

In Conversation with Jim Sheridan

Jim Sheridan

Playwright, Screenwriter, Film Director and Film Producer
Dublin, Ireland

Conor Murphy (Interviewer)

School of Arts, Dublin Business School
Chairman of Filmbase
Dublin, Ireland

Barnaby Taylor (Interviewer)

School of Arts, Dublin Business School
Dublin, Ireland

Stephen Bendict (Interviewer)

Filmmaker and Broadcaster
Dublin, Ireland

© Jim Sheridan. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

Abstract

On 9th February 2016 SAH Journal was privileged to host a public interview with arguably Ireland's most successful filmmaker, Jim Sheridan. Born in 1949, Jim Sheridan grew up in family of social and artistic activists in the Sheriff Street area of Dublin's inner city. He studied at University College Dublin and worked with an emerging generation of writers, performers and theatre makers. He was instrumental in the establishment of the Project Arts Centre and he occupies a central position among a group of artists who have left an indelible mark on the creative and cultural life of Ireland over the past 40 years. Sheridan left Dublin for Canada and then the United States in the early 1980s and became the artistic director at the Irish Arts Center in New York. Following a course in film production at the NYU Tisch School of the Arts, he returned to Dublin and became quickly involved in the burgeoning Irish film industry. The global impact of his debut feature film My Left Foot (1989) marked the beginning of a uniquely successful career as one of the outstanding Irish filmmakers on the international scene. This impact has continued to the present day with the international release of The Secret Scripture (2016). To coincide with the release of his latest feature film, SAH is delighted to publish an edited transcript of the stimulating conversation held at Dublin's Filmbase between a number of film lecturers and Jim Sheridan.

CM: Please welcome to the stage the great Irish film director –Jim Sheridan. Jim, many thanks for being here today. We have a capacity crowd of over 100 people here at Filmbase. We have undergraduate film and media students from DBS, lecturers and post-graduate film students from Filmbase, as well as film and media students from IADT, NCAD and Pulse College. We have quite a cross-section of emerging filmmakers in the room and it's hard to know how to introduce you to this audience. Is it as a six-time Oscar nominee, international award winner of BAFTAs, Golden Bears, WGA, or as the director of such iconic films as My Left Foot, In the Name of the Father, The Field or In America? All of these are worthy introductions by any standards but I then thought about the incredible list of great actors, both Irish and international actors, that you have worked with over the last 25 years. Let me just name some of them: Daniel Day-Lewis, Brenda Fricker, Fiona Shaw, Ray McNally, Richard Harris, Sean Bean, Tom Berenger, Paddy Considine, Samantha Morton, Djimon Hounsou, Tobey Maguire, Daniel Craig, Rachel Weisz, Vanessa Redgrave, Jack Reynor, Eric Bana, Rooney Mara, Saoirse Ronan... the list goes on. It's an astonishing list of global and Irish talent and goes some way to encapsulate Jim's career thus far. But I'd like to go back to the beginning of your creative activity in Dublin. We are here today in Filmbase in the Temple Bar area of Dublin. We consider Filmbase to be the hub for emerging filmmaking activity in Dublin and we're just a few hundred metres from the Project Arts centre which you were deeply involved with since its origins over 40 years ago. Tell us a little about how it all looked back then...

JS: Well, this area was just a dump back then. It used to be a bus depot. The Project was this crazy little building on East Essex Street. It was kind of a revolutionary place. We did film, theatre, visual arts, music. Everyone was involved. U2, the Boomtown Rats. We put on the Gay Sweatshop plays from London long before all the mainstream activism. We were a combination of the Stonewall riots and the Alternative Film Club. It was a very exciting place to be at the time. Of course, in my case it all goes back much further, back to the Sheriff Street area of Dublin in the 1960s. My mam and dad were my biggest inspirations. They were involved in everything back then, tenants groups, parents associations, the drama group, old folks groups, discos. All that led to us getting involved in activism through the arts. We used to fight with everyone. I remember crashing the door down of a Dublin City Council meeting when the Lord Mayor was condemning us for putting on the Gay Sweatshop plays. I've always felt that this country will never change, not until there's a revolution anyway. This country is weighed down by the civil service. Nothing will change until there is a revolution.

SB: Jim, how about that idea that you change what you can. You went off and made your movies and when you came back after the fantastic success of My Left Foot, the government then changed the investment rules around film. I don't think we would all be here having this conversation today if you hadn't made My Left Foot and if the film hadn't been so successful worldwide.

