

CENSORS MISSING THE TARGET

Is stopping Irish 16- and 17-year-olds from seeing a movie about the teen drug scene really how our censorship system should be working, asks *Katy Hayes*

Few Irish-made films get an 18 classification. In the past five years, there have been six, and most of those were horror or dystopian. There was *Love Eternal* in 2014, which was heavy on the suicide and necrophilia; and *Let Us Prey* in 2015, which was a fantasy bloodbath with mutilated body parts. The *Survivalist*, released in 2016, was a futuristic dystopian flick involving bloody violence and starvation-coerced sex. Last year we had *Cardboard Gangsters*, directed by Mark O'Connor and starring John Connors, which had the familiar gangster-film tropes of drug use and gory violence.

Now another Irish film has had an 18 cert attached to its release, and this one seems anomalous. *Kissing Candice*, directed by Aoife McArdle, is a purposeful slice of social realism with something serious to say about youth culture and teenage feminine desire. It has a lot in common with *Dublin Oldschool*, Dave Tynan's film of Emmet Kirwan's script, which opens in Irish cinemas this week. This also portrays drugs use by young people, but has been granted a less restrictive 16 cert.

Andrew Freedman, producer of *Kissing Candice*, admits he was "disappointed and surprised" by the 18 cert, which is likely to depress box-office returns. Though the producers did not make a formal

appeal, distributors Wildcard asked the Irish Film Classification Office (Ifco) to have another look. The 18 rating was upheld. Compounding Freedman's unhappiness is the fact that the BBFC, the UK classification office, passed *Kissing Candice* with a 15 cert.

Ifco has two exclusionary categories, 16 and 18, which mean anyone under those ages should not be admitted to cinemas. The rest are "parental advisory" categories, which mean children are admitted provided they are accompanied by an adult who has deemed the film appropriate viewing.

Ger Connolly, Ifco's director of classification, says: "We're basically mechanics, we're not critics, and we don't give ratings for quality. We try to look at everything on its merits from a classification point of view, according to our set of public guidelines. These are broadbrush, and sometimes the context of a particular film can play a big role, more than just the bare content of a scene."

Connolly agrees that there is a perception Ireland is stricter than other jurisdictions, but he doesn't think

this is actually the case. The Queen of Ireland, Conor Horgan's documentary about Pantli Bliss, got a 15A from Ifco while the BBFC handed it an 18.

"*Cardboard Gangsters* was a very easy 18 because it was relentless, visceral violence and, regardless of where that film was made, it would be 18," he says. "*Kissing Candice* was one of those marginal calls between 16 and 18 but, because it involved teens, because it involved drugs and a murder, that is the tipping point. The three things together in contemporary Ireland made it an 18. That's my opinion. The distributors of any film have an appeal mechanism if they're not happy with my decision."

Connolly says the appeals board can be rapidly assembled, but formal appeals are rare. In fact there have been only six in the past nine years, none of them relating to Irish films. Several times a year he does get asked by distributors to have "another look" at a film on an informal basis, and he readily does so, but "it would be quite unusual for me to change my mind".

He points to some comments online that suggest *Kissing Candice*'s 18 cert was due to sexual content – there is a scene in which Candice masturbates, and she also explicitly expresses her sexual desire – but he says this is not the case. "The days of puritanical classification are gone," Connolly says. "Our job is to reflect public expectation. I hate people using the word 'censor'. I look on this office, as it has evolved, as being for consumer advice. There are rules, but I don't think we are censors as such."

He points out that the Ifco website provides descriptive information to help people make up their own minds. This applies not just to parents, but to general audiences as well.

So if drug use were a key factor in pushing *Kissing Candice* into the 18 category, why did *Dublin Oldschool* not get that classification? "One of the things you take into consideration, particularly in talking about drugs, is a

positive outcome," Connolly explains. "If a guy abusing drugs suddenly becomes a success, then you have a problem. But if the guy abusing drugs has to face his demons and comes out the other end with a positive message, it does have a bearing on classification."

