



Empire State

Independent documentary feature *Home* is a Dubliner's personal journey through his adopted city, New York. SEAN MCCARTHY talks to filmmakers DAWN SCIBILIA and ALAN COOKE about this unusual project, which makes its EU premiere at this year's Galway Film Fleadh.

LADY LIBERTY'S BARE heels are restless, but her majestic gaze is fixed forever beyond the city she has never seen. Now, from the metropolis behind her, producer/director Dawn Scibilia and writer/co-producer Alan Cooke emerge with their independent feature-length film *Home*. *Home* sees Dubliner Cooke wandering about Manhattan reflecting on his recent immigration to New York City, exploring nostalgia, the journey and the concept of home. The film includes a nifty balance of interviews with ordinary New Yorkers, immigrants, and a host of prominent New Yorkers. Woody Allen, David Amram, Armand DiMele, Pete Hamill, Elaine Kaufman, Fran Lebowitz, Frank and Malachy McCourt, Alfred Molina, Mike Myers, Liam Neeson, Drew Nieporent, Rosie Perez, Colin Quinn, and Susan Sarandon all share their great love for the city they themselves now call 'home'. Following a private screening at Goldcrest in the meatpacking district of Manhattan, I caught up with the filmmakers.

SEAN: Why did you choose to write a story about New York, rather than any other city in the world?

ALAN: Well I moved to NY in 2001, and I'm still here. The width and depth of experiences that I encountered as I lived here were unlike anything I had encountered before. I was affected by New York in so many ways, it felt to me like I was in a river of

humanity, knee deep in cultures, energy, history and change. Writing my thoughts and feelings on the journey became a necessity. I feel all interesting pieces of creative work, whether it be a poem or a painting, come from an intense need to make sense of the world you are in. It was also my first real extended period away from home in Ireland and I started to change and grow. I wanted to record that growth and my relationship with New York. I had not lived in any other city as long as this, and I feel you pass a benchmark in time and suddenly you feel like you are on a journey of real living.

As a director and producer, what was it about Alan's story that made you want to make this film?

DAWN: I liked the idea of someone asking questions and searching for meaning in their life right now, questioning the state of the world right now and the meaning of a place. What is New York? What is Home? I liked the idea of the journey, where am I going? What am I doing here? It was also interesting and challenging to me as a director and a native New Yorker to try to see New York from the perspective of a newcomer. The idea of trying to mesh my New York and Alan's New York was appealing. I was intrigued by Alan's truthfulness, and I knew he would go the distance with this film. In the end all of these explorations made me understand and embrace this place even more.

Talk to me about the process of shooting *Home*. How did yourself and Dawn start, and how did it end?

ALAN: I met Dawn when my wife and myself were renting out an apartment for our landlord to get a rent discount! I told her I was a stage actor and writer, and that I was toying with the idea of writing a solo theatre piece about New York. We clicked in our creative aspirations, and met the next day in a local cafe. We laid out our fundamental philosophies on what makes a creative work special, we agreed that in the world today there is too much information and not enough soul. We were not really sure how we were going to make this, but Dawn intrigued me and assured me that it could be done on a digital camera. We both had an intense interest in New York in different ways; she in her passion for capturing the changes here, and me trying to understand my place in this city. I guess our creative merging began that day and we went and shot from the hip, with no script and trusting our gut. I feel that has been a crucial element in this process, whether it was shooting me walking across the Brooklyn Bridge, or talking to a homeless person, it was always with a sense of both of us being led and piece by piece, gaining inspiration, and following our hearts. As the project proceeded we felt stronger-minded with more clarity about how the project was shaping. At the end we worked in such unison, we had almost created a secret language in the way we understood our creative goals. I don't think I have ever had such a relationship on any creative project, I think it could have only happened in New York.

***Home* makes its EU premiere at the Galway Film Fleadh this year. Is this significant to you, and if so, why?**



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Interviewees Liam Neeson, Susan Sarandon, Alfred Molina, Malachy McCourt, Frank McCourt (with Angela pictured in background); writer and co-producer Alan Cooke.

We chose these people based on our gut instincts of them having the same passion and conviction about New York and the concepts we explore in the film as we did.

