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Title	William Trevor on Screen
Author(s)	Kenny, John
Publication Date	1999
Publication Information	Kenny, J. (Autumn 1999) 'William Trevor on Screen.' 'Film West' 38, 18-20.
Publisher	The Irish Times
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/762

Downloaded 2024-04-25T15:17:36Z

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William Trevor on Screen

Once a narrative source is credited, a film admits to being, to one degree or another, derivative. All aesthetically valuable adaptations, whether engaged in free play or imitation, should set up some kind of dialectic with the originary story. The conversational opener, 'So tell us, is it as good as the book at all?' can only ever be critically productive. Ever since the publicity wagon began to roll for his latest film, Atom Egoyan has been lavishing praise on William Trevor, the septuagenarian originator of the story of *Felicia's Journey*, and the novelist is surely presently blushing bemusedly at the latest plaudits from his newest fan: 'It's *shocking* more films haven't been made from Trevor's books, because they're great stories and he creates this wonderful universe. I think Trevor is a most remarkable writer, one of the great writers of our time.' Much as Egoyan has pointed out that, in his screenplay adaptation, he couldn't engage in any kind of 'literal process of adaptation' of Trevor's eponymous novel, published in 1994, he has been careful to communicate a tremendous respect for both author and novel and has indicated that he was very conscientious in ensuring that any changes he made would be in sympathy with Trevor's story. This deference, from a man with redoubtably un-coy work behind him, contrasts heavily with Tom Paulin's assessment of Trevor's standing in the literary world: Reviewing the writer's *Collected Stories* (1992), he suggested that Trevor was 'a writer for old ladies'. In the light of this divergence, Trevor himself, the writing he has been engaged in since the late fifties, and particularly the attraction some of it has held for film makers, are all worth examining.

William Trevor Cox was born in Mitchelstown in 1928, into a middle-class Protestant family that, because pater was a bank official, lived variously in Youghal, Skibbereen, Tipperary and Wexford. William finished his schooling in Dublin and, after attending Trinity, became for a while a teacher in Ireland and then England. Settling across the water for good in 1953, he tried, with reasonable success, to become a sculptor but gave up in favour of the art of narrative, producing a first failed novel in 1958 but launching his career proper with *The Old Boys* in 1964. His early work was in the vein of the black English social comedies of the likes of Evelyn Waugh, Kingsley Amis and Muriel Spark but, voluntary as it was, distance eventually encouraged him towards a new examination of his home country. Ireland, he has said, 'did not fall into place until I'd been in exile. Things you take for granted you don't actually see when you're living there'. By the late sixties, inspired to some degree by the international attention newly directed at the 'Troubles', he had begun to employ the subject matter of Ireland past and present and the involved works — short stories and, later, novels — would come to be regarded as among his best. All screen adaptations of his stories have attended to individual examples of this 'Irish' work.

Before going on to these adaptations, Trevor's own love of the cinema should be mentioned. While the importance of the popular culture of films in the work of the likes of Pat McCabe is readily recognised, it is too often assumed that the generation that grew up in the sixties and the seventies was the first to have the screen as a pervasive cultural influence. This may be the case with the TV screen, but it should be remembered that for Trevor's generation a trip to the cinema was one of the more

precious social and cultural activities. His reminiscences (see *Excursions in the Real World* (1993)) are dotted with references to the silver screen: ‘The cinema — or picture-house, as it was more popularly called — provided an influence that cut deeper, and has lasted longer, than schoolroom information about trade winds and the rhomboid. *Men with Wings*, *The Bride Walks Out*, *Meet Me in St Louis* combined with Trigger, Andy Hardy, and falling in love with Barbara Stanwyck, to cheer those wartime winters ...’ Recalling ‘going to the pictures every time there was a change of programme’, he insists that ‘Nothing was more lovely or more wondrous than Cork itself, with its magnificent array of cinemas: the Pavilion, the Savoy, the Palace, the Ritz, the Lee ... For ever and for ever you could sit in the middle stalls of the Pavilion watching Claudette Colbert, or Spencer Tracy as a priest, and the earthquake in San Francisco.’ Anyone interested, indeed, in the functioning of cinema in Irish provincial towns in the earlier decades of this century could do worse than attend to Trevor’s perfect novella on the subject, *Nights at the Alexandra* (1987). We might have to wait on some lengthy postgraduate thesis to elaborate on just how film influenced the narrative practices of Trevor’s generation of prose writers, but it can be safely assumed that the adherence of a man who calls himself ‘the least experimental writers’ to old-fashioned romance structures has been abetted, in significant part, by the Hollywood of his youth in the forties.

