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If I Should Fall from Grace

Prod and dir: Sarah Share

Emdee 2000 productions

TG4/Bord Scannán na hÉireann

Our national bawler

In a 'Note to Young Singers' included as a preface to his ballad anthology, *Ireland Sings* (1965), Dominic Behan encapsulated one of the major debates generated by the then burgeoning Irish folk revival. 'That everything in relation to folk song must be limited to the purely "Ethnic"', he scoffed, 'with no allowances for the day to day changes which are a feature of any society is tantamount to asking us for our signature on a death warrant for folk-lore. Above all, it is asking us to sing with an academic tongue in cheek, and, before we bawl our heads off, we must find out why. It is enough to prevent young people from making their own songs.' Over the last three or four decades the positions have often been heavily and emotively set in the traditional-folk/innovative-folk oppositional stakes, from the lively debates generated by Seán Ó Riada's classical orchestrations to the tired cultural self-righteousness provoked by Riverdance's dollar-stamped endgame. The complacencies and simplistic polarities of the entire debate were pretty much complicated into oblivion by the appearance on the eighties music scene of a man by now entitled to the title of Ireland's national bawler - Shane MacGowan. A young man reworking older songs and making his own new ones in the traditional spirit, MacGowan was a striking combination of the determinedly ethnic Irishman and the culturally deracinated modern Everyman. Simultaneously informed by the attacking irreverential mood of the punk era and by an inherited reverence for Ireland's vocal and literary legacies, his work was never going to be easily co-opted by either side in the tradition/innovation caterwauling. The very point of his career has been his melding of old and new, elementals that are as inseparable in his sensibility as is form and content in his lyrics and music. His artistic fillip resides in just this synergy; in her recent and perceptive profile for *The Observer*, Lynn Barber went so far as to describe him as 'one of the founders of the current Irish cultural renaissance'.

Importantly for a folk figure, MacGowan is firmly etched on the popular imagination. This has been well abetted by the media. Music journalists, naturally engaged by such a patently *real* rock-'n'-roller like MacGowan, have kept a close eye on his career, for good and for ill, and there have been some notable, though not always creditable, book-length studies: Ann Scanlon's *The Lost Decade* (1988) was a detailed probing of his career with the Pogues during the eighties, while Ian O'Doherty's *Last of the Celtic Soul Rebels* (1994) was a disgracefully slight piece of opportunism. If it were needed, official testimony to the inherent value of his song-writing is the fact that his lyrics were published - as *Poguetry* (1989) - by one of the most prestigious British poetry houses, Faber & Faber. Best remembered for his pivotal role with the Pogues in issuing three of the finest albums of the eighties - *Red Roses for Me* (1984), *Rum, Sodomy and the Lash* (1985), and *If I Should Fall from Grace with God* (1988) - MacGowan has spent a decade in the comparative doldrums, this despite an

occasionally brilliant first solo album (with The Popes) called *The Snake* (1995), and an extraordinary tribute to the Country & Irish sound in 1997 called *The Crock of Gold*. MacGowan is, however, at present enjoying the spotlight again, mainly due to the issue of the latest book, *A Drink with Shane MacGowan*, Victoria Clarke's (MacGowan's long-time girlfriend) interview-fed biography which provides for a deeper and more prolonged insight into the life and work than hitherto available.

Within the next few weeks however, Clarke's revelatory book will be joined at midfield on the Shane MacGowan exposé team by the first documentary to focus entirely on his background and career, a feature-length film titled *If I Should Fall from Grace* made by Sarah Share. Now that its première is nigh, one cannot help but wonder why, given the contemporary importance of MacGowan, some kind of 'rockumentary' had not already been devised on him. There is a sense, therefore, of at-last timeliness to this film. A Dubliner who now resides in Oughterard in Galway, the director describes herself as a 'late starter' in her forties. While Share has intermittently worked in television since she was thirty, she moved mainly in the bookselling and publishing world of London in the eighties before eventually deciding that she wanted a change of direction. She found herself working for Bob Geldof's film company and becoming involved in arts documentaries, frequently as production manager. She made an Arena programme and, most notably, a South Bank Show programme in the early nineties called *Clear Cool Crystal Streams* on contemporary Irish rock and pop music. Share is somewhat cautious in discussing or making assumptions about her first foray into major documentary since she is, in a sense, in the process of having fame thrust upon her. Production wise, *If I Should Fall from Grace* is the story of how the original plans for a standard hour-long television documentary had to be widened to provide for a transformed ninety-minute work that is bound to attract significant attention.