Connolly says someone might argue that a certain scene appears to contravene the general guidelines, "but if you

look at the whole movie, you will see the outcome in its totality is completely contra to that scene, and there is a salutary lesson in it all".

Dublin Oldschool producer Dave Leahy is aware of this. "If you're going to make a film that has a drugs subculture, the feedback we've had [from Ifco] is that the context is important," he says. "We show drugs but – without giving away the ending – you could say

that by the end of the film you wouldn't want to touch drugs ever again."

This all seems more a matter of judgment and opinion rather than "mechanics", however. Though the drug users in *Kissing Candice* don't learn lessons or face their demons, the film does give a highly negative portrayal of drugs and their impact. Drugs are used only by a marginal and negatively portrayed gang. When I tell

Connolly that, as a parent, I would be happy for my older teens to see *Kissing Candice*, he replies: "You are perfectly entitled to think that. It [the 18 cert] is my opinion, and my opinion is challengeable to an appeals board – I am not speaking ex cathedra. Another person will come along and say the film should be banned, and they are entitled to their opinion too."

It could be argued that teenagers should not be excluded from thought-provoking films such as *Kissing Candice* and *Dublin Oldschool*, but rather should be encouraged to see them and discuss their themes. *Kissing Candice*, in locating its schoolgirl protagonist on the margins of a violent drugs subculture, asks questions about challenges faced by youngsters. The characters in *Dublin Oldschool* are young adults with jobs, but the seeds of their problems were sown much earlier.

All of this is becoming increasingly moot as film distribution methods expand to include streaming, where no age restriction can be effective. Meanwhile, reports of teenage murders have become a more regular part of the Irish news cycle, including the tragic killings of Cameron Reilly, 18, and Ana Kriegel, 14, in the past two months. If ever teenagers and their parents needed to have their consciousness raised about drugs and violence, now would appear to be the time. The question can reasonably be put: by not letting them see *Kissing Candice* and *Dublin Oldschool*, what exactly are we protecting our young people from? ■

Kissing Candice is reviewed overleaf

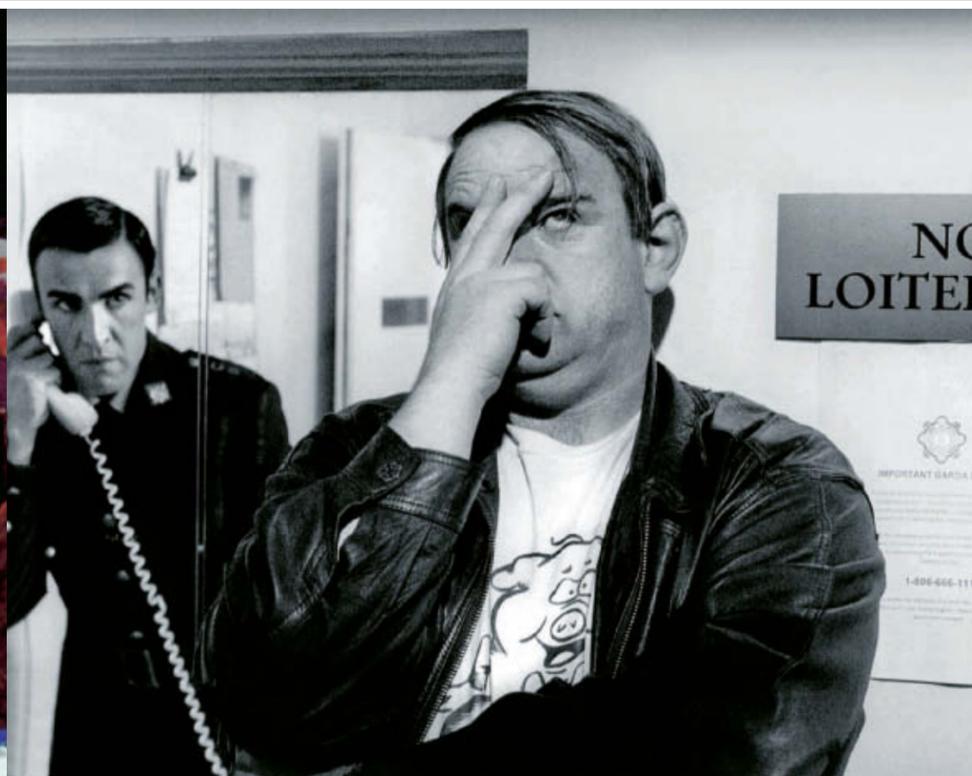


MIKE CATRINO

“We’re not critics, and we don’t give ratings for quality”

