

Cultural Daily

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CALVARY – Sweet Surrender to Brendon Gleeson

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, August 6th, 2014

Brendan Gleeson serves up a tour de force performance as Father James, a humane and courageous priest who suffers unrelenting hostility at the hands of his parishioners, in the bitingly chilling and darkly comedic *Calvary*, the second feature from gifted screenwriter-director John Michael McDonagh. Gleeson co-starred with Don Cheadle in McDonagh's masterful freshman feature, *The Guard*.

As *Calvary* opens, Father James is hearing a confession. "I tasted semen when I was seven years old." A man's voice from behind the screen asserts how he was repeatedly raped as a child by the parish priest now long since deceased. The victim threatens to kill innocent Father James for these past sins. He offers Father James a week to put his house in order, at the end of which time he invites the Father to join him on the beach for a personal day of reckoning. It's an opening that immediately sucks you into the "Who's gonna do it?" mystery of it all.

Father James admits to his Bishop advisor that he knows the identity of the issuer of the threat. We in the audience, however, are left in the dark as to his identity. As we follow Father James on his daily ministerial rounds, we question who might possess the motive to commit such a crime. As it turns out, everyone in the parish seems in revolt of one sort or another against the Church. Will Father James choose to confront his accuser? How exactly will he prepare to face his personal Calvary? We wait and ponder his destiny as the suspense gradually mounts. We witness Gleeson navigate his grief — from denial, to anger, to bargaining, to depression, passing through each of the classical stages described by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross.

According to the Gospels, Calvary is understood as the hill upon which Jesus was crucified. It finds its filmic concordance here in "Knocknaree," a grassy prominence in County Sligo, Ireland, featured in the background initially, then later, menacingly in the foreground of the evocative cinematography by Larry Smith (*The Guard*, *Eye's Wide Shut*, *Only God Forgives*). Calvary, moreover, has come to mean any experience of intense mental anguish analogous to the suffering of Christ. "The notion of this man suffering for other people's sins somehow became very real to me," Gleeson reveals. "It is almost as if I was some kind of syringe, sucking the toxic poison of cynicism out of people, day by day, scene by scene ... It could be relentless, absorbing all that contempt and hate and poison ... You begin to understand, in a personal way, the notion of calvary."

A title card at the opening of the film reads: "Do not despair, one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume, one of the thieves was hanged." You may recognize the quote from The Gospels (Luke

23:39-43); however, it might also be familiar from Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*. Like Beckett's play, *Calvary* has a dreamlike, absurdist quality. McDonagh cites Luis Buñuel and Robert Bresson as cinematic influences and Jean Améry as his philosophical muse for the story. Améry was a Holocaust survivor intent upon keeping the subject of the torture of the Holocaust alive, so that it would not be lost for posterity as a abstraction. In *Calvary*, McDonagh makes visceral the wounds that fester in the aftermath of revelations of sexual abuses perpetrated by Church officials, with an ending that is emotionally jarring and destabilizing.

What is the price we pay when neither the Church, nor the Banks, do penance for the harms they have inflicted? Might we all stand to benefit from crucifixion of an innocent at this particular historic juncture? Is a symbolic sacrifice a requisite to rebuilding such institutions on more stable foundations from the ground up? These are some of the dark questions the film prompts one to consider.

Calvary premiered at Sundance Film Festival. I recently had the opportunity to speak with the wry and self-aware John Michael McDonagh in his suite at the Ritz Carlton Hotel, San Francisco. As *Calvary* was conceived in a pub, it seemed entirely fitting that McDonagh was kicking back with a cold beer. "Lots of my ideas are conceived in pubs," he confesses. "I find three pints, you get good ideas. Any more than that, it just devolves into a mess." Here's toasting to more of McDonagh's droll, provocative, and wonderfully messy stories.



Director John Michael McDonagh, "CALVARY." Photo courtesy of Fox Searchlight Pictures.

In what context did you first learn the term "Calvary?"

