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The Development of the Irish National Cinema: From the Celtic Tiger to the COVID-19 Pandemic – An Interview with Mark O'Halloran

O desenvolvimento do cinema nacional irlandês: Do "Tigre Celta" à pandemia da COVID-19 – Uma entrevista com Mark O'Halloran

Sanio Santos Silva
Mark O'Halloran

Mark O'Halloran is known as one of the most prominent writers and actors in Ireland's national cinema and theater. He has appeared in films that are widely recognized by scholars, such as *Adam & Paul* (2004) and *Garage* (2007), both directed by Lenny Abrahamson and written by O'Halloran himself. In this sense, this interview, conducted online during the COVID-19 Pandemic, aims at presenting details regarding his creative process and his views on the recent development of the Irish indigenous cinema.

Sanio Santos da Silva (SSS): Can you please tell us what your first steps were as a filmmaker?

Mark O'Halloran (MO): They were tied to theater, and I went to drama school, and I studied acting and I had a theatre career working in most of the major companies around Ireland, in Dublin mostly; sometimes in the UK. And at the age of about thirty, my career began to shift a little bit, and I was a bit of unhappy with what parts, I was getting accepted. So I wrote

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some plays as a kind of a way to bridge a gap of stuff, not writing particularly parts myself but sometimes I did, but there was a play I wrote called "The Head of Red O'Brien," and uh, the producer Johnny Spears came to see it and he really liked it, and he asked me to meet himself and Lenny Abrahamson. And, they asked me did I have any ideas for a for screen play, and I said yes because I've been sort of thinking something over about the idea of two heroin addicts and I had a title and I knew there was going to be sunrise to sunrise, so I sent some scenes to Lenny and, both Lenny and Johnny really liked it and asked me to write a screenplay so it was as simple as that. I hadn't really been involved in the film industry. I've been in one film, I think a thing called, "H3," which is about the hunger strikes that had happened, in which I play, Bobby Sands. But beyond that, I did no film work essentially and so I was kind of coming to the film world from the theatre world and as an outsider. But Lenny, himself, made quite a successful short a number of years before that. And, people were kind of waiting to see what he was going to do because he was quite well known as a maker of ads, quite high-end. And so, we got together, and we entertained each other for a year of development and then we made it. It was quite kind of spectacular.

SSS: When you recorded Adam and Paul, Ireland was still starting to establish an indigenous film industry. Was it difficult to start working with cinema?

MO: Well, Ireland has a sort of a rich theater history, and there's this rich history of writing for theater. But, there was no history of writing for cinema. In fact, essentially, there's two types of Cinema in Ireland: Modern and Indigenous Cinema. And before that, it was a cinema of the outsider, which was usually American people or British people, who would come here, and they would make a film here. And so, you'd end up with something like, "Far and Away," or with... I don't know, "The Quiet man." Kind of iconic features of what Ireland is, but it's generally the Irish people within the films do the periphery. And then, there was kind of a modern film industry that began in the 90s, in the 80s into the 90s, but a lot of those films generally dealt with nationalism or the national question, which is about Northern Ireland or our historical conflict with the UK, with England. And, by the time, myself and Lenny wanted to make a film together, we didn't want to make a historical drama or a drama with a priest in it. We wanted to make something that was completely other than all of that. We didn't want to mention nationalism, we didn't want to mention the Catholic church for instance, we didn't

want to mention all those things, but we wanted to show what it would be like if you were living and you looked out your window, basically. And, it hadn't been a history of that in our cinema before this, there were bits and starts with..., but nothing that established that – I don't think.

SSS: *Adam and Paul* is a film that exposes the negative effects of the Celtic Tiger period. Why did you decide to explore this subject?

