them do these things.

When we did national service, years and years ago, you were taught that stabbing an opposing soldier was simply a drill movement, which you did by numbers. You pushed the bayonet in, you twisted it around, and then pulled it out. It turns you into…well, it didn't turn us into anything, because we were just a hopeless bunch of incompetent kids…but the theory was that it made you into something else.

Joanne Laurier: Because the war is a filthy colonial war, the soldiers are victims in a specific sense. The nature of the war has a definite impact. Algeria, Vietnam.…

DW: I've been doing this work for some time, and when I speak to serious filmmakers and ask about people they admire, your name comes up most often. You are seen by people as having stood for principles, and having retained an interest in social problems and the fate of the working class. Do you have any thought about what historical and artistic perspective has permitted you to continue this work in a difficult time?

KL: A couple of practical things, I suppose, helped. One was directing two things that were seen as reasonably successful early on, which meant that I had some sort of purchase in the industry. *Kes*, a film, and *Cathy Come Home*, on the television. So they were like a calling card for the last umpteen years. So that helped.

The discipline that has kept the whole show on the road is working with writers, first with Barry Hines, and then Jim Allen, and then with his Lordship sitting there. And the thing is, if you've got a good team, it supports you when you think, "I don't know the way." Because there's someone else who has the same analysis, the same ideas, that is supportive. I hope it's true, in both directions. So you have a common sense of where you're going.

That's very important, and the other thing is working with producers who manage to steer their way through the labyrinth of film financing. We found a method of raising financing, which comes from the countries where we've done reasonably well, particularly France and Italy, and Spain, to an extent, and Germany also, to an extent. Because we don't spend much money on the films, we raise enough money and they can then make their money back, plus a little bit. So there is an economic viability to it, which then keeps going. If we had two or three films that all died the death commercially, obviously we'd have dropped by the wayside. And a huge element of luck hasn't hurt.

JL: There also has to be an audience. People come to your films, they see you as having a commitment to the working class, which they don't see any place else, quite frankly.

DW: Yes, you passed by that issue fairly quickly. It's the historical analysis. What I'm getting at, a lot of people have fallen by the wayside since 1970, who were left-wing at the time, but you retain a certain perspective.

KL: But it's not that difficult, in that events just keep underlining it, don't they? Every year or two…if the faith was lapsing, things happen to reinforce it. The war reinforces your analysis, the present cuts reinforce it, the economic collapse reinforces it. It's just…demonstrated time after time. Yes, life demonstrates it.

PL: He's being modest. To do this for 40 years, you have to have a deep feeling for it, and commitment, and you have to work like hell, let's not forget that.

KL: My dad used to say, the problem with you is that you don't have a proper job.

DW: Are there any special responsibilities or obligations you feel as socialist filmmakers in the present situation?

KL: There are a number of subjects that are urgent, but which we don't yet know how to tackle. There are all kinds of things that you feel need to be said, but I don't quite know how to say in film terms.

I suppose you just feel an obligation to keep your shoulder to the wheel, apart from anything else.

PL: There are many fascinating stories, but to find a human way into the subject…it's more complicated.

KL: We get abused by mainstream critics for being "didactic," but you see commercial films that are incredibly didactic, that say things you would cringe at saying, because they're so blatant and simplistic, and they get away with it.

PL: I think any film that deals with a serious aspect of life, there's a type of critic who just says, that's boring, that's preaching, and doesn't look at the contradictions we've wrestled with when we were trying to make the film.

JL: There's a class reaction in that response. They prefer something else.

KL: Well, there's Michael Gove, now a cabinet minister. What did he say at the time of *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* [about the Irish civil war]? He said that the Irish had always rejected a democratic option.

PL: He hadn't even seen the film, he stood history on its head. The lying bastard. My favorite was the journalist who compared Ken to [pro-Nazi film director] Leni Riefenstahl.

DW: That's charming.

KL: Yes, they wrote I was a worse propagandist than Leni Riefenstahl. The thing that disturbs me about the critics is that they will not deal with the substance of the film. If there's a review of a book on the Iraq war, for example, it would tend to discuss the book, and its content, the motives for the war, its consequences. But we won't get a review in the mainstream press that will even discuss any of that.

I think there is a lot of class hostility. And on the "left," there's a fear of seeming old-fashioned, out of step, of not tapping into the current zeitgeist and the current mood. There's such a pressure to be whatever the current word for "hip" is, and to be up to the minute, to be detached, to be cool, not to be passionate, above it all. That's not what we do.

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