

## SCREEN DIRECTORS GUILD OF IRELAND

PHOTO: *The Boy from Mercury*

money together to make the damn film. Indeed, a producer friend once half-joked that it's a wonder anyone has the energy left to make a film after surviving the battle to get it funded. I live in Berlin – not as a career move – and am engaged with the German film industry. It looks as if this German/Canadian scenario is the best hope for what will be my next film, although I also have two Irish/German projects up my sleeve. But then again I have scripts for two Irish family films and an Irish ghost film that will probably never happen despite years of effort. Recently, the Irish Film Board declined supporting a sci-fi project of mine. Given that this story is, by nature of the genre, not culture-specific I now start looking to other countries for ways of developing and realising the film.

Am I ceasing to be an Irish filmmaker? I was fascinated to learn, when directing in New York and later Cardiff, that the language of filmmaking is international. I believe cast and crew anywhere in the world have basically the same work ethic and the same team dynamic: everyone wants to get the film made and everyone hopes the director won't be an asshole. The choice of stories I write or am attracted to is of course influenced by my Irishness, but my being Irish is neither a help nor hindrance to my directing – although the Americans did love my accent.

### Enduring frustration

One thing I have learned for sure is that every film is a journey – a team of adventurers get on board and away we go. With *Welcome to Earth*, I feel I am being supported by producers who believe in my story and my style – the core team already feels right. The fact that the journeys on my last three films were not charted by me has been both a frustration and a learning experience. Then again, 'frustration' is this business's middle name. Or maybe 'endurance'. I'll have to check the birth cert.

The challenges are always there, and so are the rewards. When I think of my determination to hang in as a filmmaker I am reminded of a joke: A man goes to the circus and after the show he notices a worker shovelling up all the animal shit. 'What an awful job!' the man says, 'why don't you quit?' 'What,' the worker replies, 'and give up show business?' There is a lot of fun, camaraderie and creativity in the filmmaking process. It is also, however, akin to going into battle and it can happen that you discover you've walked into a minefield. It's a peculiar mix of needing to be both sensitive and thick-skinned. I can't resist trying to get back in there with my own stories again.

Martin Duffy, 10th April 2008



# SDGI Director in Focus

'I have a cunning plan' – MARTIN DUFFY on being an *Irish* filmmaker.

WHEN I WAS a film editor, I felt happy and honoured to ride shotgun for such heroes as Bob Quinn, Alan Gilsonan, Margo Harkin and other greats of Irish film. In the twelve years since I wrote and directed *The Boy from Mercury*, I have worked as director-for-hire three times and now want to find my way back to being a writer-director: telling my own stories just as my heroes tell theirs.

### The question is: how?

I seem to have a knack for directing family films. I also enjoy writing stories for young people. What I lack, however, is the ability to get my scripts into production: there is a six-year gap in my filmmaking career to prove it. The lack of any interest in or policy about family films in Ireland has not helped. But now I think I have found a way to write and direct a new family film. All I have to do is pretend I'm American. If the plan works, I'll make a Trojan Horse film that will penetrate Fortress America movies – the source of family films that families around the world will go to see.

It's not a complete cheat. My script is set in suburban USA and that's where my younger son grew up, so I know the turf. It is a family film with a touch of sci-fi, so I'm playing to my strengths. It's a character-driven comedy called *Welcome to Earth*. It is being set up as a Canadian/German co-production, the exteriors to be shot in Vancouver and the interiors to be shot in Germany. The trick is this; the audience may never know that it is a German/Canadian film made by an Irishman. The actors will be American (or Canadians in American roles) and my script has been proofread by my ex-wife's young American son, Conor, to ensure its American authenticity.

### On the money

The German and Canadian producers are very enthusiastic about the project and funding sources in each country see it as financially sound. I'm very happy with the way it all has evolved – German producer Rudi Teichmann had read my story and encouraged me to develop the script. Canadian producer Henrik Meyer was an instant fan of the

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script and it was clear we three shared the same vision of the film. We then worked together to establish a realistic schedule and budget. When we got together during the Berlinale in February we agreed a strategy for seeking the all-important first ingredient; commercial money. So far, the signs are encouraging.

So how should I feel about getting from the point of making an Irish family film to making an American family film? How far from my roots and truth have I wandered in order to get back to being writer/director? I doubt that my Irish filmmaking heroes would be much impressed by my plan, though I'm sure they'd wish me well. I'm not making a film about Irish culture, but I am doing the work I love.

### Half the battle

The toughest part of filmmaking is getting the