Originally, MacGowan more or less suggested the project to Share. 'I lived up the road from where Shane's parents lived and where Shane's cottage is [in Tipperary] and the Christmas before last, I was literally in bed one night, asleep, and the phone rang at midnight and it was Joey Cashman (MacGowan's manager and an old friend of Share's) to say that he and Shane were coming to visit and Tom, my partner, shouted that Shane was coming round and to get up - he dragged me out of bed, so it's maybe thanks to him this film got made. And so the pair of them ambled in and we did the graveyard shift.' MacGowan had heard she had done a small series for TG4, a cookery-come-natural history programme, the first that she had directed, and he said that he owed the station a favour for messing up an appearance on their *Shibín* programme. Once she had proposed the project to TG4 and been accepted, the first thing she did was to shoot a seven-minute trailer to show to the film board in order to prove she could deliver what was universally assumed to be a difficult project. The board gave £30,000 initially and TG4 gave £40,000, their top money for an hour-long film. The whole thing, even at the original hour length, was always going to cost more than £100,000 however, Share points out, because archiving and music clearances are so expensive. Shooting over six months, Share was intensely aware of having a broadcaster looking over her shoulder. So, with the pressure on and with intensive work carried out, why didn't the programme go out on TG4 last Christmas as scheduled?

Early enough in the project, a friend had suggested to Share that she show her work to Brendan McCaul in Buena Vista. McCaul cut his teeth in cinema in the sixties and seventies putting on late-night rock movies and so Share's film was bound to be close to his interests. While he pointed out to her that Buena Vista does not involve itself with production, he readily declared interest and wanted to see the film once it was finished. Buena Vista was happy with the finished product and so the film has been held, first, for cinema release. (Share will also eventually have to cut an hour-long television version.) Spending the extra time with no extra financing on the project has been expectedly stressful. Share, and executive producer, Larry Masterson, deferred their fees and she hasn't earned a penny for a year's work. Such a commitment inevitably leads to intense emotional investment in one's subject and she became, she admits, absolutely obsessed with MacGowan for a lengthy period.

The experience of concentrating on such a deliberately independent subject however, has come with its own helpful lessons: 'Making a film about Shane gave me a huge opportunity and maybe crystallised ideas and notions I had on documentary already. Initially I tried to control Shane, to make him do set-ups, I tried to organise him, get him out the door and to do things for me. Very quickly I realised this was not going to happen. Even when I tried to get him to talk directly in the presence of the camera he got very defensive, belligerent and opinionated'. Primarily, Share was forced to take her commitment to the proverbial fly-on-the-wall approach to an extreme. Realising quickly that MacGowan 'has a script and its hard to get him to drop it', she decided 'to stand back and let him off. In retrospect, this was the best thing I could have done'. Her interest in her medium has obviously been further piqued by discovering the benefits of adopting that stand: 'I suppose filming Shane did teach me about the kind of film making I like. I'm not interested in controlling subjects or imposing structure ... you have to spend a lot of time making people feel comfortable... you have to be patient'. Long-lens cameras picked up the best footage when MacGowan had been made sufficiently comfortable to entirely forget that the team were in his presence at all, and one of the most heart-warming moments of the film occurs when, in giving some money to a street sitter at night in London, MacGowan snarls at the impropriety of the camera's presence.