DAWN: It couldn't be more significant – this must be the way it is meant! And this is how the entire film was made, by way of chance and synchronicity! It is the place where *Home* started. Alan met his wife in Connemara. While living there, they decided to move to New York. So for us, this has all come full circle. In the film, Alfred Molina comments on the concept of the journey by saying that it is a circle. Pete Hamill brings up Homer: 'If you think of a book like the *Odyssey*, it's not about going off to go to war, it's about coming home; it's about the long circle home'. So for Alan, perhaps he's completing his circle in a way. Also, I find it interesting and fitting in a way that this film may have to come to New York via Ireland! I just have this huge smile on my face. I can't wait to get to Ireland! I'm bringing two cameras!

Is *Home* a love story, Alan, a tragedy, or what?

ALAN: I guess it is a love letter! I mean to New York, to the people of New York and to ourselves. There were some very difficult times here for me, but we always preserved and I think the film is a testament to our determination to make a piece that connected with human beings. The world is becoming more and more fragmented, and emotion is being replaced by information; we feel *Home* is a poem to the people who see it – not just in New York, but hopefully all around the world. I feel it makes a connection with all of us, in that we are all on a journey and we all face the same dilemmas. If we can change how people feel when they come out of the cinema, maybe to stop and feel the air on their face or look across to a stranger and see a connection, then we will have succeeded beyond our heart's desire.

A host of prominent New Yorkers, including

Woody Allen, Alfred Molina, David Amran, Liam Neeson and Susan Sarandon speak on camera in *Home*. How did you choose and secure your interviewees?

DAWN: Luck? Synchronicity? Perseverance? All of the above probably. We chose these people based on our gut instincts of them having the same passion and conviction about New York and the concepts we explore in the film as we did. As we brainstormed names there were certain people we knew would do it and share what they did with us, we just knew. Getting them was the challenge. We said to each other, if we can just get to these people in person, and they see our passion for this project, they will do it. They will trust us, and they will share with us. And that's what they did. And we will always be thankful for that. Almost all of their agents said no!

Alan, you are an actor and writer from Dublin. Does possessing an acting skill make any difference to you when you write for the big screen?

ALAN: I have been an actor for 10 years, doing a lot of stage work. I think having being in front of a live audience helps in understanding the sound of language, it is a performer's job to tell the truth, and if you have an ear you can feel when the audience knows you're not doing your job. I guess it did help with my writing, I had the concerns of my heart but also trying to reach out to the world through words. When I would sit on the subway or on a park bench I sometimes wondered: 'Will this ever be read or heard by anybody?' but always I was compelled to do it for the sheer need and joy. My acting experience definitely helped in recording the narrative. Being able to use words is my trade, so it

was a joy to actually perform your own words. I guess a non-actor would have to test his words a lot more. An actor proves or disproves a piece of writing in terms of its truthfulness, so I guess it might have helped me be a better self-editor.

Why did you become a director?

DAWN: I'm still asking myself that question! Just kidding. I think I said that because it feels especially difficult now in America. As a filmmaker I sometime feel as though I'm in mourning. Judging from the news coming from Cannes this year, and the state of independent film distribution in America lately, it seems that America is just too tied into the idea of a 15 year-old female demographic. I feel that limits the stories I want to tell, which would appeal to adults. I became a director because I can't do anything else, I don't want to do anything else. Unfortunately, as David Lean has said, 'I would pay them to let me do this.' I'm sort of like a junkie. As a kid, like everyone else on earth, I loved going to the cinema. I wanted to know more about the process of making a film, so I decided maybe I should study it in school. In the neighbourhood where I grew up, which was blue-collar working class, the adults I was surrounded by didn't have time to find out about these things, so I'd never even heard about them. I hadn't any sort of education really, I dropped out of school at the age of 14, but I chose to study at NYU, who miraculously accepted me. At NYU I saw *Les Quatre cent coups* (*The 400 Blows*), I guess that was my first taste of the drug. When I saw a film I liked as a kid, I would rent it from the video store and bring it home for the family to watch. They would make fun of me when I became angry at them for not paying attention to the important moments in the film. 'You can't listen to the film from the kitchen.'



We wanted to make the film alone, we wanted to be *left* alone and feel secure in knowing that we always had total creative freedom

I would say! This is terribly corny, I suppose. Why am I a director? I guess it's just as simple as because it makes me happy. I feel lucky to have found it. I know a lot of people who aren't happy with what they are doing with their life, and many who don't even have the slightest idea what they want.

