

The Dark Side of “THE ECLIPSE”

Written by Michael Gingold

Wednesday, 24 March 2010 15:23



Proof that movies about ghosts don't have to be all about spectral CGI or girls with long, dark hair, *THE ECLIPSE* is a different sort of haunting film—in both senses of the word. While it sports elements of the supernatural and occasionally quite jolting moments, it's more a deeply emotional drama than a strict horror movie—which suits its star, Irish actor Ciarán Hinds, just fine.

“I've never been involved in the horror genre; it doesn't tickle my tonsils,” he admits. “I've seen the older films, but the new genre just scares me too much, to be quite honest. Do I want to put myself through that? I'm not very good at thrill rides and those kinds of things.”



What he is very good at, as demonstrated by *THE ECLIPSE* (beginning its theatrical release in New York and California this Friday from Magnolia Pictures, and expanding across the U.S. through April), is grabbing and holding an audience's sympathy. He plays Michael Farr, a teacher in the Irish seaside village of Cobh who is dealing with both the figurative ghost of his wife—who has recently died, leaving him to care for their two young children alone—and what appears to be the angry specter of his still-living but ailing father-in-law, Malachy (Jim Norton). When Michael volunteers at a local literary festival and is assigned to chauffeur Lena Morelle (Iben Hjejle), an author who specializes in ghost stories, she offers potential closure for both those situations—if her cocky fellow novelist and former flame Nicholas Holden (Aidan Quinn), also in Cobh for the event, can keep his ego and jealousy under control.

THE ECLIPSE was written (with Billy Roche) and directed by filmmaker/playwright Conor McPherson, based on a short story by Roche that contains no paranormal elements. Hinds, who met McPherson via his own stage work, was first introduced to *THE ECLIPSE* while the two were collaborating on Broadway's *THE SEAFARER*, for which Hinds' turn as the devil in disguise earned a Tony nomination. “Conor said, ‘I have this little script, I'm working on this

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small movie, I'm just wondering if you'd read it and would like to play in it?' ” the actor recalls. “It was unfinished, there were a lot of gaps, but there was a kind of atmosphere, and from working with Conor I knew there's so much in his head that he imagines and thinks about. He's an awfully clever man, even though he wouldn't boast about it. I knew that if I did this, we would work out this journey, so I had no hesitation saying yes.”

McPherson ultimately added otherworldly undertones to Roche's tale of emotional breakdown, though it was the latter side of the story that Hinds and his director focused on. “Conor was trying to present this very simple, honest man with problems that we all occasionally suffer from, which are grief and guilt, and how it overwhelms us. Sometimes we pretend we're dealing with it, and we bottle it up and have those moments where we close the door, go into a room and scream. You think you're handling it, and then you catch an image of something and this extraordinary thought comes into your head unbidden, and you go, ‘Where the hell did that come from?’

“To play as an actor, especially in something like this, you just try to be as open as possible,” he continues. “It's done from a real perspective of communication, trying to make these people human, and to convey the sudden jolts of horror, the guilt, the bile, the rage that they feel—or the need for someone to let you know things are all right from beyond. It's sometimes very difficult to manifest these things in visual, celluloid terms, but I feel Conor has been able to do that.”

His initial enthusiasm for THE ECLIPSE was borne out by the experience of making the film, particularly when it came to his co-stars. “Working with Aidan was fantastic,” Hinds says. “I knew him socially a little, and we always got on very well. What's fantastic about his performance in THE ECLIPSE is that although you think Nicholas is very arrogant and self-absorbed, his depth and frustration and a sort of anxiety is real; this guy is suffering. While he's obnoxious and all that, there's pain in there; he's frayed, growing old, feeling his mortality—is he still attractive? He also brought this extraordinary weird humor into the proceedings to lighten the mood and the grief of what's going on. And Iben is just a complete joy. Her work is so clear and honest—no embellishment, no ‘performing,’ just a truthful connection. Based in reality, but quietly strong.”

The local atmosphere was equally appealing to Hinds; THE ECLIPSE filmed in the actual town of Cobh, whose heavy atmosphere infused the movie and informed the performances. “The location itself is almost a character,” Hinds notes. “It produces a lot of the mood—the Gothic cathedral, the steps... Conor was quite crazy about the spiritual dimension he put into it, with Ireland being a Catholic country and one of his favorite films being THE EXORCIST. It's just

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there, that emotional and historical backdrop.”