*JS: Yes, I think there are examples of where government gets involved. They did Section 481 [tax incentive scheme] and other things like that. The Irish Film Board were involved with *The Secret Scripture* and they gave us loads of notes but nobody looks at a film project in terms of how it has to be seen, in terms of the American market. Films like *The Crying Game* *Once* were made here and did nothing and nothing happened until they went to America and made it big. Let me put it in the simplest way, in terms of narratives. People have a narrative in their heads of, for example, civil rights. We marched for civil rights in the 1960s. But we have no Bill of Rights (like in the USA). So how can we be marching for civil rights if there is no Bill of Rights? It makes no sense. And we can see the same thing happening in*

television and movies. Nobody's making independent movies any more in America. We've had an amazing year here in Ireland with the Oscars. Maybe this is our time to get into the American film market now with the success of *Room* and *Brooklyn*. Because over there it's all television now. In the last few years everything has changed. It's all about Netflix and Amazon and they're trying to wipe out the terrestrial broadcasters and we need to change our ways of making films to coincide with that. I'm way too old for all this now, but we need to get out of the old mind-set of making the product and putting it on in the cinema. We need to work out how to get it on the internet, how to get it on the streaming devices, how to get it direct to the world. That's the big issue.

CM: *Back to the 1980s. You left Dublin and famously went to America. Was that part of a plan to get into film, or were you just 'getting out of Dodge'?*

JS: I was getting out of Dodge. I felt I'd messed up in the Project Arts Centre. I was the worst Chairman in the history of the place. I was no good at making any business decisions. I was great at the other side of it all, making it crazy and mad and doing interesting things. But I don't think they go together well. When things are interesting and crazy and wild, often they don't go together with business. Bowie was unique in that regard. I left because I was pissed off and the 1980s was a terrible decade here. I think from the 1990s on things got better. Historically, I think we've always been the place that wasn't England. Look back at our history from the Spanish Armada onwards, we've always been waiting for the Europeans to come to the rescue. So I left Dublin. Of all of us who were active in Dublin during the 1970s, I always thought Neil [Jordan] was the visual one. He comes from a family of visual artists. We worked together in a children's theatre company and we wrote plays together for kids. We were a good combination, but very different. I was more from the theatre world and he was more visual. I think Ireland is split in two. It's the writers who are really respected. Behan, Yeats and all the writers are much more respected than the painters. I think we're split between the verbal and the visual. English wasn't our first language and I suppose our way of thinking was a bit messed up. So most of my work originally in North America was in the theatre but I had wanted to make films from way back in the Sheriff Street days. I used to bring Neil Jordan and the UCD fellas down and we'd do mad stuff for the locals in Sheriff Street. We did *Doctor Faustus* by Marlowe and we toured around the amateur drama groups. We had no sets and Pink Floyd for music and we were smoking joints on stage. We did a great show in UCD with Neil and my brother Peter called *Oedipus Rex* where we put up scaffolding in the Aula Maxima in the old UCD building and put the audience in the scaffolding. The show went on till all hours and the local reviewers all hated it. The Irish Times said it was the "worst show ever" and called it "psychedelic madness". By the end of the run we had hundreds of people queuing up to get tickets. We had offers to take the show to New York and London. That show and the story behind it still fascinates me. The Oedipal story. It's a defining story in personal terms and in political terms. All these things influenced me greatly. Take *Finnegan's Wake* as an example. Joseph Campbell and Jean Erdman found the roots of mythical storytelling structure in Joyce. It's a night-time book about a father who's abusing his daughter. It's full of the structures of what I call invisible colonialism. There's a pressure from outside that weighs down but is never visible. You're in the house but there's something wrong in the house. It feeds into our own understanding of the Northern conflict as well. The father figure is not overtly abusive but the necessity is to drive it out and to try and see what's really going on.

SB: You did that with your own films. You once said that “My Left Foot was for my mother and In the Name of the Father was for my dad.” In your best work you have personalised these huge social and historical issues.

*JS: Yes. In ways that are probably mad. I had done a few plays in the Project that my dad was in. He always was the bad guy. It’s funny. Last night I had a dream about him. (I think I was trying to get him out of the drama group...). I remember saying to him that I was going to do a story about a good father like Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*. He loved that idea. On the night we premiered *In the Name of the Father*, he hugged me in front of everyone in the Savoy cinema in Dublin and he whispered into my ear “I love you” and I pushed him back to look at him. And it was weird. It was like I had to make a fucking movie to make him say that. Later at the time when my mother was dying, I got a camera. And I realised that she really liked the camera. You know the way that when you have a camera, you become invisible. It makes you kind of not present in the event you are witnessing. So it’s both a retreat and a recording at the same time. My mother loved being on camera, all day if she could. My brother Peter was away at the time and I was trying to get him to come back as she was fading at the time. And when he came back he hated that I was filming everything. I went into the room and started filming. My brother walked in and she started calling him “Pete”. She never called him “Pete”, his name was Peter, like my dad. But as I was in conflict with my dad, so was I also with my brother, Peter. If ever I needed a bad guy in a story, I’d just write “Peter”. But when she called him “Pete” and said “I love you”, I zoomed in closer and I said “but not as much as you love me Ma”. This was on her death bed. And she said “No, no. I loved youse all the same, no different”. And I had it. I’d recorded it all. I got it edited and put it together with the Sheriff Street footage and I gave it to Peter. The next time I saw him he said “that’s not what she said”. Love is the primal force. The mother’s love. It like the Achille’s heel of relationships. The love which makes you strong is also the love which is your weakest point. Ireland is so dominated by the mother. The men are so castrated...*

CM: Can I go back to the early film days and get you to talk about Noel Pearson. For this generation of filmmakers, Noel Pearson is a name attached to your films. But for people of a previous generation, Pearson was a force to be reckoned with in the theatre world. How important do you think he was in that first generation of Irish filmmakers.