***Home* is a poetic documentary film. Why did you write a documentary as opposed to any other form?**

ALAN: I guess what we planned took this form out of necessity; we wouldn't have had the resources to shoot a feature film with a cast, crew, etc. — the idea of just a two-person crew appealed to us. I think we're doing something new in that it's neither a documentary nor a feature film, it's a hybrid. It's almost a throwback to the literary wanderers, like Whitman and Joyce, who captured the cities they lived in with words — but we had the advantage of having a camera to do a lot of the work. I wonder what those writers would have done if they had the technology we have today.

Is it difficult, do you think, for women to source investment for such an intricate project as is *Home*?

DAWN: I don't like to think of the way men and women directors are perceived by the industry. Maybe I'm in denial, or naïve, or just determined — I don't know. I think for anyone right now it would be difficult, or even impossible, to get financing for this film. Maybe I'm wrong. I think documentary is still the 'D' word to many. Although it's been hot in recent years it seems that this is only the case if the film is sexy, controversial, political, violent, or exploitive. I just thought that pitching the idea for this film would be a total waste of time. 'Let's just do it ourselves' is what I told Alan. I think in a way, we wanted to do it alone, we wanted to be *left* alone and feel secure in knowing that we always had total creative freedom with regard to content, process

and timeframe. I knew we could do it alone because of what they taught me at NYU, and because of what the French New Wave did. And I knew the city. The number one reason not to seek financing was that film festivals are now willing to screen digital video.

Are you writing something new right now?

ALAN: Not at the moment, I have been thinking about a trip across the states, it is a romantic dream I guess a lot of Europeans have, just getting in a car and unwinding your soul to the rhythm of the open road! I would like to write a piece based on that journey; hmm... I don't think I'm the first person in the world to have that idea. I guess *Home* has given me the confidence to want to explore more in writing; I just love the utter simplicity of a pen, paper, my thoughts and the world. But my other main goal is to return to the stage again, so I might combine the two. I guess it's a wait-and-see thing. It's been a long year.

You have worked with numerous directors including Martin Brest, Michael Ritchie, and Patrice Leconte. What, in your estimation, makes a crap director, as opposed to a decent one?

DAWN: I think there are few directors, period. I suppose a crap director is a director for all the wrong reasons. A crap director is perhaps seeking only fame or feeding the ego. The proof is always in the pudding. And perhaps what we perceive to be a crap director is actually a director in a situation in which they have lost creative freedom, or who has an awful editor. You have to care. Connecting yourself with the material is also a good idea. Knowing and understanding what you want and what you're trying to say and then having the determination to execute that. Knowing where to put the camera, what lens to use and when to cut. Being patient with your actors. Knowing when to hold on and what to let go. Always telling the truth,

never settling for a scene or line of dialogue that has more potential.

To where — and how far — do you want to take your film?

DAWN: We've always wanted to take *Home* beyond festivals. By hook or crook, we want as many people as possible to see this film. That's partly why we made it. We also made it for ourselves, in that we wanted to make a piece of cinema that we would want to see. In our early talks we always said we wanted to give back with this film, to share, to inspire and to heal. So everyone should have a taste! And we've always wanted *Home* on the big screen. I would love to see this on a New York screen. This would be great playing on a loop on the Sony Trinitron in Times Square! There it would be, interacting with the city itself as it goes about its dailyness.

Would you make this film again, beginning tomorrow, if you had to?

DAWN: Yes, I would want to experience all of this again. The process of going out without a shot list, or even a location list, and coming home with great footage to cut with is definitely worth doing again. Getting to know my city more and falling in love all with it over again was a wonderful experience. Having such a successful collaboration with Alan was otherworldly and rare, I'd do that again. Meeting all the wonderful citizens of this city, and touching them in some way by asking them for their story, connecting with them and exchanging with them the experience of life right now is worthy of another round. And who wouldn't want to meet Susan Sarandon, Liam Neeson, Woody Allen, Mike Myers, Alfred Molina, the McCourts, etc... for the first time all over again? I wouldn't change a thing — I'd do it all the same way. ❖

***Home* will premiere at this year's Galway Film Fleadh. www.homethemovie.com**