Fully focused Connolly says film-makers can appeal decisions

BRYAN MEADE



Irish film and TV directors are infatuated with making gangster movies — but should we worry that the genre is glamorising the lifestyle, asks *Katy Hayes*

HOLE IN THE HEAD

Michael Inside, a new Irish movie from the director Frank Berry, won the best feature film award at the Iftas last month. Berry's debut, *I Used to Live Here* (2014), was a gritty engagement with a working-class community struggling with teen suicide. This time he has focused a cinematic lens on the world of crime. *Michael Inside* is about 18-year-old Michael McCrea (Dafhyd Flynn), who is jailed on a minor drugs charge and meets a variety of hardened tough guys and criminals inside.

Though a serious film that examines the negative effects of prison, *Michael Inside* is the latest in a long line of Irish movies and television shows that have engaged with the indigenous criminal underworld. Are our film directors obsessed with this genre?

Global cinema has always loved gangsters. They form an entire sub-genre of crime films, with high-profile examples frequently appearing on lists of the greatest movies of all time, such as Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* and *The Godfather Part II*; Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas*; and Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*. Gangsters provide film-makers with the opportunity for storyline tension and suspense, ego clashes, pretty girls, machismo and bloodbaths, including opportunities for sadistic events.

These films often talk out of both sides of their mouths, milking the underworld for cinematic value,

ostensibly not encouraging or condoning any of the action, while glorifying it all the same. This is the moral crux at the heart of the gangster film, and it applies to Scorsese or Coppola as much as anyone else. Would they really want any of these colourful gangsters rocking up to their residences in Manhattan or Napa County?

Irish cinema has embraced the gangster genre with a vengeance, perhaps because it speaks to a traditional post-colonial affinity with the outlaw. A significant early example was *The Courier* from 1988, co-directed by Joe Lee and Frank Deasy, and starring Gabriel Byrne. At the time it was made, there was a well-publicised rise in the chronic social problems associated with heroin use and the resulting tragic blighting of families and communities in Dublin's inner city.

Like many films in the gangster genre, *The Courier* faced two ways: urban realist exposé of the heroin trade and generic crime thriller. The film remains vivid for a scene in which the character played by Byrne blinds Danny (Andrew Connolly) with a jagged light bulb — a standout violent episode in Irish cinema at the time.

Nine years later, Paddy Breathnach's second feature, *I Went Down*, was a buddy road movie set among the criminal underworld. This work established a style of humorous haplessness, which became a feature of Irish gangster films. Peter McDonald and a fresh-faced Brendan Gleeson played the

leads, one of the latter's many outings as a gangster.

John Boorman's portrait of real-life crime boss Martin Cahill, *The General*, was controversial because of its sympathetic presentation of Cahill, also played by Gleeson. He was depicted as a Robin Hood type, a "working-class hero who never worked a day in his life", as the promotional material declared. The film was artfully shot in black and white, asserting a classic status for itself, with Gleeson playing Cahill as a lovable funny guy. When he has an underling nailed by his hands to a snooker table, Cahill is sorry afterwards and takes the hoodlum to hospital. The film ends on a nostalgic note as Cahill, after being shot, has a vision of his cheeky childhood self, played by an even fresher-faced Eamonn Owens.

Veronica Guerin, directed by Joel Schumacher, produced the most terrifying of Irish cinematic gangsters in Gerard McSorley's depiction of John Gilligan. Unusually for the genre, the central character was a woman, based on the journalist killed by the criminals she wrote about. Cate Blanchett played the title role in what was a high-profile international production, but the gangsters were portrayed by Irish actors, with McSorley backed up by Ciarán Hinds. Nobody was hapless or funny, as Schumacher created a mood with a more ruthless American feel.