MO: The Celtic Tiger was a great mirage, as far as I was concerned. I was working in the theatre, I spent a lot of time on welfare, I made money, up to the point where the Celtic Tiger happened, I made money during the Celtic Tiger; the only thing was my rent kept going up, I ended up having to live in the back room of my brother's flat. So, the Celtic Tiger people... when people talked to me about the Celtic Tiger, I was like f*** you people, I hate you. I had friends that I went to school with and, I remember him saying..., we were having a drink one day and he was going, "God, you know the top rate of taxes is really awful," and I was like, well...I've never paid the top rate of taxes. And, he goes, "But, you're quite well known, you would've paid the top rate of taxes." But, I've never paid the top rate of taxes and I don't even come near the top rate of taxes. So, I was like, you people are f****** mental. And, in fact, my TV series, "Prosperity," was set in 2007 and it was about people on the edge of the economy at the height of the Celtic Tiger, and so, all of that was just a mirage, and so I enjoyed making stuff up, that totally bypassed like..., I didn't want to show..., you know, there was a tendency to make dramas where they were going like, we have an evil Banker or we'll have the troubles that the middle class are going through at the moment, and I was like, if you are on the street and you are a heroin addict, you have to figure out where you going to s***..., that's more drama and more dramatic and we're ignoring these things... So, that was why we made it (laughs).

SSS: It seems that the Irish filmmakers explore genre in a unique way. For example, *Adam and Paul* can be considered a comedy, but it also has drama characteristics. How do you explore genre in your scripts?

MO: Well, um, I wanted to make a film that felt sort of like a *Lard and Hardy* film, but also had elements of realism in it. So that's kind of what I went towards. Now, there is a tradition

in the Irish theatre canon, kind of, you know, writers like Sean O'Casey, who wrote plays like *June on the Paycock*, or *The Plow in the Stars*, that situate comedy right on side of awful tragedy, so he has slapstick comedy buffoonery, people chasing sausages around a place, alongside, you know murders by republicans or nationalists, alongside desperate tragedy. And I see, I've always enjoyed his plays, and so I wasn't afraid of putting comedy and tragedy together in the same place, you know.

SSS: I can see that. So, why do you think it is important to portray the contradictions of the society?

MO: Well, that's why we have drama, you know, that's why drama exists, so that we can look at societies ourselves and try to figure it out. That's why art exists, it's about trying to figure out where we are in a safeway rather than... I mean look at polarized societies now, like in the United States and everything, and that's about people not trying to figure it out, not looking at art, not trying to figure out where the soul of the nation is.

SSS: Could you tell me a bit more about how you explore genre in *Adam and Paul*?

MO: Well, you know, I think when you have two people who are tied together in a film like, *Laurel and Hardy* or *Adam and Paul*, one of the things that is important is, you understand that within a duo like that, there's a power struggle. So, one feels that they're more powerful than the other and the other feels they're less powerful than the other, one feels that they're in control and one thinks they're not in control, and you can play games with that as you go along. So, for instance, in "Adam and Paul," the taller one which is the character that I play, constantly thinks he's in control and he thinks he's more intelligent than the smaller guy, they're both the same level of stupidity, but one thinks they're more intelligent and one thinks they're stupider. And also, the person that you think isn't in control is the person who suggests all of the things in the schemes that go on in the comedy that goes on and around them. You can start playing games like that since I started with that, then I started working in physical comedy and the tragic elements that I put in there were just the realism, the realism of somebody's life...One character, or I'd say, two characters who desperately need each other and you're going to pull them apart by the end of the film, so you know, that's the kind of

area, some people found it odd that I was putting those two things together, but I think they fit very well together.

SSS: The film did not present Ireland in a positive way. Back then, did you think it could have affected the Irish Film Board decision to fund the production?

MO: The film was made on very little money, so I don't think so, and also they were investing in Lenny in many ways because he was sort of somebody that people had expectations up for real good reasons. I don't think that the film board are prescriptive in that way and certainly is an independent body, so politicians have nothing to say about it, there you know, they've frequently made difficult challenging movies so they're not trying to sweep bad images of Ireland under the carpet.

SSS: Why did you kill Adam in the end?

MO: It's the only way to properly finish a story is to kill somebody, isn't it? Any good film, they always die in the end.

SSS: Do you think the unexpected conclusions can be seen as a common feature of the Irish contemporary cinema?

MO: It is not so much something that I thought of before, I think that one of the things with *Adam and Paul* is, I had done a lot of work with people who were addicted and you know I had met a lot of them who had friends who died on them, who they had met death every day, you know, or massively, frequently in their lives, they did and they had people die in their company, and so I felt that to deny that would have been to deny...also you know, with the film I didn't just want to make a comedy, I didn't just want to write a comedy, I wanted to make a film, you know. For instance, we don't allow the audience to know which one is Adam and which was Paul, and that's kind of deliberate because you know, frequently people say, "the Junkies, the junkies are this..." and they don't put individual names on them, and then in the film we play this game where we give them the individual names but we don't allow them to

put them on them. Watching an audience struggle to name these people, who think normally step over on the street is actually with the film is about.

