

***Belfast*: Kenneth Branagh's autobiographical tale of growing up in Ireland at the onset of the Troubles**

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?Written and directed by Kenneth Branagh

Noted actor and director Kenneth Branagh's latest film is inspired by and closely based on his childhood in Northern Ireland. His family left Belfast for England in 1970, when he was nine years old.

Belfast expresses Branagh's affection for his working-class parents and grandparents. It is filmed almost entirely in black and white, and on location in the capital city of Northern Ireland. The music of Van Morrison, the well-known singer-songwriter also born in Belfast, is prominently featured.

However, Branagh's ode to his childhood, well-intentioned as it may be, does not succeed in evoking the period or emotionally gripping the viewer. The mix of nostalgia and occasional sentimentality remains almost entirely confined to memories of family. It does not examine the circumstances facing 9-year-old Buddy and his family, circumstances that would determine the future of Branagh himself.

This remains quite consciously a child's-eye view of the onset of the Troubles, when sectarian conflict erupted between the minority Catholic and majority Protestant populations in Northern Ireland amid protests against anti-Catholic discrimination. The Labour government of Harold Wilson, claiming to defend Catholics, sent British troops to the province, and direct rule was eventually imposed and lasted for more than 25 years.

In the opening minutes of the story, the mostly idyllic childhood of Buddy (Jude Hill, in his film debut) is shattered, when a Protestant mob descends on the block in which he lives with his parents and grandparents. The time is August 1969. Buddy's family is Protestant, but the block is home to a mix of Protestant and

Catholic families who live alongside one another as neighbors and friends. The thugs demand that the Catholic families leave, and back up their threats with Molotov cocktails and physical violence.

Buddy's Ma (Caitriona Balfe) and Pa (Jamie Dornan) face family issues and crises that are brought to a climax as the physical dangers increase. Buddy's father, working in construction in England, is only home every other weekend. When he returns, he faces threats from the leader of the Protestant mob in the neighborhood, who demand that he support the eviction of his Catholic neighbors from their homes.

In addition, financial problems are a source of concern and of differences between Ma and Pa. When Buddy's father suggests they leave for Australia or Canada, Ma is distraught. A move, whether to England or farther afield, would mean leaving the only world they have ever known. It would also break up the family, which includes Buddy's loving and ever-present grandparents (Judi Dench and Ciaran Hinds). When this prospect is raised before Buddy, he throws an understandable tantrum.

While his future is being decided, Buddy's life includes family afternoons at the movies, where he is captivated by *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (1968) and *High Noon* (1952). He and his friends engage in make-believe combat in the streets, which alternates with the real thing, as fire bombs destroy the homes of Catholic neighbors. At school, Buddy develops a crush on a Catholic classmate, and spends much of his time figuring out how he can sit next to her. Buddy's parents' opposition to sectarian conflict is indicated when the boy asks his father whether he can marry the

object of his affection when he grows up, and Pa answers that he doesn't care whether someone is Hindu, Southern Baptist, or a "vegetarian anti-Christ," they are "welcome in our house any day of the week."

The memories from more than 50 years ago also overlap with the first-ever moon landing, which took place only weeks before the opening scenes of violence on Buddy's street. He and his family stare transfixed at the television screen, watching this momentous event while their own confined world in Belfast is coming apart.

The acting of Dench and Hinds, in supporting roles and with spare and understated dialogue, is among the stronger elements in *Belfast*. Morrison, the Belfast native still performing in his 70s, is a delight to hear. Young Jude Hill is also very effective as Buddy, but Balfe and Dornan as his parents somehow seem out of place in the gritty streets of Belfast and only rarely emerge as fuller characters.

The overriding problem with *Belfast* is that politics is left out of a story that demands it. How the world looks to a 9-year-old can be part of this story, but not the entire story. The film shows only passing images and snatches of conversation, which is far from enough. At one point, Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson appears on television threatening to send British troops. Another brief aside mentions that the unemployment rate in Northern Ireland is the highest in all of Britain. We hear that Buddy's beloved grandfather, now gravely ill, had been a coal miner in his working life.

Even worse than this superficial treatment of the social and political context of the story is the film's silence on the role of the British Army in Northern Ireland. What began with several hundred troops supposedly protecting the Catholic population became 30,000 troops within a few years. The real aim of the troops, and of the eventual direct rule from Westminster, was to defend the capitalist system. The Army quickly pivoted to the suppression of working class opposition to the status quo of poverty and discrimination. January 30 marked the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday, when British troops massacred civil rights protesters in Derry, Northern Ireland's second-largest city, leaving a death toll of 14.

Branagh ends *Belfast* with an on-screen dedication, "For the ones who stayed, for the ones who left, and for all the ones who were lost." This all-too-neatly

encompasses everyone, including a brief acknowledgment that the "low-level conflict" saw more than 5,000 deaths over 30 years, mostly of civilians. What the Troubles were really about, and the responsibility of British imperialism, which ruled Ireland for centuries and then carved it up to deny the country its full independence almost exactly a century ago, with the creation of the six-county province of Northern Ireland, is ignored. The Troubles, it is suggested, were a time of social crisis that has now receded. The deepening crisis of all of Ireland, particularly of the North in the wake of Brexit, tells another story.

Branagh, now 61 years old, achieved prominence as a stage and screen actor more than 30 years ago. His role as Benedick, opposite Emma Thompson as Beatrice in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), for example, which he also directed, is an absolute delight. He is particularly known for his work on Shakespeare. His work as a director for the last several decades, however, has been far less successful.

The fact that *Belfast*, whatever its positive elements and minor charms, is among the Academy Award nominees this year, both for Best Picture and Best Director, is, it must be said, a commentary on the overall level of this year's films.



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