

# PLANET HOLLYWOOD

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I HAD SPENT many years working in the theatre. Mostly I acted with amateur companies but with the occasional foray into the professional world. I tried my hand at direction and administration, scripted some material for sketches and even adjudicated at a very low level. The world of film never even entered my wildest dreams. I had lived through the years when Hollywood was king of the silver screen, in the sophisticated sixties I joined the ranks of those who enjoyed the continental cinema from France, Italy, Spain and the Eastern European States. Later I discovered the world of Japanese film and enthused over homemade 'Mise Eire' cinematography. When Television and an increasingly Irish involvement came on the scene, I still saw myself as someone who would remain on the outside of the action, content to sit in a plush seat amid the consumers of popcorn.

Now and again I would notice ads in my local papers proclaiming 'Open Casting Call' at a venue close to me. One short notice caught my eye, a Donegal casting company requesting acting talent from the North-West to attend at a Sligo hotel where a London based film company PFJ Productions, were seeking to fill parts in a short film to start shooting at the end of the summer. As usual I was slightly tempted but decided that, even if chosen, I would be a mere extra or, a fate worse than death, a face on the cutting room floor. I promptly forgot all about it.

Some weeks later I was surprised by a call from London on my home phone. A voice from the other end checked out that I was the one on the line. He introduced himself as the writer/director of the PFJ film set in the Sligo Area. He told me that all parts but one had been filled by auditions in Sligo and London and that my name had been given to

him by what he called 'reliable contacts in Sligo'. He would like to meet me if I was interested in taking part when he next visited Ireland. I agreed to meet him but as yet had no stars in my eyes.

Two days later the postman dropped a large brown envelope through my letter box. It contained a copy of the script of a film entitled 'To Catch a Crow'. A covering note read. 'Please find enclosed a copy of the script following our conversation earlier to-day. The role you may be suitable for is 'Old Mikey'. As you can see he appears throughout the film. I will be in Sligo from Saturday, 18th September so I'll call you soon to hopefully arrange a meeting if you are interested in playing a part in the production. The description in the 'auditions' is meant as a guide only, the main point being that he impresses the jury.'

Saturday brought another phone call, this time from a local hotel. I picked up a photocopy of the poem suggested in the script—'He reproves the curlew' by Yeats, put on my most theatrical jacket, and headed down town. Shay Leonard was waiting for me in the coffee dock and after a short chat and an 'americano', he conducted what I considered a benign audition. He seemed impressed by my possession of the poem and had me read it to him. We discussed my background in theatre and I felt confident that the part was mine. Like most aspects of life, a snag arose. He asked about my cycling ability as 'Old Mikey' was to ride an ancient, squeaky bicycle in the opening scene while the end credits had him 'moving long a quiet country road, whistling to himself. We track out to reveal that he's cycling on a shiny, brand new, top of the range mountain bike.' I had to admit that I had not cycled a bicycle for well over twenty years and, whatever about the squeaky bike, my cycling abilities were more than a little rusty. We discussed the problem with the gravest seriousness but in the end my promise that I would take a 'crash course' before shooting started convinced him enough to offer me the part. We shook

hands, he promised me he would be in touch soon and I set off to borrow an old 'high nelly' from a neighbour and enroll my eight-year-old grandson as a cycling coach.

After a shaky start and more than a few mishaps, I discovered the cycling equivalent of my 'sea-legs', whatever that is. While no longer worried about falling from the saddle in front of the cameras, I still felt a little nervous of what lay ahead when I received my first call sheet dated Monday, 27th September. I read; Breakfast 07.30, Unit Call 08.00. Character Number 5 'Old Mikey's schedule continued with - Wardrobe. 8.00 a.m. Hair/Make-up, 8.30 a.m. On Set 9.a.m. Lunch for 40 people was down for 1p.m. with a curt note saying, 'ready for 12.30 p.m. please'. There was no mention of a finishing time for the day.

I arrived in time for a large breakfast, eating much more than I normally would at home. Not a great idea before a 9 a.m. start. I was introduced to one of the most unmanageable bikes to appear on any screen anywhere. There was a wobble on the front wheel and the back one had a mind of its own. My stomach with its full Irish breakfast was no help and some dodgy time was spent going up and down the Ballintrillick road. I was filmed from all angles while the bike got used to my riding style and the camera crew were as pleased as I was when we had the scene in the can. By 12.30 p.m. I was ready for lunch but went easy on the food in case my tummy and the bicycle would repeat the morning's movements. To my relief, my afternoon session was a sit-down one in Gorevan's pub where we drank pints, played cards and kept a desultory eye on the t.v. screen until the newscaster announced that an English film crew would be shooting a feature film around the area and inviting locals to an open casting session in the pub. Even old Mikey was prepared to try for a part.