While much of THE ECLIPSE maintains a quiet, simmering tension, with a sense of the otherworldly lurking somewhere just offscreen, there are a few moments where McPherson goes for the hardcore scare. These involve the sudden appearances of Malachy, which give both Michael and the audience quite a fright; in real life, though, Norton is another past collaborator of Hinds’ of whom the latter speaks fondly. “I worked with Jim in THE SEAFARER, and he won the Tony that year; he’s a remarkable actor,” Hinds says. “He’s been in five of Conor’s plays and worked a fair bit in America, but he’s Irish, from Dublin. Malachy’s a small role, but when you get somebody of Jim’s quality to play it... There’s that one scene where Malachy just lays it on the line about what it’s like being in [a nursing home], and it’s just so painful for Michael. He realizes there’s no way out—‘I’ve got these kids to deal with, and I’m doing my best and it’s not good enough.’

“That’s why Malachy manifests in this horrible image,” Hinds adds. “It’s [a reflection of] his bile and his rage at Michael, and Michael’s guilt. He basically blames Michael for the death of his daughter—even though it’s obvious through the imagery and everything that she was lost to cancer. But still, her father says, ‘I don’t care, you should’ve saved her somehow.’ There’s no getting around that because it’s not real; it’s Michael’s reality, and that’s why the images of Malachy that Conor has chosen to use are so vile, because he wants the audience to see these sudden flashes of Michael’s guilt that he can’t do anything for this man, who hates him.”

Hinds recalls that Norton spent two hours in the makeup chair, getting Malachy’s deteriorated face and contact lenses put in, and reveals that he himself just underwent the prosthetics process for the first time as well. The occasion was HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS, the two-part screen adaptation of the last of J.K. Rowling’s wildly popular books. “I was offered and snuck in the back door for the last films,” he says. “I play Aberforth Dumbledore, brother of Albus Dumbledore, who’s not spoken of very much but suddenly appears at the end—so most of it was trying to give me some similarity to the great Sir Michael Gambon. It was two and a half hours for the prosthetics, and you just have to go somewhere in

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your head. You can't go, 'Oh, hurry up'; you just have to realize that it's going to require a lot of takes and get used to it. For a little while, I suppose you can do a crossword or chat, and then the moment comes when you can't. So you may as well reflect on how meaningless we all are," he laughs.

Having started his film career in John Boorman's 1981 Arthurian epic EXCALIBUR, Hinds has occasionally visited the realms of fantasy in the years since, with roles in the Jekyll-and-Hyde variation MARY REILLY, the "Confession" episode of TALES FROM THE CRYPT, the 2000 TV version of JASON AND THE ARGONAUTS, the second TOMB RAIDER feature and the film version of the stage musical THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA. Most recently, he took part in the currently lensing JOHN CARTER OF MARS, based on Edgar Rice Burroughs' novel. "I'm a leader of two warring factions on Mars," he explains. "John Carter, a Confederate soldier on the run, ends up in a rock formation, touches something strange, passes out and comes to on Mars. And then he faces all these extraordinary things—hairy giant white apes and such—and he gets into a love/hate relationship with this woman, Dejah. I show up playing her father at the end for a little bit of gravitas. She's played by Lynn Collins, who's done a lot of classical acting—Shakespeare in the Park—and was one of the X-Men [in X-MEN ORIGINS: WOLVERINE].

"The guy playing John Carter is Taylor Kitsch, and he looks like the real thing," Hinds continues. "It's a huge role; he's going to be knackered when he's done! I mean, you read it and think, 'Whoa, you've got so much to get through!' " I've just done my first day, and greenscreen was everywhere. It's a really creative computer-generated animation/live action project, directed by the great Andrew Stanton [who previously helmed the animated hits FINDING NEMO and WALL•E], so it was a thrill to be asked to be part of that one."

He further reveals a more hardcore genre project he was asked to be part of, but turned down: the grisly vampire feature 30 DAYS OF NIGHT. "The script was good, and it was a very interesting concept, but I just thought it was so violent. I was offered a role in it—I can't remember which one—and I remember thinking at first that the premise was wonderful. And then suddenly everyone's getting munched and chomped, and I thought, 'I don't know if I can do this.' It's pathetic, but that's how I felt."

Hinds states that he's not averse to taking horror parts in the future ("In the end, it depends on the script"), and even admits to having a real-life spooky encounter when he was a teenager. "It was in County Antrim, where we used to go on holidays and my mom lived for a bit," he recalls. "I can still visualize it; it was in a very old graveyard on top of a little cliff by the sea. I was maybe 15, and I saw a strange figure that sort of shapeshifted or manifested itself, but not into a

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clearly delineated substance. As I watched this, I thought, ‘Is that trick of the light or not?’ But I could see movement, and I looked away a second and when I looked back it was still there, but it sort of dissipated—and I didn’t want to go towards it, because where it was beckoning was a long drop down. I still have strong memories of it.”

See FANGORIA #292, on sale now, for an interview with ECLIPSE director McPherson.

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