While Share expresses admiration for the work of a documentary maker like Molly Dineen and her way of going underground and quietly letting people tell their stories, she seems more concerned with her own trajectory, and regards documentary as an art form that can be perfected. She is especially keen that, as a director, she should absent herself as much as possible from her films and she spent much time with the MacGowan story deliberately cutting herself out of the final product. Of the whole process, she says she found the editing 'much more exciting than filming because with filming you're just working on your wits and your gut is in a knot. ... The day I went into editing, I really didn't think I had a film. But it actually all came together much easier than I thought'. In all, the editing took four to five weeks. She was particularly worried that she'd have to use a voice-over since people persisted in telling her that MacGowan was going to be an ungiving subject. 'If you had to make statements about Shane', she says, you'd be going into dangerous territory. I didn't want to make statements. I wanted people to draw their own conclusions'. As far as interviewees go, Share affirms that she had no intention of rolling on the usual suspects, nor did she want a sequence of talking heads. She was perpetually worried that the story would be told too much through the voices of others instead of through

the horse's own mouth as it were. The interviews are selective, precise, and in many instances uncompromising. MacGowan's mother and father are especially engaging on their perceptions of their son as a young boy. Victoria Clark provides the inside track on MacGowan's romanticism. Philip Gaston and Deirdre O'Mahony give a frank account of the London rock habitus in the seventies and eighties period that was formational for MacGowan and they are direct also in identifying the fallout from the 'speed-fuelled' punk scene. Philip Chevron was happy to give his version of the Pogues break with MacGowan, and there is a delightful bit of editing where Chevron says the band did not fire him and then Joey Cashman immediately says 'They fired him'. Nick Cave's commentary is something of a coup – he talks level-headedly regarding the role of drugs and drink in MacGowan's kind of music and his admiration for the 'effortlessness' of MacGowan's lyrics is evident.

There were the expected delays and some blithe uncooperativeness from MacGowan – he often kept the crew waiting for days and weeks to record material, time Share used to gather shots of London life and locations. She is particularly complimentary of her 'very willing cameraman' in the patience area. MacGowan was not overly restrictive on what he wanted done in the film, though there were one or two people he did not want her to talk to, principally the former Pogues manager, Frank Murray, with whom he has had deep-rooted disagreements. Occasionally, MacGowan did scream abuse at her: 'Don't fucking analyse me, don't give me that Freudian shite ... you're just a despicable journalist'. This is, Share avers, all part of a particularly honest persona however: 'Shane does wear his heart on his sleeve ... that's very brave'. The one point of the film where he was absolutely insistent concerned the ending. While Share is a little concerned that it may not be populist enough, MacGowan insisted on leaving in – rightly, Share admits now – footage of a delightful parody of a Micheál O'Hehir match commentary. It is a truly funny conclusion to the film, and is wrapped up by his trademark hissing snigger.

MacGowan has never appeared to be overly aware of his public image, at least as it is represented on screen. Numerous talk-show appearances have proven this, particularly a by now legendary one on the Late Late Show a couple of years ago where he seemed more than usually inarticulate and dishevelled. It is only at such rare moments however, that viewers might be usefully shocked into the realisation that television has its own inherent imperatives and that those whom the camera targets need not necessarily respect those imperatives. Whether a calculated position or not, MacGowan patently feels he owes the camera nothing. 'He doesn't care enough about his image to control it', says Share. 'When he goes on screen he doesn't prepare an image, or prepare a speech ... he doesn't play the game'. Given the current hegemony of the screen, this is a salutary carelessness. Share herself is healthily sceptical when it comes to cardboard cut-out set pieces; she is, especially, 'very suspicious of speech', likes the quiet moments in the film, and deliberately avoided MacGowan's imposition of certain lines and stories that he likes to tell about himself. It is one of the achievements of the film (and this is not simply due to the omission of a voice-over) that MacGowan's story is as much shown as told. From the archives, there are shots of the young MacGowan bopping at punk gigs and with his first band, The Nips, that were also shown in Julian Temple's film *The Filth and the Fury* (2000), and there is a brief excerpt of an impossibly fresh-faced MacGowan from LWT's 1983 programme on the 'punkabilly' music genre, *South of Watford*.