John Michael McDonagh: I was brought up in the Catholic faith. I was an alter boy like Mícheál, the little kid in the movie. I have been behind the scenes. It's like being backstage at a theatre performance. You see your priest getting ready, putting on the vestments and all those kind of rituals. I was aware the idea of redemption (which is big in Catholicism) and the fact that you're not supposed to break the seal of the confessional. The Catholic faith is a pretty dramatic. It's quite visually impressive. Above the altar in nearly every church is a massive crucifix, so you are seeing everything in widescreen, as it were. That was my background.

The members of Father James's parish seem to revile his presence, yet yearn for his counsel. Father James seems to have a whole parish of 'Doubting Thomases.'

John Michael: The parishioners still sort of go to Mass — but why? Just out of habit, really. My mother still goes to Mass. I'm not sure how big a believer she is anymore because she was really shaken up by the scandal. Up until about ten years ago, my father had gone to Mass every week of his life. He no longer goes at all. He is a seventy-six year old man who stopped attending church when everything started to come to the surface. So these scandals have really shaken faith to its core in Ireland.

How much is this film an indictment of The Church and how much is *Calvary* a story that champions Catholic virtues and the priesthood?

John Michael: Father James is a good man within a corrupt institution. I wanted to convey the idea that there have obviously been a lot of terrible priests, but to deny the existence of all the good priests would be pretty crass. If you get into an argument with a police officer and the police

officer beats you up, that doesn't mean all cops are bad. That's the way I approached it. Father James is well aware of how corrupt The Church has become. It is almost as if he is willing to sacrifice himself to try to make amends for everything that has happened. He has taken on board [responsibility for] everything, when he probably shouldn't. He probably should just leave!

The lead character is heroic in the end. I think he is heroic because of who he is as a human being, possibly more than the fact that he is a priest. He probably would have been heroic in any other walk of life. I think it is important that he is someone who didn't enter the Priesthood when he was fifteen or sixteen. He had an entire life before joining the priesthood, and that makes him a much richer person. It gives him moral authority.

You have priests who are mediating between warring couples, and yet what experience do they have of marriage or sex or relationships? They have none. Whereas Father James has struggled with alcoholism; he has seen his wife die; he has seen people suffering. It's the death of his wife that probably led him to become a priest. He's got a daughter. Their relationship is not contentious, but there are obviously a lot of problems there, which they resolve through the course of the movie. I think the fact that he has had a whole lifetime of experience before becoming a priest makes him much stronger than someone like his assistant, Father Timothy Leary (David Wilmot). That guy is willfully naïve. He's trying to brush everything under the carpet. Father James is not like that at all. In one scene, Father James asks Milo (Killian Scott), "Have you tried looking at pornography?" You know, a priest wouldn't say that, right? But Father James does because he's a human being.

Brendan Gleeson and his son Domhnall Gleeson have often acted in films together. Can you talk about the choice to cast Domhnall in this role?

John Michael: Domhnall is playing Freddie Joyce, the cannibalistic, serial killer. I was a bit worried that it might bring the audience out of the movie if they're thinking, "Oh, that's Brendan Gleeson, and that's his son." So I thought, let's try to make Domhnall as unrecognizable as we can by giving him that strange haircut and putting him in a jumpsuit. At the end of a screening in Berlin, one of my friends turned to me and asked, "Who did Domhnall Gleeson play?" So I guess we got away with it.

It's a very intense scene. There is a lot of very dark stuff coming up in that sequence. It unnerved crew members as they were listening for the first time. We go from a very wide set-up into this really close, intense encounter. It is a black hole right in the middle of the film, deliberately dead center. I am really proud of that scene.

After that point, I thought, this is going to steer the whole film in a somber direction. At Sundance, I discovered that the film would not only continue to get laughs after that sequence, but they were bigger laughs than I was expecting. I think that the audience is looking for any kind of relief, so they laugh a bit more than probably they should. Some lines that aren't that funny, get huge laughs. From there, Father James goes into the whole dance sequence (dancing with his daughter, discovering the doctor snorting cocaine in the bathroom), so that gives the audience some respite from what has happened just before and what's about to come.



Brendan Gleeson (Father James) and Chris O'Dowd (The Butcher), "CALVARY."

Photo courtesy of Fox Searchlight Pictures.