Trevor’s specifically Irish work can be fairly readily divided into ‘sociological’ and ‘historical’/‘political’ categories. While *Felicia’s Journey* provides for a nexus of these two categories, the first Trevor adaptation opted for the sociological concentration: Pat O’Connor’s version of the short story, ‘The Ballroom of Romance’ (1972), televised in 1982, remains perhaps the most famous slice of Trevor on screen. Two subsequent screenings of Trevor are closely related in their historical and political concerns. The year after *Ballroom*, Kieran Hickey directed a version for television of the short piece, ‘Attracta’ (1978), a story that shifts between the period of the Anglo-Irish War and the contemporary situation in Northern Ireland. And, in 1990, for the last Trevor work to be adapted before *Felicia’s Journey*, Pat O’Connor came back for more with a feature version of the 1983 historical ‘Big House’ novel, *Fools of Fortune*. Accepting that Egoyan’s take on Trevor is the slickest and most expensive to date, it might be best to deal with these three precursive adaptations in order of increasing merit.

While Trevor has frequently displayed a deft touch with Irish history, particularly in such stories as ‘The Distant Past’ (1975) and ‘Beyond the Pale’ (1981), Kieran Hickey made a poor choice when he alighted on ‘Attracta’ as it is one of Trevor’s more awkward and politically less creditable pieces. This is the story of Attracta, a Protestant school-marm who is forced to confront the depredations wreaked on her own childhood by the Anglo-Irish War when she reads of some atrocities committed by contemporary Republicans in Belfast. A British army officer is murdered and his head is posted in a biscuit tin to his wife, Penelope Vade, in England, who, in defiance, comes to Belfast to join the Women’s Peace Movement. Incensed, the unidentified Republicans attack her, gang rape her, after which she kills herself. (Not quite fit material for old ladies, Mr Paulin.)

Hickey’s film version (BAC Films/Irish Film Board/RTÉ, 55mins), presumably adapted by himself since there is no screenplay credit, manages to actually accentuate

the improbability of the occasion for Attracta's crisis. The almost ridiculous reduction of the Northern conflict to a scenario of sexual violence committed by non-specified psychopaths, even if it is something of a continuation of the concern with horror Hickey displayed in *A Child's Voice* (1978), provides little in the way of constructive analysis of the situation at that time. The entire thing is turned into melodrama by Hickey when he opens with the wholly histrionic groans of Penelope Vade after the attack and this scene resurfaces later only to further melodramatic effect. The horror would have been better concentrated in an excellent scene later on when a schoolchild reads Penelope's story from Attracta's newspaper cutting. Instead, we are treated to an assault scene that somehow manages to not be horrific — a case where suggestion, rather than demonstration, would have been the better part of valour. Equally, Hickey doesn't seem to have been able to make up his mind whether his newly written scenes where Attracta is placed in a nursing home were to be affective or blackly comic. Wendy Hiller in the title role however, does manage to rescue some dignity for her character; John Kavanagh brings levity to his scenes as the repentant IRA man who accidentally killed Attracta's parents in a Black and Tan ambush; and, even if many of the performances are wooden, it is interesting to see some future *Fair City* and *Glenroe* people in action (Alan Stanford, Kate Thompson). These aspects however, and a brilliant performance from Joe McPartland as Purce, a ranting Presbyterian proselytizer, are not enough to recommend a flawed adaptation of a flawed story.

Fools of Fortune is arguably the better of Trevor's two Big House novels (the other being *The Silence in the Garden* (1988)) and, though it is not nearly so complex as its forebear in the subgenre, Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* (1929), adapted this year by John Banville and Deborah Warner, it was well entitled to the attention of the film makers. While Pat O'Connor's version (Polygram/Working Title Films/Film Four International, 1hr 45 mins) retains some of the faults of what is, in the original, basically a romance, he manages, with the aid of his screenplay writer Michael Hirst, to also improve on Trevor's occasionally loose story line. Trevor's 'fools of fortune' are a Protestant family with republican sympathies who get caught up in the Anglo-Irish War to the prolonged sorrow of the scion of the house, Willie Quinton. The intriguing quirk of the plot is that Trevor has Willie endure the sight of most of his family being burnt out and shot by the side traditionally seen as the protectors of the Big Housers, the Black and Tans, and has the grown Willie, in the wake of his decimated mother's eventual suicide, hunt down and kill the sergeant in charge of the conflagration.

The large part of Trevor's story is narrated from the present perspective of Willie as he languishes in exile abroad after enacting his vengeance. The first departure of the film is that O'Connor has Willie, played by Iain Glen, hiding out on the Aran Islands, an apposite echo of Synge's Playboy character and entirely in keeping with the feel of the novel. The only really jarring aspect of the film is in fact Glen's performance which turns as melodramatic as Hickey's film when emotive reactions to extreme situations are called for — no amount of standardised knuckle munching and wailing can compensate for the individually devised tics good actors devise for the revelation of feeling. Glen's better scenes are those where he plaintively yearns for his abandoned lover, Marianne, played in remembered scenes by the facially riveting Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio.

O'Connor, with significant aid from photographer Jerzy Zielinski, goes all out for the idyllic effect of parts of Trevor's book, opting for elegiac piano, sepia opening shots and hazy pictures throughout, particularly in the scenes involving the female leads. Though potentially annoyingly fairytale-ish and dehistoricized, the early parts of the film set things up for an effective fiery fall. Tom Hickey, as young Willie's tutor, the defrocked Father Kilgarriff, gets to allude to the pastoral quality with his recitation of some lines from Goldsmith's 'The Deserted Village' and this is nicely counterpointed when a certain local called Doyle is pictured marching back from the Great War. Played by Seán McGinley and his menacing eyebrows, Doyle assumes the role of Black and Tan informer, reports on the Quinon's associations with Republicans, causes an ambush, and is hung by the IRA for his efforts. Doyle's friend, one sergeant Rudkin, organises the slaughter of Willie's family in reprisal and thus the cycle of violence begins.