SSS: This question is about *Garage* and *Adam and Paul*, because they both explore drama and comedy. But do you think that the comedic relief is a strategy to convey your message to the audience?

MO: I think so. I mean there's that phrase that George Bernard Shaw used, which says, "If you're going to tell the truth, you'd better make them laugh." And I believe that. But I also do believe that we are all, human beings in general are ridiculous. We are all ridiculous, ultimately comedic. Sometimes that means we're pathetic, and sometimes that means we're high comic characters, but it's all on a spectrum of comedy. For instance, with the portrayal of the character Josie in *Garage*, it was also a sort of reaction toward the types of films that had been made about the Irish countryside up to a certain point. So, for instance, *The Quiet Man* or *Ryan's Daughter*, or something like that. The *Village Idiot* always existed in those films, as this ridiculous character who is there as sort of light relief. And I wanted to write something, about a ridiculous person, about the village idiot, but to give them their space to have dignity within that. So, Lenny described it as being a serious film about a ridiculous person. And so, we wanted to give... you know... one of the things that I always get told when people talk to me about that film is that... you know... "In my town, there was a guy like that." And so, it was kind of a testament to people like that.

SSS: I would like to talk about your 2015 film: *Viva*. It is a Spanish language film set in Cuba. There is a scene in the beginning, in which a man passes by wearing a shirt that is written Ireland...

MO: Well, you're not going to believe this, but that is actually accidental!

SSS: Please, continue.

MO: Sometimes... Like I've spent a lot of time in Cuba, and Irish people go there, and you know, when you're in Cuban, one of the things people say to you is "Hey, do you think you

could throw us a few T-shirts when you're leaving?" I've seen like Dublin Gaelic football shirts being worn by these guys, these kids who are rocking the streets of Havana. You do see them. So, it was accidental! It accidentally came along. Now, if they placed him more directly, I'm not sure of it. It wasn't planned, that's all I know.

SSS: Would you say you aimed to place an Irish story within a Cuban setting?

MO: Well, one of the things I grew to learn about Cuba when I was there is that the Cubans and the Irish are not unlike each other. They're both island nations. They both have trouble with their neighbors. They both defined their own sense of nationalism as being not their neighbors, so they're not the United States of America, we are not the UK. And there's also the sense of intense pride in their Cuban-ness, and also a sense of embarrassment about their Cuban-ness. The same way as back in the 80s and 90s, I remember going, "I love Ireland!" dying to get away from Ireland at the same time and being embarrassed by it.
And I also wanted to write something about fathers and sons, and I used plenty of my own experiences...what my own relationship with my father might have been back in the day. So, I do think there is an intense Irish connection. And also, just to add to the connections between them, in Spanish I say, "Somos los Cubanos del Atlántico Norte." Which is, you know, "We are the Cubans of the North Atlantic." And very literate, and literary people. Musical. Cultural. And also, we have this way of dealing with the world where we put on a show. We put on a show. And I think I describe both countries, both peoples, as being damaged jokers. We like to tell a joke, blah blah, but underneath there's heartache and there's a lot of pain. There's a lot of history. I mean, these are both nations that are sinking under the weight of their own history. So that's one of the things that attracted me and made me realize I could write something there.

SSS: I think you sort of answered this question before, but I am going to ask it again. What inspired you to write *Viva*? And also, do you think LGBT themes are well explored by Irish filmmakers?

MO: The second part of the question, I'll take first. It is quite a lot now. So, there's people—there's films like *Handsome Devil,* got made a few years ago. There's *Goldfish Memory.* There's

Dating Amber, which is a new film, LGBT film that came out this year, and it was quite a success during lockdown. What else has there been? There's *Papi Chulo*, which is of Irish origins, it's the same guy who made *Handsome Devil*. And also, my own film *Rialto*, has certain elements of queerness about it. There's a friend of mine who's an academic who did a paper on it, and she called it a queer film because, for lots of reasons...about male friendship and otherness and all of that. I think that before there wasn't much of an appearance of LGBTQIA+ issues in Irish film, or if they were, they were dealt with badly. So, now, I also think there's a lot of LGBTQIA+ filmmakers making their own films, about their own lives. I think it is quite an open book there now. And with regards to why I wanted to make something in Cuba... was that part of the question?