You created a whole world of eccentric, intriguing characters. What was your inspiration for the individual parishioners? How did you approach building this world?

John Michael: I'm a big fan of Preston Sturges and screwball comedies from the '30's and '40's. Those films always had big supporting casts with eccentric, funny, witty characters. So I knew that I wanted a big cast in that way. Once I'd had the lead character, pragmatically I thought, 'What does a priest do?' A priest tries to help people who have marital difficulties (so that's the butcher played by Chris O'Dowd and his wife, Orla O'Rourke), he ministers to the sick (so that's him going to see the ex-pat novelist on the island, Emmet Walsh), he performs the last rites (so that involves meeting the Doctor, Aidan Gilen, and the French Widow, Marie Josée Croze). These characters became the building blocks. There is always a rich man in town who wants to make donations to the Church to make himself feel better (Fitzgerald, played by Dylan Moran). So the characters came out of the work that the priest does. You don't want those characters to be too obvious. I wanted the rich man to go on a journey. However appalling he seems at the start, he actually does ask for help at the end. The doctor seems like one of the most confrontational characters in the movie, and yet at the same time, in his daily life on the job, he is saving people's lives.

I'm trying to make a movie that hopefully can be watched more than once – where the more times you see it, the more things you get out of it. I'm writing to amuse myself. I'm working on the principle that if it amuses me, it will amuse other people. I see a lot of art-house cinema, but I also watch a lot of mainstream cinema. So I'm not a snob, but I also tend to favor art-house films. So I'm aiming for people who just want intelligent cinema.



Brendan Gleeson (Father James), "CALVARY." Photo courtesy of Fox Searchlight Pictures.

This is the second time that you have worked with the extraordinary Brendan Gleeson (*The Guard*, *Calvary*). Your brother Martin McDonagh has also directed Gleeson (*In Bruges*). Do you and Martin have Gleeson on an exclusive contract?

John Michael: Martin is turning now towards making more American movies. But he did win an Oscar with Brendan, so maybe he'll bring Brendan back at some point. You always want to work with good actors — especially if they are your friends. It makes it a lot easier. I'm hoping that Brendan gets proper recognition this time around because I thought he should have gotten more notice last time for *The Guard*.

Gleeson describes your ingenious approach to directing; you deliver storyboards each morning with the call sheet. He observes, "You could read the comics, see what you were supposed to prepare. It made complete sense." Are you like Hitchcock in that every shot comes straight from the boards?

John Michael: Up to a point ... but I'm happier to allow the actors to change it. You read those stories where Hitchcock is basically sitting there bored because they are just reproducing everything that's in his storyboards. I had gotten into an argument with somebody on the crew when I realized they didn't know what we were about to shoot that day. I had delivered storyboards for the entire movie before we started shooting — which anyone on the crew could have studied. That really enraged me. I thought, I'll put the storyboards on the fucking call sheet so that when they wake up in the morning, everyone will see the shots. What I found was, people became more involved. Even the drivers who were driving you to set had seen the call sheet and

were discussing the shots: “Oh, that’s an interesting shot that you’re doing.” So the negative experience of an argument led to something positive. It became a more inclusive experience for everyone on the movie.

Your bio in the press kit has a hint of “Calvary” in it: “JOHN MICHAEL McDONAGH is married, disastrously, to a psychologically unstable Australian, though this imperfect union has produced two lovely children, Babs and Willie, both of whom are currently suing him for emotional neglect.”

John Michael: And I went to jail for killing a swan.

Indeed, it continues: “As a troubled youth, JOHN MICHAEL McDONAGH, was once incarcerated for accidentally killing a swan. His time inside was a happy one, however, as he brutally subjected the other boys to a tyrannical reign of terror. Upon his release, he worked in a pie shop, his weight ballooning to over eighteen stone, or five baboons.”

[Enormous laugh.]

John Michael: Some people think that’s all true! The only true bit is that I’m married to an unstable Australian.

Top Image: Kelly Reilly (Fiona) and Brendan Gleeson (Father James), “CALVARY.” Photo courtesy of Fox Searchlight Pictures.

“Calvary” Official Website

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