Martin McDonagh's *In Bruges* (2008) paired Colin Farrell with Gleeson, and once again the Irish criminals were

Playing with fire From left, In Bruges with Brendan Gleeson and Colin Farrell, Cate Blanchett as Veronica Guerin, and Gleeson in *The General*

played for laughs. The film becomes ruthless only when an Englishman (Ralph Fiennes) arrives to impose discipline on the unruly Irish mobsters.

The following year's *Perrier's Bounty*, directed by Ian FitzGibbon, was the most visionary of these Irish gangster films, with a surreal existential gloss bringing sophistication to the format. The movie follows Cillian Murphy's character trying to escape from the clutches of the mob while pursuing a romantic interest and reconciling with his father. Byrne provided a touch of class as the voice of death, and Gleeson played another gangland boss, this time with a funny deadpan performance. We should point out that Gleeson as gangster endures some negative outcomes, including being shot in the arm, assassinated by a hitman, death by suicide, and getting eaten by dogs.

Last year's *Cardboard Gangsters*, directed by Mark O'Connor, was an Irish box-office hit about hitmen. Like *The Courier*, *Cardboard Gangsters* is pulled in two directions, trying to create a social exposé while obeying the aesthetic laws of the crime thriller. The gangsters are glamorised, having a great time with "yokes", while the money generated by robbery and drugs is seen as a way to get "mots". The main character, Jason, is presented as a hero looking to get money to provide for his family, in a fine performance by John Connors, who won an Ifta for best actor. The character was a direct descendant from Boorman's depiction

of Cahill, down to the vision Jason has of himself as a little boy at the end.

A question explored only sporadically is whether there is a danger that presenting gangsters getting high on "yokes" and having access to lots of "mots" is unintentionally promoting the criminal lifestyle. RTE broadcast five series of *Love/Hate* between 2010 and 2014, making Tom Vaughan-Lawlor, who played gangland boss Nidge, a domestic star. The drama portrayed Dublin criminals as having the time of their lives. Was it a coincidence that the Hutch-Kinahan feud took off soon afterwards? Do such depictions of gangsters become an unwitting recruitment drive for young men to join the gangs of Limerick or Dublin, to follow this path to apparently easy money and macho prestige?

Here's a scenario: a boxing tournament weigh-in at a Dublin hotel. Among the sports enthusiasts are members of the criminal underworld. Gunshots ring out as a man disguised as a woman and two others dressed in tactical-style garda uniforms flee. It could be a scene from *Love/Hate*, but it was an early episode in the Hutch-Kinahan feud. We are walking a fine line between fiction and reality.

Gangsters are flourishing, and so are their avatars on Irish screens. Whether there is any interconnection between these two phenomena could keep criminologists busy for years. ■

Michael Inside opens on April 6

“ Perhaps the genre speaks to a traditional post-colonial affinity with the outlaw

5 OF THE BEST FILMS ABOUT NEWSPAPERS

HIS GIRL FRIDAY (1940)

Witty and wise screwball comedy starring Cary Grant as a hard-boiled tabloid editor who schemes to prevent his star reporter and ex-wife Rosalind Russell from getting married. A classic.

CITIZEN KANE (1941)

Orson Welles' epic account of a fictional newspaper baron's life was inspired by the exploits of media mogul Randolph Hearst and is built around a reporter's efforts to find out who Charles Foster Kane really was.

WOMAN OF THE YEAR (1942)

The first of nine films Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn made together, George Stevens' sparkling comedy tells the story of two writers who fall in love. She's an intellectual columnist, he's a sports reporter, and they don't see eye to eye.

ACE IN THE HOLE (1951)

If you take a dim view of journalists, your worst prejudices will be confirmed by Billy Wilder's hard-hitting classic, which stars Kirk Douglas as an unscrupulous reporter who delays the rescue of a man trapped in a desert cave so he can fully capitalise on the story.

