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That They May Face the Rising Sun (15)

Dir: **Pat Collins**

with: **Barry Ward, Anna Bederke, Ruth McCabe**

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Synopsis: *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is about a group of people living in a small lakeside community in late 1970s Ireland. The film follows Joe (Barry Ward) and Kate (Anna Bederke), writer and artist respectively, who return from London to live and work in the community where Joe grew up. The film explores their lives and the lives of the people around them, including their neighbours, through the rituals of work, play, and the passing seasons. The film's central theme is Irishness and how the country's rapid modernization has caused some aspects of Irish life and culture to disappear

"Does anything happen, or is it the usual heavy going?" a novelist is asked about his latest book in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*. "Not much drama," he replies, "more day-to-day stuff." This response acts as a wry self-commentary on Pat Collins's film. *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is concerned with the everyday lives of a small group of characters in a lakeside village in the west of Ireland. A few things do happen in the film – a wedding, a death – but there is little in the way of standard drama and conflict, and no firm narrative shape beyond the passage of time and the changing of the seasons.

It's hard to imagine a filmmaker better suited to bringing John McGahern's final novel to the screen than Pat Collins. The central theme of Collins's work to date has been Irishness itself, with his documentaries (including John McGahern: *A Private World*, filmed a year before the author's death in 2006) exploring aspects of Irish life and culture that have largely disappeared amid the country's rapid modernisation. Collins has incorporated narrative techniques into his documentary work, notably *Silence* (2012) and *Song of Granite* (2017), and his first dramatic feature feels very much of a piece with what went before.

Collins often requests a degree of patience from his viewers, encouraging us to adjust to a slower pace of life, and he sets the tone here with the opening credits, which invite us to watch the dawn gradually breaking on the horizon. This region of Ireland in the 1980s is one that still lives by the old ways. There are rumours of telephone poles being installed in the area soon, but for now the news is primarily shared at Sunday Mass, or by walking across the fields to visit your neighbours. Much of the film takes place in the kitchen of Joe and Kate Rutledge (Barry Ward and Anna Bederke), a young couple who swam against the tide by leaving London to relocate in the county where Joe was born. Joe was written as McGahern's surrogate, and it's through his interactions with his



neighbours that we get an understanding of this community, with a few characters emerging as particularly vivid portraits of the area's lonely rural Irish men.

Many of those living here have rarely if ever ventured beyond the county's borders, and while some – like the gregarious, gossiping Jamesie (Phillip Dolan) – are contented with their lot in life, there is a real sadness underlying the scenes with Bill (Brendan Conroy), a farmhand damaged by his brutal upbringing. There is also great poignancy in the story of Johnny (Seán McGinley), who left Ireland for a demeaning job in London and now doesn't feel entirely at home in either place; but the most compelling figure of all is Patrick, played by the extraordinary Lallor Roddy. Once regarded as a gifted young actor destined for bigger things, Patrick is now a scrappy odd-job man who occasionally comes around to make a half-baked attempt at building Joe's shed. He can be charismatic and witty, but he also has a bitter, abrasive side and a habit of pushing people away before they can see any hint of vulnerability in him. The brief but potent flashes of loneliness and suppressed emotions that we glimpse in these characters complicate a film that may appear, on the surface, to be a nostalgic picture-postcard vision of rural Irish life.

Collins and his co-writer Éamon Little have wisely taken an elliptical approach to adapting McGahern's work. Characters drift in and out of the picture, narrative threads are unresolved, and much is left unsaid; all we get is a brief window into these lives, and an evocative snapshot of a particular time and place. Collins frequently punctuates scenes with Ozu-style 'pillow shots' of the landscape and he often observes his characters in quiet contemplation, strolling down a country path and enjoying the sun on their faces, with the film's unhurried rhythm affording us the same space to appreciate these fleeting moments. It's such mundane details that make up the stuff of life – as local businessman The Shah (John Olohan) puts it, "The rain comes down, the sun shines, grass grows, children grow old and die. That's the holy all of it" – and Collins brings the curious, attentive eye of the documentarian to capturing these moments, making *That They May Face the Rising Sun* a quietly captivating experience.