From the first day on we were a happy united group, actors, experienced professionals and neophytes alike. Together with the expert crew, we gelled as if we had been working together for years. Our director

and the executive producer saw to it that we were all part of one big, happy family. My fear of the unknown had gone by the time I sat down for my breakfast on Day 2. A wiser 'Old Mikey' was more sparing with the sausages this time round. By the time the last reels were in the can, we had seen some 'rushes' and the wrap party had concluded, 'Old Mikey' felt he was halfway to L.A.

It was a year before any definite news reached us. Editing, sound mixing, music recording, sound track and suitable effects had taken longer than expected. The summer had almost ended when the good news arrived, an invitation to attend the world premiere of 'To Catch A Crow' at the Empire, Leicester Square as part of the BBC Short Film Festival, Wednesday 27th September at 9 p.m. We were entered as an Ireland/U.K. entry in what was listed as a British and International competition.

Old Mikey parked his bike and took the plane from Knock to Stansted. After a reunion with other crow catchers in the Regent Palace Hotel, we wended our way to the Empire wondering what was in store for us. It was not exactly a red carpet welcome and our names did not appear in lights. The festival itself was in big letters on the theatre marquee and we were heartened at the sight of hundreds of people clamoring for tickets. We felt important to have been sent the precious passes to the stalls. Inside in the dark we impatiently sat through 'Matinee', 'Swingers' Serenade', 'Max Goodman's last Film', 'F.A.B.!', 'The Flick and Where to Find It,' all of which were enthusiastically applauded by their supporters. I have absolutely no memory of any of them, good, bad or indifferent. Our row of seats had eyes only for the last film of the session. Nothing in my life prepared me for what came next. An enormous 'Old Mikey' cycling along the Ballinrillick road filled the large screen. I was so startled at seeing myself like this in the centre of downtown London that my companions had to restrain me from diving under my seat. When

the initial shock passed, I relaxed enough to enjoy the film. The applause at the end exceeded anything that had gone before. We wondered if this was a true reflection of audience opinion or just a general appreciation of the entire programme.

We need have had no worries on that score. When the awards were announced that night 'To Catch A Crow' was proclaimed the winner of the Red or Dead Audience Award and some twenty red or dead watches were distributed amongst our company. Old Mikey would now be able to tell the time in Tokyo, Melbourne, Lagos or Lima and should never have to wind his clock again. Even better was the reaction to the film. The following summer, Sky Movie Max announced its U.K. and Ireland Satellite T.V. Premiere of the award winning film, 'To Catch A Crow'. Ten repeats were shown between May and the end of July. R.T.E.2 screened it on its 'Debut' series. In April of the next year I was euphoric to read a glowing tribute to the film in 'The Ticket' supplement of the Irish Times. Critic Donald Clarke had written a highly critical review of 'The Shipping News' before ending with a reference to our movie. 'On a more positive note,' wrote Clarke 'one must congratulate distributors Buena Vista International for continuing to seek out promising Irish Shorts to release with its features. In selected cinemas, 'The Shipping News' will be shown with the crafty comedy, 'To catch A Crow'. It justifies the ticket price all by itself.'

No phone calls arrived from Universal, from Pinewood, nor even from Ardmore Studios so after a week I was resigned to a short career in films. But the phone did ring before the month was out. My Dublin-based daughter was involved in the planning of a film in that city and had seen 'Catch'. When she mentioned that 'Old Mikey' was her dad, she was asked to invite him to audition for a part. I jumped at the chance and presented myself at an upper room high over Grafton Street. I had great expectations, considering that a family

member would give me an inside track. When I knocked at the door she opened it with the lines, 'Hi Dad, good luck with the audition. I'm off now. See you at Bewleys in about an hour.' I faced a room full of strangers who quizzed me about my acting background and asked me to read from a typed script. To my amazement I was asked if I knew an Irish ballad called 'BooLavogue'. To my hesitant 'sort of', I was asked to sing it 'out of key'. My mind went back to my youth and my own father singing it out of key.

I sang a verse about Father Murphy and the Rebellion of 1798, glad that I was not asked to sing in tune. My audience looked at each other and after a few pleasantries I was allowed to go.

Another week passed before I got an invitation to attend a reading of 'The Marriage' in the St Andrew's Lane Theatre. I was handed a script and asked to read the part of Fr. Buckley, the priest at the wedding reception. I thought I was holding my own with a bunch of brilliant professional actors. However, my equilibrium was put into jeopardy when the priest had to sing Johnny Denver's 'Annie's Song', fortunately again off key. Those present laughed when the song ended leaving me wondering whether the laugh was for Fr. Buckley's performance or in derision at my poor effort.

Fr. Buckley passed the test and I was called to a hotel on Bray's waterfront for filming. I located to Dublin where I was picked up by mini-bus each morning at 6.30 with other actors and crew for breakfast from 7 a.m. Lunch was from 12.30 p.m. with 'hot tea and coffee available all day'. The food was even better than on the Sligo set and we were worked really hard before transport returned us to the city. Again I was pleased to be accepted by the other cast members and treated as if I was an old hand at movie making. 'Annie's Song' was to cause a problem for the film makers and myself later. My schedule for Day Four stated that the singing scene would be shot next morning. Before we broke up I was

summoned to the Director's office. 'We have a problem with your song,' I was told. 'Johnny Denver's people were in touch. They heard that R.T.E. Television are likely to broadcast 'The Marriage' and they are demanding a fee well outside our budget. We have tried to get back to them but L.A. time is so different we have to keep trying to-night. Resurrect 'Boolvogue' but keep working on 'Annie'. Don't worry. Leave that to us.'