Share seems somewhat worried that she has romanticised MacGowan, but this is perhaps an endemic worry with such a subject since the assumption often made is that if one doesn't condemn a dissolute lifestyle like MacGowan's then one is implicitly condoning it. The purpose of this film however, is to objectively show the creative personality in its own lair. MacGowan himself is a film fanatic and has thousands of videos; he's especially obsessed with violent American movies and watches them compulsively, and there are some shots of him in the film on what appears to be his culture-assimilation couch, surrounded by books, CDs, video cases. He is, says Share, often like a ghost at home on this couch, staying up for somnambulant days watching, listening, reading. 'He has a pile of books he brings with him everywhere, almost like comfort blankets.' She has two hours worth of cuts of MacGowan discussing his favourite books that might, hopefully, find their way into another film sometime. Her own favourite moment in the film is when MacGowan launches into the first verses of 'The Galway Shawl' for the purposes of comparisons with his own lyrics. There is also a searing moment, resonant with all kinds of social and racial specificities, when MacGowan, pointing out how important the Sex Pistols were to him because of Johnny Rotten being 'so bloody obviously Irish', snarls out the central lines of 'God Save the Queen': 'No future, no future, no future for you, no future ... in England's dreaming'. Rotten still calls MacGowan 'Mr Ireland', Share reveals.

Potentially detrimental as is the latter-day-James-Clarence-Mangan Dionysian outlook of MacGowan, his star is undoubtedly on the ascendant again. Clarke's book has topped the non-fiction selling lists in Ireland; a further *Very Best of the Pogues* album has been released; a 'Live in New York' album is apparently in process; another biography is due out this month. Also, amid Alex Cox's newly issued DVD collection of his own films is a revamped and accessorised version of the spaghetti western, *Straight to Hell* (1987), with which, along with Denis Hopper, Elvis Costello, Joe Strummer and The Pogues, MacGowan was involved and for which he wrote much of the sound track. *If I Should Fall from Grace* premières at the Dublin Film Festival on April 20th, and Buena Vista will launch it around the country three or four weeks afterwards. MacGowan intends to attend on the night – he is, as Share indicates, quite proud of the film and it is to be hoped that the combination of delicious arrogance and down-home childish glee he displays will be embraced by viewers. The importance of such a reception specifically relates to what is both old and new, traditional and innovative in what MacGowan does. Share is particularly respectful of his hatred for the idea of a generation gap: 'He has a colossal respect for parents ... He thinks, in Ireland, there never was a generation gap in country areas ... young people went to dances with their aunts, people sang together. ... He has a huge warmth and understanding. He's very non-judgmental and the least we can do is be non-judgmental back ... He's not cynical, and to not give him room to be romantic shows a very mean mind'.

And here is the crux. This film will not be to everybody's taste. MacGowan fans will want to watch it on repeat since there is enough new material to intrigue and, in any case, all converts (convert does seem the right word, given the almost sacral feelings some seem to have for MacGowan) are already well accustomed to his foibles and are immune to the inherent distractions. For non-judgmental non-initiates, the empathetic and explanatory nature of the film should make for a new acceptance if not outright approval or admiration. No doubt, however, many will continue even after viewing to plainly reject what MacGowan does and what he stands for. What distinguishes

MacGowan's work and personality from most strands in contemporary popular art is his discomfiting tendency – to use Share's terms – to wear his cultural heart on his sleeve. He has no time for the kind of uniform cleverness too often demanded of culture by the self-consciously educated; though there is humour aplenty, there are no levels of standard literary irony to his lyrics to which we may point and interpret sophisticatedly and thereby claim sophistication for ourselves. As he puts it directly in the film, his words are 'raw', 'emotional' words put to a brand of dance music that 'bypasses the intellect and hits you in the gut and hits you in the heart and hits you in the soul'. The moments in the film that should most successfully cut to this chase are those shot in MacGowan's home place in Tipperary – shots inside the cottage he knew for the first seven years of his life, shots where he talks to cattle, shots where he spontaneously sings his song USA to Victoria while walking down a lane.

Though she will not specify, it is probable that Share will choose another musical subject for her next project. 'I respond hugely to music', she says, 'it cuts through a lot'. It does. From its original conception, this film has been lengthened largely through inclusion of full-length or almost full-length versions of MacGowan's songs and music and, far from being filler, it is this nicely incorporated additional material that turns the film into a properly beneficent artistic documentary where the work is given space but is also contextualised in terms of the worker's life. From whatever self-designed hell's ditch MacGowan continues to lounge, laugh and (above all) bawl in, he is bound to look at the creation of this film as one of the brighter lights in his shadowed firmament.

John Kenny