Thankfully, the most tedious part of the novel, recounting Willie's Boys Own-ish capers at school after a move to Cork city, is completely omitted in the film, and O'Connor gets down to making space for the finest performance, that of Julie Christie as Willie's degenerating mother. Christie plays the confused, haunted, alcoholic widower to perfection and her exit half way through is not quite compensated for by Mastrantonio's presence. As a full length film, *Fools of Fortune* does have a few plot hiatuses but these are generally glossed over by decent support performances from Mick Lally and Niall Tóibín as punctilious clerks, from John Kavanagh and Niamh Cusack as employees of the Big House, and particularly from Michael Kitchen as Willie's father.

And so to the masterpiece. A big budget television film for the time, Pat O'Connor's flawless adaptation of one of Trevor's best stories, 'The Ballroom of Romance', was screened by both its producers, RTÉ and the BBC, in 1982 and enjoyed considerable public acclaim. The potential for the success of the *Ballroom* film was promised by Trevor's original: The story is perhaps the best instance of Trevor's 'sociological' category and it must be said that he has always been on surer ground when his focus has been on the activities of people outside of the immediate scope of politics or national history. He has claimed, in fact, despite the subject matter of the likes of 'Attracta' and *Fools of Fortune*, that he doesn't really see himself as a political writer, insisting that his work is, instead, all broadly 'based on an objection to the intolerances and conventions that ... society has generated.' In this case, his story is a non-didactic, implicit objection to the conventions of socialisation in a rural fifties dancehall and a lament for the dead dreams of Bridie, a quite literally disillusioned thirty-six year old who looks after her father and his farm and who is coming to the end of her dancing days. Though Bridie clings to the last wisps of a remembered love affair in her youth, the title of the story is entirely ironic. Trevor may provide, in other works, plenty of love interest for old ladies, but, here, his omniscient narrator provides some deflationary commentary: 'One way or another it wasn't difficult to be a figure of fun in the ballroom.' One respondent in a viewer survey after the screening of the broadcast of the film was well entitled to complain: 'I mean, there wasn't a bit of romance in it.'

While, in the original, the narrator is allowed range backwards and forwards and gives a panoramic report on Bridie's lifestyle, the film is like the most perfect of short

stories in that it concentrates the events into a single night at the ballroom. The film opening coincides with the opening of the ballroom for the night, and Cyril Cusack makes the role of proprietor Mr O'Dwyer completely his own with his little shimmy round the empty floor. Then there are scenes of Bridie at home working and eating before she prepares to cycle to the dance, scenes that are, despite Brenda Fricker's excellently tight-lipped lead, almost shadowed by the few seconds Sonny McNulty has to play the troubled but benign father. Then there are the inspired scenes, written into the film, which establish the pre-dance activities of three boozy bachelors, Joe Pilkington as Tim Daly, Niall Tóibín as Eyes Horgan, and John Kavanagh as Bowser Egan, the man with his eye on Bridie and the man she will settle for in the end. (I don't know what Egoyan had against Kavanagh to not cast him and so make it four out of four for the actor.) All three patently have a blast in their roles and their roistering when they get to the dance is utterly convincing. Mick Lally is adequate as the listless drummer of the ballroom band that Bridie fails to woo, and Pat Leavy is inspirational as Madge, the spinsterish 'figure of fun' Bridie is frightened of becoming. Given the scenario of the film, music is employed to tremendous effect: The use of the band's saxophone to establish mood rivals that of another film of the same year, Jordan's *Angel*, and the bowsies' singing of songs such as 'Phil the Fluter's Ball' and 'Don't Fence Me In' adds to the irony. One of the highlights of the film is photographer Natt Crosby's night shots with bicycle lamps, particularly that of the bowsies cycling up the road to the dance while spitting out 'Ghost Riders in the Sky.'

Trevor has sometimes been accused of condescending the kind of rural characters he includes in 'The Ballroom of Romance.' Though there is a repeated emphasis in the story on men coming 'down from the hills like mountain goats' however, the story is generally empathetically told, and O'Connor notably carries this through into his version. O'Connor gets the irony, the half-grotesque, half-plangent tone of the story, exactly right and the final scenes, where Bowser and Bridie go into, and then come out of, the courting field, allow for no easy hierarchy of the feelings of love, hate, disgust, desperation, resolve. Filmed in Ballycroy, Co Mayo, this fifty minute long piece, despite his later versions of Neil Jordan's 'Night in Tunisia' (1983), Bernard MacLavarty's *Cal* (1984), and Maeve Binchy's *Circle of Friends* (1995), remains O'Connor's finest achievement in the area and is still one of the highlights of fiction-to-film adaptation in this country.

John Kenny.