*JS: Well, he was the first businessman in the theatre as opposed to guys who just ran a theatre. He was an entrepreneur. He was very good at it. He was a union guy. He was a manager. He was Christy Brown’s agent. He had a very good antenna for picking up what might be a good story. Making a movie from *My Left Foot* was basically his idea. It was a very thin book. But you know, the shorter the book, the better the movie. You don’t need a big book to make a great movie, but you need a big idea. *Down All the Days*, which was Christy Brown’s book was beautifully written but was never a movie. It’s a bit like Sebastian Barry’s book *The Secret Scripture* which is so well written I hate it! It’s very hard to make a movie outside of your own environment. 90% of the commercial appeal of a movie is in getting the audience to see themselves up on the screen. So when you have a film set in America, it starts with 90% advantage over a film set outside America. So making an Irish film is like trying to play baseball with a hurl and hoping for a home run. It’s very hard.*

CM: But Jim, you have done it. Over and over again. You are almost unique among Irish filmmakers to have done it. And done it repeatedly. I’m conscious of the fact that we’re here in this room today with over 100 people under the age of 30, fully engaged in their own film making practice. This room was impossible 30 years ago in Dublin. Its possible today

because of what you and a number of other filmmakers have achieved. Where do they go from here now?

JS: Well, the first thing you've got to do is to act. It's all about actors and acting. Even if you only get your mates to act out in front of you. That's a start. You don't really need direction. Direction is for the birds. It's a joke. You can't really direct people. You've just got to love them. It's that simple. You give them the words. You trust their interpretation or you fire them. Trying to get deeper than that is very hard. You just got to do. Neil started the publishing company [Field Day]. I started the drama group. We were guys who did things.

The simplest and the hardest thing is this: what happens next? If you've written it and you know what happens next, it's dead. I don't want to see a movie that has been over-rehearsed. I think really in-depth are about not having a clue about what's going to happen next. It's really hard to get into a room having written it and planned it and then not know what's going to happen next. But the minute you do that, you cause chaos. And the minute you cause chaos, you cause disturbance at different levels and to different people. With *My Left Foot*, we did it word for word and probably I had the benefit of not knowing any better. I was lucky. I had a genius performer and some great actors. This time round with *The Secret Scripture*, it's been difficult. With Vanessa [Redgrave], she's given as good a performance as I've ever got from an actor but all I did was drive her nuts. You know, you're supposed to be the boss when you're directing a film but it's very difficult. There's over a hundred people standing around. They're all just wanting to move on to the next scene. You're there looking at two or three actors, trying to get them to do something. And one of them is saying, "but what about if I do it this way..." The minute you just go with what's easiest, you're dead. You're better off being wrong. If you look at Scorsese's early movies like *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver*, he's moving the camera all over the place all the time. He hasn't a clue what he's doing. He cuts out of shots for no reason. He zooms in on something for no reason. He cuts to another shot. Not related in any way. But his mistakes are part of what makes these movies better than later movies when he knows what he is doing.

BT: *That idea of just moving the camera and seeing what happens is a new wave impulse. What filmmakers do you look to for example and inspiration?*

JS: I suppose I'd have looked to earlier filmmakers, Carl Dreyer, John Ford. It's back to that thing I said earlier about us not really having a visual history. You need light, good weather, open air. It requires finance and it requires a political system that allows you to think. And that didn't exist here for so long. We don't have a sense of that but on the other hand we have an overburdened sense of drama and theatrics and madness and story and emotion. So I think that every visual decision is in conflict with an emotional decision. With early Scorsese, for example in *Raging Bull*, he cuts from a shot where De Niro is bleeding, he's not bleeding, he's bleeding, he's not bleeding. It doesn't matter. What matters is the emotional impact of what you're seeing. That's an example of where the emotion is deeper than the visual. So I'm always trying to get to the emotional truth. The visual can come next. It's hard to explain. I remember doing a shot in *In America* and the only thing that mattered was to draw out the emotional truth. If you're getting the emotional truth, it doesn't matter where you put the camera and at the same time if you're not getting the emotional truth, it doesn't matter where you put the camera. *In the Name of the Father* is a movie about a father and a son but it's also about my experience of my father and me as his son. If you write a scene which carries some part of the weight of your own experience, it can become very powerful because you know it's true. No matter how weird it is, it will still feel real. So much of our storytelling has been shaped by our experience of being crushed for generations.

CM: *Is that going to continue? Will the current generation of filmmakers continue to make stories coming from hurt?*

JS: I don't know. I can tell you what is missing are stories of spiritual belief. Everyone says that movies are narrative, movies are documentary, movies are whatever, but nobody ever tells you that movies are a form of spiritual belief. Maybe that's what the next generation are going to be making movies about.



*Filmbase Dublin 9th February 2016
(From left to right: Conor Murphy, Jim Sheridan, Barnaby Taylor; Steven Benedict)*