SSS: Yeah, what inspired you to make *Viva*?

MO: Well, I was kind of... I took a little year and a half or a two-year gap from working, and I went travelling, and I came home, and I met Paddy Breathnach, who is the director of it. And I said, "Do you have anything you'd like me to write for you?" And he said, "It's funny you mentioned that because I'm a real big fan of Cuba. Would you like to come to Cuba?" And I had never been to Cuba before, so, we planned a really short trip to Cuba, like ten days or something like that, and I went with him. And he liked the color of the drag world. So, we went there, and I spent a few days interviewing drag queens, and hanging out with drag queens and going to shows and all of that. And I got a shape of a story that I wanted to tell. And I wrote it up as a one-pager, and I gave it to Paddy, and Paddy liked it, and the two producers really liked it. So, they said, "Go and write it." So, later that year, in 2010, I went and lived in Havana for a while. And I didn't have Spanish at the time. I do have Spanish now—it is not brilliant Spanish, but you know, I can get by. And so, I was struggling to learn Spanish. But I was over there and so trying to...you know, it's kind of a big task to try and write about another culture, and try to be as honest as possible about that culture. And you know, my own type of writing is observational anyway. I observe people. So, I spent a lot of time observing people. And meeting people. And I brought a lot of wigs with me when I went over there. And they can't get wigs on the island. So, I was very popular over there with the drag queens, so I basically consumed all their stories. I got them to tell me all of their stories. And a lot of that

ended up in the film as well.

SSS: Would you make another film about drag queens? Cuban drag queens, maybe? Or Irish drag queens, maybe?

MO: I've toyed with the idea. I think it's a very crowded market now, actually. You know, there's a lot of drag queens on television now, and in films, whereas before, there wasn't. What interested me about drag queens in Cuba was, their drag queens are different from the drag queens you'd see in New York or London or Dublin. In New York or London or Dublin, there's a sort of ironic attachment to the songs they sing, and they're jokers, and they're coming out in these fantastic costumes and they're playing games with gender and with gender identity and it is really funny. In Cuba, the drag queens sing the songs as if they absolutely mean every word of it. So, it's all these big Cuban divas singing and they're tearing out their hearts and they're tearing out their wigs and it's really dramatic. There's no ironic detachment whatsoever, and I loved it. I was like, "Oh my god! These people are brilliant!" And so that was one of the reasons that attracted me to it. The fierceness of the queens there was quite interesting.

SSS: In *Viva*, there is some Catholic symbolism. One can point to the name of the protagonist, which is Jesus, as an example. Could you talk a bit more about that?

MO: There was no particular, I wasn't trying to be overly symbolic. I called him Jesus because he was simply a gay character that was going to be a drag queen. The idea that that might piss somebody off was just delightful to me. So, I did that. His father was called Angel, simply because I met a drag queen while I was there, in Cuba, called Jesus Angel, and he's a really lovely kid, I got to know him very well. And he disappeared after a while, I think he ended up in prison. And it's just – he was having a difficult life, and so I decided I'd use his name to name both characters. So literally there was no – but I mean there is the Ave Maria in there. You know, I think drag queens are as holy as any priest is. Their faith and belief in transcendence and transubstantiation and all that is there with them in every performance, so I think it is quite religious in a way.

SSS: From my perspective, Jesus was living with a very dysfunctional family, but at the end of the film he was able to create his own family in a non-traditional way. Could you share your views when it comes to family representation in Ireland?

MO: Um, I think that family is such a strange word. I always see conservatives on TV talking about family values and I always go, "You don't own that fucking word!" And like, someone like me, I come from a family. I am part of a family, and I constitute a family. You don't own the word. And so, the family that I put together myself is as precious as any conservative bible-basher's wife and 2.5 kids. And I wanted to deliberately show a blended family by the end of the film, so there was a little coda by the end of the film, where you have Jesus and this hooker boyfriend (laughs) that he has and the girl next door, who has a baby, and they live together—they all live together and I think that's sweet. Nurture is all the kid wants and they're going to be great parents, the three of them.

