

Sing Street from Ireland, *A Bigger Splash* from Italy: Neglected realities

Joanne Laurier
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Sing Street, written and directed by John Carney; *A Bigger Splash*, directed by Luca Guadagnino, screenplay by Alain Page and David Kajganich

Sing Street

Sing Street, directed by John Carney (born 1972), is a musical comedy-drama set in Dublin in the mid-1980s. The Irish filmmaker's new movie pursues some of the same concerns found in his previous works, such as *Once* (2007) and *Begin Again* (2013), which focused on the challenges facing singer/songwriters and the vagaries of the music business.

Dublin teen Conor (Ferdia Walsh-Peelo) finds refuge in music as his middle class life disintegrates: his parents are getting a divorce; his depressed, drop-out brother never leaves the house; and to save money, his parents are taking Conor out of a private school and sending him to a free state school (Synge—pronounced “sing”—Street CBS, which Carney himself attended), run by an oppressive priest. Conor deals with his woes by inventing songs with lyrics like “If we didn’t share a mortgage, I’d leave you.”

When Conor meets Raphina (Lucy Boynton), a sixteen-year-old whose parents are out of the picture and who aspires to be a model, he promises to feature her in one of his band’s music videos. The problem is that he doesn’t yet have a band.

More or less by magic, Conor assembles a group of boys from his new school (apparently musical prodigies like himself) and in no time at all they are writing and performing catchy, vibrant tunes and making innovative videos with Raphina. As the movie’s production notes explain, “*Sing Street* shows us a world where music has the power to take us away from the turmoil of everyday

life and transform us into something greater.”

Although “Dublin in the 1980s was wracked by an aggressive downward socio-economic trend,” the notes continue, Carney “didn’t want to do anything about Dublin politically, about the dark days of Ireland that we were living with in the late 70s and 80s.” (There was a time, believe it or not, when artists did not boast about that sort of lack of interest.)

In any case, the bleak times have been refashioned by Carney. *Sing Street* is a self-consciously “cute” film about a sweet Irish cocoon—in other words, a fairy tale. It is a sincere work, a feel-good movie smothered in charm—but also socially indifferent (Carney grew up in the Thatcher/Reagan era), made in an Ireland that has once again plunged into misery.

It seems telling that in the wake of the collapse of the so-called Celtic Tiger economy following the 2008 financial crash, Carney and John Crowley in *Brooklyn* have turned to relatively nostalgic glances at the past. Is there anyone prepared to look honestly at the *bad new* Irish conditions?

A Bigger Splash

A pseudo-erotic thriller directed by Italian filmmaker Luca Guadagnino (born 1971), *A Bigger Splash* takes its name from a painting by British artist David Hockney, which, among other things, depicts a swimming pool. Guadagnino’s new movie is loosely based on the 1969 French film, *La Piscine* (*The Swimming Pool*) by Jacques Deray.

Guadagnino’s *I Am Love* (2009)—despite numerous weaknesses, including its silly title—dealt critically with a wealthy Milanese manufacturing family. Unfortunately, *A Bigger Splash* is a pretentious piece that isn’t rescued by

pretty images and talented actors.

Tilda Swinton plays Marianne Lane, a rock diva convalescing from throat surgery. She is vacationing with her boyfriend Paul (Matthias Schoenaerts), a documentary filmmaker and recovering alcoholic, on Pantelleria, a remote volcanic island off the coast of Sicily. Their sensuous fun in the sun is interrupted by the arrival of Marianne's former lover and record producer, Harry (Ralph Fiennes), and his 22-year-old daughter, Penelope (a surly, Lolita-ish Dakota Johnson).

The super-charged Harry, often high, is out to recapture Marianne's heart, a plan and a desire that lead to a fatal outcome. *A Bigger Splash* presents four unsympathetic, self-involved people, who tell each other such things as "He doesn't believe in limits," and "He said you were too conceited to be addicted to anything."

It seems all too appropriate that a newspaper article about the movie was headlined: "Tilda Swinton: My *Bigger Splash* character doesn't speak because I had nothing to say." Indeed. Unhappily, one might have written another for Fiennes, a fine actor misused here: "My *Bigger Splash* character speaks too much because I had nothing to say."

Guadagnino's unfortunate fascination with his rich and elegant—and not very intriguing—characters, his lack of artistic distance from them, leaves him unable to pass judgment on their destructive behavior. His film seems obsessed with gorgeous, complacent beings plotting against one another while dining on succulent dishes in a magnificent villa. The director may not entirely approve of the goings-on, but he is nonetheless a willing voyeur relishing their excesses.

There is an intense love affair between the camera and the pristine, rugged landscape of Pantelleria. However, the filmmakers barely touch upon the island's principal global significance today, as one of the main arrival points for desperate, impoverished refugees fleeing Africa and the war-torn Middle East. In fact, Pantelleria is something of a modern-day underground railway stop in the horrific, mounting refugee crisis.

Guadagnino's *A Bigger Splash* pays scant attention to this reality: a small group of refugees hide out in Pantelleria's rocky crevices; another group is locked up in cages at a police station; and in the background in that station the television news reports on refugees landing on Lampedusa—another Italian island in the Mediterranean.

Justifying his decision not to concentrate more on the refugee issue, the director asserted in an interview with the Curzon Blog that "You have to stick to your point of

view when you do a movie; if you swap points of view, you're suddenly making a drama. If you are internal to the narrative, then that's what happens: you have those glimpses because it's their perspective of it. That's how [the refugee crisis] appears to the gaze of our protagonists." (At one point, one of the quartet comments, "They're human beings, theoretically.")

Guadagnino added that making a movie on the island without mentioning the refugee issue "would have been a travesty because the movie is set in Pantelleria, and that's what is happening there. Plus, I wanted to talk about how we deal with otherness in the relationship of these four people who are bound to neglect the other because they are so immersed in their own vision of things."

This is not entirely clear, but it seems that Guadagnino consciously decided not to shift the focus from his inconsequential "reality" to one a hundred times more compelling and tragic. He chose to be "internal to the narrative" and show "glimpses" of the refugee crisis as it "appears to the gaze of our protagonists," who are "so immersed in their own vision of things." Yes, but *why* did the filmmaker restrict himself to his self-absorbed protagonists' vision of things?

The important artist is capable of presenting his or her characters as they appear to themselves—doing justice to them, so to speak—and criticizing them at the same time. The failure to accomplish that in *A Bigger Splash* results in something weak and, to say the least, ambiguous.

To her credit, Swinton, appearing at the Venice film festival, reminded her audience that "we're dealing with refugees, war refugees."

A little over 40 miles separates Pantelleria from Tunisia. What lies between, the Strait of Sicily, has become a mass watery grave for victims of American and European imperialist policy. Guadagnino's film would have been far better served had the director stepped outside his comfort zone instead of neglecting this world-historical "other."



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