SPOTLIGHT (2015)

Tom McCarthy's perfectly judged drama is based on the *Boston Globe's* exposure of decades of clerical abuse. Michael Keaton plays 'Robby' Robinson, the *Globe* editor who oversaw an arduous investigation that faced resistance at every turn.



Tension: Hanks and Streep (third and fourth left) in *The Post*, and inset, Redford in *All the President's Men*

no say at all. Redford, cast as Woodward, worried that his well-known face would damage the veracity of the project, and realised that an equally famous actor would need to play Bernstein. Dustin Hoffman was the obvious choice, and he and Redford promptly descended on *The Post* to soak up the newsroom atmosphere.

They stayed there for weeks on end, sitting in on editorial meetings and picking the real Woodward and Bernstein's brains. But Bradlee drew the line at Redford and co using his newsroom as a film set, and so an exact replica was constructed in a Burbank studio, with bins full of actual *Washington Post* refuse to add to the authenticity.

While everyone agreed that Woodward was helpful, Bernstein was trickier. And when Redford showed the first draft of Goldman's screenplay to Bernstein, he and his then girlfriend Nora Ephron wrote a version of their own, which apparently rather aggrandised Bernstein's persona and appeal to women, and was promptly rejected by Redford.

He and Pakula spent long hours tinkering with the script, but the finished result was very much Goldman's, who later said he would have run a mile if he realised how much interference he'd have to tolerate.

But working on a film based on recent and very controversial events was always going to be fraught: lawyers pored over every word, and Goldman, Pakula and Redford exhaustively interviewed reporters and other participants in the actual

investigation to make sure they got everything exactly right. The activities of Woodward and Bernstein's elusive source, 'Deep Throat', was particularly intriguing. He was played in the film by a shadowy Hal Holbrook, and his famous phrase "follow the money" was invented by Goldman, and never uttered by the real government source.

Woodward and others kept his identity secret, and it would be 30 years before FBI associate director Mark Felt was revealed as their invaluable informant.

The finished film, which was over two hours long and featured a lot of talk and hardly any action, could so easily have been worthy, and tedious. Instead it was brooding, tense, relentlessly gripping; somehow, Goldman and Pakula managed to make the painstaking, grubby and tiresome business of reporting seem fascinating, even noble. Because as *All the President's Men* made clear, if Woodward, Bernstein and their swashbuckling editor Bradlee hadn't doggedly pursued that trail of breadcrumbs around Washington, Nixon and his henchmen might have got away with it.

In *The Post*, Steven Spielberg uses the quaint paraphernalia of typewriters and hot metal to eulogise the virtues, and necessity, of a free press. In America, the fourth estate is under attack as never before, from a president who knows that rigorous journalism is the only thing likely to hold his worst excesses in check.

Nixon once thought he could cow and control the media by bullying editors and banning publications from his press briefings: Donald Trump should take note of what happened next.

SCENE & HEARD

Energy: Cornwall's Kneehigh Theatre brought *Tristan & Yseult* to Galway



Adaptations are fine, but is the new Irish play an endangered species?

The status of the playwright has become substantially downgraded in Irish theatre of late and the concept of a new play as a national event has all but disappeared. Like most gradual changes in modes of entertainment, it has many roots. A major problem has been the underfunding of the Peacock over the past couple of decades. It was the greatest weakness of Fiach Mac Conghail's tenure at the helm of the Abbey. There were well-publicised problems with funding the smaller space during this time, but an Abbey without this "engine room" is surely a National Theatre with a limb missing. The under-active Peacock severely interfered with the grooming of new talent, and was a major cause of the entrenchment of Irish theatre's gender imbalance during the past two decades.

New Abbey directors Graham McLaren and Neil Murray were appointed to bring a fresh wind into the building. They have done this with their free previews and their hosting of, and co-producing with, the wider Irish theatre community. Their strengths include the ability to create site-specific and touring works, to inject vibrancy and energy into productions, and to bring a national theatre to the people. These were distinctive aspects of their previous institutional affiliation, the National Theatre of Scotland.

