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A strong 'wind'

Irish turmoil propels a generation of heroes

Deborah Nicol
Desert Post Weekly
February 22, 2007

No film about the birth of the Irish Republican Army can fail to depict its labor pains, but Director Ken Loach aims to present this period with humanity and compassion.

A brave Brit surrounded himself with Irishmen depicting a generation of heroes who stood up against the tyrannical Black and Tan armies. Loach has done his homework for *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*. The unrest of Ireland in 1920 was long in the making, and each character is infused with a family history of mistreatment.

Though the Irish characters are richly multidimensional, the British soldiers are dark and unflinching. Portrayed through raw brutality, they would sooner beat a train driver for not complying to their immediate requests than wait to see if their actions would be counterproductive. And it is at this moment of senseless violence that our hero is ignited.

An intelligent young man on the verge of training in London to become a doctor, Damien realizes his country needs him now rather than later. Portrayed by Cillian Murphy with soulful uncertainty, Damien's passion for equality is spurred by years of being treated as inferior within his own country. Nudging him into action is his brother, Teddy, a natural leader who fearlessly guides the local men into battle.

The men would not get far without the help of the women to transmit intelligence communications, organized as the Cumann na mBan. Without firing a shot, they contribute equally towards the success of their freedom. Behind closed doors, they obtain military knowledge as the maids and servants to the British. In the open, they hold charge of the local Dail courts under Irish rule.

Fighting together for the common cause of ridding the country of the British might, these untrained forces gain strength despite small numbers. But as their guerilla tactics become more organized and distant leaders begin to make far-reaching decisions, the rebels must make examples of fellow countrymen with weak character.

Loach carefully exposes the painful heartache of realizing when a friend must be treated as a traitor. In war, a sense of duty to country must outweigh personal weakness. As the stakes become higher and they approach the possibility of freedom, it becomes easier to kill but harder to die. Every loss is felt by the group, and at no moment does the film portray heroism without cost.

This is never more true than when a fissure develops between the Irishmen, and brothers face brothers. Though they are both ultimately fighting against a greater power, they have met the awful conclusion that the only resolution is to be completely unified in will despite the expense of Irish lives.

Affected by so much history of abuse, the Irish are still evolving and thirsting for peace. Intellectuals become men of action, and men of action become followers. Loach has tackled an extremely complex period and respectfully infused his characters with courage of every level. The absurdity of war is highlighted when the common enemy is removed and they begin to fight each other with the same fervor. United or divided, Ireland is nothing if not a passionate country.

3 1/2 STARS
Rated: NR

Time: 2 hours, 6 minutes

Genre: Drama, war

Language: English

Starring: Cillian Murphy, Padraic Delaney, Liam Cunningham, Gerard Kearney

Director: Ken Loach

Showing: Coming to Coachella Valley theaters in March, so stay tuned for show times.

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