SSS: After the Celtic Tiger and an economic depression, the Irish economy is starting to grow again, so considering this scenario, how would you describe contemporary Irish cinema?

MO: It's an interesting one. I think that the borders of cinema have moved. It's that thing of like how do you define what is an Irish film? So, for instance, is it a film produced by the Irish film board using Irish money? Or is it a film that is made by an Irish director? Or is it a film that has Irish actors in it? Or is it a film that is set in Ireland? Or about Ireland? And those aren't necessarily the same thing. And most often they're not. And for instance, We, with *Viva* had *Viva* in as Ireland's entry into the best foreign language Oscar. Which was kind of funny. But at the time that was us pushing the boundaries and saying to the film board let's say that you are supporting Irish artists to do whatever the hell they want, that an Irish film cannot just be defined by national boundaries or anything else. So, for example, Yorgos Lanthimos makes films in Ireland. *The Lobster* was made in Ireland – It's an Irish film, Irish production company, Irish money. It's Yorgos Lanthimos – does that make it a Greek film? Does that make it a European film? What does that make it? And I think those kinds of slippages are happening at the moment. I think we're also in a time, at the moment, where the absolutes that a market

needs to sell a film have changed. So, for instance, and this especially is opposed to television, where most filmmakers are moving towards... the specificity... you know, if you want to make a film in America, you don't have to go to America to make it. It's the same with television, what they are interested in is uniqueness or something fun that hasn't been seen before. But they don't care what market it's made in. So that's gonna change what is an Irish film as well. As to whether the climate or the economic climate has changed what is being made, I don't... I think there's a kind of confidence that happens sometimes when the economy is buoyant that allows you to make a certain kind of film. But I didn't follow it as closely as with the Celtic Tiger. The Celtic Tiger was much more vulgar. Now, there's another thing that's happening, which I think we're going to see a lot more, which is that the ethnic make-up of the country has changed. For instance, you see a lot of Brazilian characters popping up in scripts. There's a lot of Brazilians in Ireland. There's people who are first generation or new immigrants. They come from all over the world – the Middle East, Africa, blah blah. They are making an impact on our country. And they will be seen in our cinema pretty soon, I would say.

SSS: In contrast with *Adam and Paul, Halal Daddy* is a rather positive narrative. So, tell me about the process of creating this film.

MO: I'll tell you what it was, I got delivered a script by Conor McDermottroe, who was directing it. And he wanted someone to do a pass on it. And I think what it was trying to do was use characters who were Muslim, who were living in Ireland, and who were Irish, or second-generation immigrant Irish, or were Irish converts to Islam, and Irish regular people, and Catholic people who interact and live in a small town together. And to make it into a fun film. And one of the reasons I got involved in it is because I remember the days, years ago, you couldn't put, especially in the 80s, either a film that was made here in Ireland or in the UK, you couldn't have an Irish character, unless they were an IRA guy on the run, or they were a bomber, or blah blah blah. And now we find with Muslim characters, they are always the terrorist. And so, we wanted to make something that didn't mention terrorism, except maybe as a joke, and was just about someone trying to open a factory. So, I felt that it was going to be something like an Australian low budget comedy film that came out on the 80s, rather than a Four Lions, that had come out in the UK, which was a much more sophisticated comedy.

So, it was an attempt to make something happy, that had stupid gags. So that was where it was coming from.

SSS: You also explored the growing presence of immigrants in Ireland in *Adam and Paul*. In your point of view, what are the main differences between the immigrants of the Celtic Tiger and the ones that reside in Ireland nowadays?