McLaren's directing style follows the current British vogue of creating spectacle productions, a style typified by star director Emma Rice's *Tristan & Yseult* for Kneehigh in Cornwall, a production which came here last year as part of the Galway International Arts Festival. The kind of show becomes a song-and-dance act, complete with some acrobatics or puppetry, and audience involvement. The ideas and visuals are often more important than the verbal script.

It is a highly enjoyable mode of theatrical production, with plenty of novelty. But novelty wears thin and the problem with importing this style of razzmatazz theatre into Ireland is that we do not have a large enough industry to accommodate it along with other more native literary forms. When you plant a rhododendron bush in a small garden, it is pretty and dramatic with its eye-catching blossoms — but it can overpower native shrubbery. In the UK they can absorb all sorts of trends, while maintaining diversity across forms; that is less certain here.

The new Abbey management has not appointed a literary director, though there are two people listed on the staff with responsibility for "new work". The language here is significant as changing language is a way of manipulating power structures. You are no

longer a playwright writing a play, with the status that used to adhere to this job. You are a 'theatre-maker' creating new 'work', among other theatre-makers. In this unflagged war on the status of the playwright, writers are quietly fighting back by simply directing their own plays: Conor McPherson, Mark O'Rowe and Enda Walsh all now direct their own writing.

This collapse of faith in writing and in the idea of a new play has led us to a heap of 'new work' which is adapted from other forms. Recently and upcoming, we have had and will continue to have a host of novels, films and new versions of old plays. Upcoming shows in 2018 include Roddy Doyle's novel *The Snapper* at the Gate and Louise O'Neill's novel *Asking For It* at Cork's Everyman and the Abbey. The big new work on the Abbey mainstage, *The Unmanageable Sisters* by Deirdre Kinahan, is a version of a Canadian play by Michel Tremblay. All potentially interesting, and welcome in their variety. But is the original play getting choked out? There will be a début, *Porcelain* by Margaret Perry, in February, and a new play from Phillip McMahon, *Come On Home*, in July, both in the Peacock. So there are some original plays, but they are no longer front and centre in the programming.

The Abbey dominates this argument as it is the major recipient of Arts Council theatre funds, at €7m for 2018, and thus carries the greatest responsibility for legacy. Other important producers in the new-play game include Fishamble: The New Play Company, which on scant resources manages to create substantial energy around new writing. Landmark Productions, using a flexible project-oriented funding model, also make highly courageous forays into new writing, cleverly attracting star cast members — a vital element bringing the oxygen of publicity to new, untested writing. But if Irish theatre is going to become more dependent on the independent sector to take new writing seriously, the money will have to be more evenly spread around.

When Lady Gregory and WB Yeats founded the Irish Literary Theatre (the precursor to the Abbey) in 1899, their declared aim was to show that Ireland "was not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism". This was a barb at the lively, sentimental song-and-dance acts embodied by the likes of Dion Boucicault, and not dissimilar to the current vogue for spectacle theatre. But, if you wish to represent the "home of an ancient idealism", can this be done without specifically grooming and empowering writers?

KATY HAYES

BOOK IT NOW

1 THE FRIDAY NIGHT EFFECT Smock Alley Theatre, Dublin Jan 9-13

Part of First Fortnight, the Art of Mental Health Festival: Eva O'Connor and Hildegard Ryan's show presents three best friends on a night out. Their fate is in the hands of the audience.

2 THE EGG IS A LONELY HUNTER Boys' School, Smock Alley Theatre, Dublin, Jan 8-13

Written and performed by Hannah Mamalis, directed by Jeda de Bri, this is an absurdist dark comedy where dreams and reality blur. Part of First Fortnight festival.

3 TYPHOID MARY Viking Theatre, Clontarf until Jan 20

The story of an Irish immigrant cook in 1906 New York, accused of spreading typhoid. Written by Eithne McGuinness, directed by Bairbre Ní Chaoimh and starring Charlotte Bradley.