The Banshees of Inisherin (2022)

“Good luck to ye, whatever it is you’re fighting about.”

Major Credits

Writer and Director: Martin McDonagh
Cinematographer: Ben Davis
Music: Carter Burwell
Production Design: Mark Tildesley
Cast: Colin Farrell (Padraig), Brendan Gleeson (Colm), Kerry Condon (Siobhan), Gary Lydon (Peadar), Barry Keoghan (Dominic), David Pearse (Priest), Sheila Flitton (Mrs. McCormick), Jenny (Jenny)

Production Background

British-born of Irish parents, Martin McDonagh was an honored playwright before he became a filmmaker whose first feature, In Bruges (2008), also starred Brendan Gleeson and Colin Farrell. The film was shot on Inishmore, the largest of the three Aran Islands (the other two are Inishmaan and Inisheer) off the west coast of Ireland. Although the setting is mythical—there is no “Inisherin”—the time is quite specific, as revealed in a single shot: April of 1923. The sounds of the Irish Civil War can be heard across Galway Bay.

McDonagh wrote the entire screenplay before proceeding to storyboard every shot. Jonjo’s Pub was built on site for its scenic location, the interior bar constructed to create separation between the film’s protagonists. Most of the secondary cast had worked with the director before in his stage productions.

Padraig’s miniature donkey Jenny, like Colm’s border collie, functions as an extension of her owner’s character (stolid vs. restless) but also almost certainly as a cinematic allusion to the long-suffering donkey in Robert Bresson’s art house classic, Au Hasard Balthazar (1966), which follows a donkey’s life through a series of insensitive and abusive owners. The New York Times reviewer described its final scene as “one of the most affecting passages in the history of film.”

Cinematic Qualities

Every element of the production—set design (the interior of Colm’s cottage, particularly the hanging objects), acting (the poignancy of Padraig’s confusion and Dominick’s halting “proposal”), costuming (Siobhan’s handmade knitted clothing)—contributes to the film’s aura of authenticity despite its outrageous premise.

1. Cinematography: Beginning with the opening high angle view of the green landscape, Ben Davis employs long shots to convey both the barrenness and the beauty of the island. Notice as well the numerous shots through windows—Padraig staring at Colm inside his cottage, the donkey and horse peering through Padraig’s window and door, the two scenes inside the confessional—that paradoxically convey a sense of both connection and isolation.

2. Music: Carter Burwell’s score combines the instrumentality of Irish folk songs with the solemnity of sacred music.
Questions for Discussion

1. Although it sometimes seems like an ancient folktale or a biblical allegory, the story is actually rooted in a particular time and place. How does the film’s historical setting deepen its resonance?

2. Like Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, the film may be accurately described as a dark comedy, maintaining an absurd premise while filled with comical dialogue but also marked by sustained foreboding. (*A banshee* is a supernatural creature that foretells death.) Think of it for a moment as a romantic comedy: “breaking up is hard to do.” How does this tone affect your experience of the work?

3. McDonagh dramatizes the critical moral conflict—art vs. “niceness,” legacy vs. quotidian happiness—at the precise middle of the film in the extended pub scene where a drunken Padraig confronts his estranged friend. Whose side are you on in the argument that ensues? Which character represents the film’s moral center?

4. Does the film offer a commentary on the “crisis of masculinity” that critics and social thinkers have elaborated in the decade preceding the film’s release? Similarly, does the story reflect the political polarization that threatens contemporary global harmony?