MO: One of the things is the different groups that have come to live in Ireland, so up to 2002, 2003, 2004, when we made *Adam and Paul*, it was largely Eastern Europeans that came: Polish, Romanians, Bulgarians. And so, they, especially Polish people, were very popular in Ireland because they were Catholic, they were very hard working, they had the reputation of being hard working, builders, blah blah, and that's what Irish people were for years. And I think that Irish people enjoyed looking at, "Oh my god, the Poles are doing what we did in England about 20 years ago!" So that was kind of fun. The ethnic groups have changed now. So, we have people coming in from Muslim populations coming in from either the Gulf States, as doctors and care workers in our hospitals, and one of our biggest doctor training hospitals in Dublin has a connection with the Gulf States, so there's a huge influx of people from the Gulf States to study medicine here every year, and then they go work in the Irish hospitals. And then you have business people coming from the Gulf coming in. And then you have workers who are from Pakistan, they come in as your average blue collar immigrant worker, working in the shops, and cleaning, and those kinds of jobs. And then you have Nigerians and people from Africa, and they come in as business people, or people seeking asylum. So, there's a whole mix now, whereas before you could joke with the Eastern Europeans, "What are you doing here? You don't belong here. You do belong here. Blah blah blah." Now there's just like levels going on, so you know, you've got your professional couple next door from Kuwait who are consultants in the local hospital, and are really wealthy, and they've totally beaten you in life. You know, this has been my thinking. And then you've got the guy who lives in the flat next door who works in the local shop and he's studying English. We've got loads of Brazilians here at the moment, they tend to be young people, party people, they work in all the bars in town. They tend to come here for a shorter period of time, they learn English, they have a lot

of fun. I think that the attitude towards people from outside, or who people who are second-generation, has changed hugely, and has become more complex.

SSS: What has changed in the country since *Adam and Paul*?

MO: Well, I mean, we've been through two major economic surges, and pretty much two collapses since. It's life in fast forward. So, like we had the very big economic collapse in 2008-2009, where basically the entire economy collapsed. Like it was a very, very, very scary, frightening time. It went on into 2010, 2011, 2012. It was absolutely awful living here because absolutely everything collapsed. We thought we were going to lose the Film Board, we thought we were going to lose all arts funding was going to be cut. So, it was really scary. And suddenly the country then bounced back really quickly, the economy bounced back really quickly. We had surpassed Celtic Tiger levels, except things were much more carefully dealt with. Like people weren't buying pink Champagne for each other's birthdays. People were more sedated about it. People also knew that; it comes and goes. There was no housing boom, for instance. So, everything was a little bit calmer. It was dealt with better. And I think resources were spent a little bit better on poverty. Well, not enough. So, anyway, then COVID happened, and the economy's blown up again. So, we're gonna have to start building again when this is all over. It's an interesting time. I'm involved in a couple of projects at the moment. I'm doing an adaptation of a Sally Rooney novel for Lenny (Abrahamson). So, we're doing her first novel. I'm not doing all of it, I'm doing a quarter of it. And it's in the same format, it's called *Conversations with Friends*, same format: 12 half-hour episodes and we're going into production with it in January. And that's a really interesting milieu to be writing about, because I've never really written about middle-class people. So that's kind of fun. And I'm also adapting a John Boyne novel. He wrote *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, which became quite a famous film. And I'm adapting a novel he wrote called *The Heart' Invisible Furies,* which is set between 1945 and 2015. Big gay story. It's a big gay story. It's a really great book. And that's going to be ten episodes, ten hour-long episodes, and that's with Lenny as well. And that's going to be for American television. So, everyone's moved to television these days.

SSS: How do you feel about that? I was going to ask you about your transition from the film *Garage* to the TV series *Prosperity*. It seems you are more involved with television nowadays. So, this question just came up: how do you feel about moving from cinema to television?

MO: It was kind of accidental. I got asked to do an episode, to write a pilot for this John Boyne adaptation, and out of that, and we decided – he decided. "Well do you want to be involved with anything else?" "Uh... yep!" And it just felt very natural. It wasn't me trying to – going, "Okay, I'm going to break into television." It's just far more of the work nowadays is in television. I mean, I think there might be five films made this whole year in Ireland. If that. I had a short film made this year, actually, that I wrote a script for. But it just feels like the natural curve of things is going towards television. There's a lot more ambitious storytelling happening there, at the moment. And it's where the budgets are.

SSS: So, this is actually the last question. It's related to diversity. Do you think the Irish contemporary cinema explores the diversity present in the country?

MO: I think it's trying to. I think one of the things the Film Board is going towards anyway is the 50/50 male/female breakdown, of directors, writers, and all that. And I think that's going to make a big difference, especially for the representation of women in cinema. It has been a fault of Irish cinema, that it's generally about men, and the female characters are not as well-rounded, or they're more objectified. So that's changing and there's been a lot of very important Irish female filmmakers coming through. And I think that possibly representations of race, representations of ethnicity around the traveling community, which are nomadic here in the island, has been poor enough, and we can do a lot better.