Credits

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|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| Joe | Barry Ward |
| Kate | Anna Bederke |
| Patrick | Lalor Roddy |
| Mary | Ruth McCabe |
| Jamesie | Philip Dolan |
| Johnny | Seán McGinley |
| Bill | Brendan Conroy |
| Director | Pat Collins |
| Screenplay | Pat Collins, Eamon Little |
| Cinematography | Richard Kendrick |
| Editing | Keith Walsh |
| Music | Irene Buckley, Linda Buckley |

Ireland/UK 2023. 111 mins

Another View

That They May Face The Rising Sun is a lyrical, loving celebration of the everyday. Pat Collins' sympathetic handling of John McGahern's final novel, published in 2002, revels in the simple things that give life meaning. The story of a couple finding their best life in the rural Ireland of the 1980s is beautifully realised and quietly beguiling. A world premiere at London should attract theatrical interest for an Irish feature that shares some of the sensitive qualities of Colm Bairéad's *The Quiet Girl* (2022).

Joe (Barry Ward) and Kate (Anna Bederke) have found the good life in a corner of Ireland where Joe grew up. Five years after their return from London, they have a contentment that feels very much like happiness. He writes, she is a photographer and artist who retains a half ownership in a London gallery. Creative days mingle with tending to the bee hives, growing food in their raised beds and keeping open house for any neighbour who feels inclined to drop by for a gossip, a mug of tea or a word of advice.

The couple have found the time to stop and stare. They can feel the sun on their face, breathe the scented air and appreciate everything around them. Collins and cinematographer Richard Kendrick provide a clear sense of what is so special about the landscape. Hedgerows stretch along the side of roads, a house seems under the thumb of nature as it cowers beneath hanging trees and spreading shrubs. Birdsong fills the soundtrack and the delicate piano score from Irene and Linda Buckley adds a mournful note. The sense of tranquility is palpable, and the film almost seems designed to lower your blood pressure.

There is no obvious serpent in this Eden but, as we witness the changing seasons and the interactions between Joe, Kate and the locals, there are undercurrents of conflict. People here have known hardship and poverty. Joe and Kate look upon their neighbours with a kind of benevolent indulgence; in turn, some of the locals regard them with fond bemusement. The prickly Patrick (Lalor Roddy) belittles their love of the quiet rural life and seems to resent the pleasure they take in the simple things. There is a sense, too, that Joe and Kate have swum against the tide. This is a place where generations have moved away to the city and a way of life once dominant is slipping away. Kate learns disappearing skills of weaving and separating wool before the past is lost to nostalgia.

Director and co-writer Pat Collins has made a number of specialist documentaries expressing an appreciation of craft, creativity and folklore, including *John McGahern: A Private World* (2005) and *Henry Glassie: Field Work* (2019). He is perfectly in tune with McGahern's world, offering a portrait of a community that survives by the sweat of its own labour. We witness the annual harvest, the slow, never-ending construction of a new building; the circle of life is marked in a joyous autumnal marriage, hopes and fears for an unknown future and the sting of inevitable deaths.

The expert cast do justice to their characters. Ward's Joe is an affable, understanding figure conveying the sense of a good man generously sharing his time and emotions. His observations of neighbours and perfect days feed into his writing, providing a voice-over narration that closely links the film to the text of the John McGahern novel and the autobiographical elements it contains. Kate has less screen time but Bederke invests her with a sense of certainty about what she wants and where she wants to be.

A gallery of accomplished Irish character actors (Ruth McCabe, Seán McGinley etc) vividly etch the people who become indispensable to Joe and Kate's lives. Phillip Dolan makes a sympathetic figure of farmer Jamesie and Roddy is especially notable as Patrick, capturing the complex, bittersweet emotions of a man unsettled by the changing world that is swirling around him.

Allan Hunter: Screen International

Our next screening: Friday October 11th, 7.30pm Io Capitano (Italy/Belgium/France, 2023)

The plight of migrants seeking safety in Europe has rarely been out of the news in recent years, but none of those reports has come close to capturing the graphic, thrilling and ultimately uplifting tale of two Senegalese youngsters who decide to chance their luck in the hope of making their fortunes in Italy. Matteo Garrone (*Dogman, Tale of Tales, Pinocchio, Gomorrah*) has created a drama with all the epic qualities of the best adventure films and captures every aspect of humanity, from naivety, kindness and optimism through to mercenary greed and brutal cruelty. It's an edge of the seat experience in every sense.