I was so chuffed that Johnny Denver's people were involved in a bargaining situation over me that I neglected to work on either song. The nerves only began in the morning mini-bus. I could not imagine many singers wondering which of two totally different songs they would have to record for posterity. Before breakfast I was told to relax; Johnny Denver's people had been most reasonable and had agreed on a nuggetary fee that would not break the bank. I was able to give my out of tune best to 'Let me give my life to you, let me drown in your laughter'. Film West was later to honour the great moment. In its review of the Galway Film Fleadh, its critic wrote 'This short has everything – drugs, sex and a side-splitting rendition of 'You fill up my senses' by the attending priest.' I have never forgiven her for neglecting to name the actor!

The shoot was completed within a week and we were blessed with sunshine very day. On one of my breaks from filming I strolled through the hotel grounds still in costume. I was approached by a middle-aged American couple, a husband and wife who were having marital difficulties during their Irish trip. I had acted in clerical character during the initial part of the conversation so I felt the pretence must be kept up when asked for advice. I did my best and they seemed pleased enough to walk away hand in hand. Maybe I had missed my vocation.

RTE kept their word and 'The Marriage' went out as part of the Short Cuts Irish Film Board competition, being one of the five winners to qualify. Skymovie Max also carried it. The film had a successful

run around the Irish Film Festivals but still no offers came from Hollywood. Both Old Mikey and Fr. Buckley, with other local actors, felt honoured in their home town when Sligo's Gaiety Multiplex screened both 'To Catch a Crow' and 'The Marriage' in a programme under the title 'A Pair of Shorts'.

Eventually a Hollywood connection was made, well, sort of. A camera assistant from Los Angeles moved to New York where she established Double A Films. Appropriately, she picked Sligo as the location for her film 'Coney Island Baby'. The local papers carried the usual advertisement for open casting in the same hotel in which I had met my first director. Half the population of the NorthWest seemed to be milling around the foyer and the aspirants were in and out of the audition room as quickly as penitents for Christmas Eve Confession in days gone by. My interview was equally as brief. I handed over my c.v., had a short chat, posed for a snapshot and was out the door. Two days later I got a note reading 'Call back. Be there early to familiarise with script.' This time I was offered the part of 'Stall-holder at Market', not a major role but an opportunity to play opposite the star of the film.

Filming was taking place all over the Sligo area and pictures of American and Irish film stars were appearing in the local papers. When I began to think I had been discarded I got a call to discuss my costume. I was told to present myself in a small, north Leitrim town at a given time, day and location. No previous rehearsal was needed and I was handed a page of script together with the other details. I duly presented myself to find a perfectly laid out street market with all sorts of things for sale set up for my scene. Tables of domestic and farming products, electric equipment, animal feeds and a clothes rack from which I was to sell a shirt to the star after some haggling. I was given coffee and sandwiches in an adjacent bar and told to wait for my call. I sat, script in hand, as I drank and ate until the woman who had dealt with me came in. 'I'm sorry,' she said

'but the scene before yours is taking longer than expected. I have to go and sort something out for them. Could you ever keep an eye on the set for a little while. I don't want it disturbed in any way.' I took over from her and tried to get into character for the part. I was doing well, nearly selling some products to inquisitive farmers, when I was hailed from across the street. A parent of a pupil I had taught before retiring from teaching came over to ask, 'Is this what you are at now?'

The scene needed only two takes despite the lack of rehearsal. When I came to view it on D.V.D. I was surprised how short it was. I missed the premiere at the Galway Film Fleadh which was its only outing in Ireland. Later I heard that, like the other two films, 'Coney Island Baby' also collected awards on its travels.

My last call to take part in a film came when I was having a Saturday morning lie-in. The phone rang to say that the choir that was to turn up for a shoot in downtown Sligo had not turned up in sufficient numbers. Could I possibly get a dress suit on and help to make a group look like a crowd? I had fifteen minutes before the cameras rolled. I was at the scene about twenty minutes later, all dressed up and ready for action. An hour later I was still waiting to face the cameras. When I saw this short film later very few of the choir appeared in the shot as they marched down a corridor but I think I noticed the toe of my left shoe on the screen.

'Chalk Up', despite good reviews, is not going to do much to further my career in the world of film. Eventually, I did get to Universal Studios. I took the tour, was mugged by King Kong, almost savaged by Jaws, nearly drowned by a flash flood and was in great danger of losing my life in an earthquake. No contracts were offered to me and not even one of the multitudes present asked for my autograph. The lot of an ageing film star is not always a happy one.