

Belfast

Kenneth Branagh, United Kingdom, Universal Pictures, 2021

Jenny Alexander

Belfast is a 2021 film written and directed by multiple award-winning actor, director and writer Kenneth Branagh. It is a deeply personal coming of age story, based on his own experience of growing up in the sectarian filled and violent streets of Belfast during the 1960s. Branagh's family left Belfast for England in 1969 to escape the violence of The Troubles,

and he did not visit the city again until 2011. He reflected in an interview with NME ahead of the film's release that in returning to Ireland he felt he had an "identity crisis that was unresolved".

He continues:

"Ireland and the Irish define so much of themselves in relation to home – it needs to be settled in some way. And I think making this film is a chance for me to go

home in a sort of more honest way.” (Bradshaw, 2022).

Branagh’s intention was to make a film which explores the influence home has on your identity, and he has done so with immense success.

Belfast follows the life of nine-year-old Buddy, played by newcomer Jude Hill, documenting his fledgling experiences and relationships and the way they are shaped by a hometown rapidly engulfed in conflict. Buddy’s dedicated and hard-working parents (played by Jamie Dornan and Caitriona Balfe) grapple with financial hardship and whether they should move their family away from the only home they have ever known in order to escape The Troubles. Charmingly, Buddy is more concerned with acing his long division so he can sit next to the girl he wants to marry in class and trying to remember which road the shouty Minster said was good and which was bad. Buddy’s inability to distinguish which road is good and which is bad is emblematic of the film as a whole - that sometimes the distinction between “good” and “bad” can be difficult to make. It is a ubiquitous dilemma throughout the film, especially present in the narrative

of Buddy’s parents’ decision about whether or not to leave, and is the beating heart of what Branagh intends to say about Belfast during The Troubles or indeed anywhere which is both a site of conflict and somewhere people call home. A home can be both good and bad, full of joy and of sadness, somewhere to celebrate and to mourn. *Belfast* demonstrates that all of these vibrant, pulsing things are what shape our lives, and our character.

Centring the film from a child’s perspective, Branagh positions *Belfast* as a reflective and explorational text. If this was not clear enough from the film’s description and trailer, there is no room for doubt just a few moments in. The film opens with a series of establishing shots which track and reveal a path through the peaceful streets of modern-day Belfast. Aerial shots briefly tour the City’s landmarks before the camera weaves its way through residential areas. All the while the screen transitions from full technicolour to black and white, connoting a narrative shift from the modern day to the late 1960s and the early days of The Troubles in Northern Ireland. The Troubles was a 30-year

period of conflict which lasted until the signing of The Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Although The Troubles officially escalated in the late 1960s, the roots lay in hundreds of years' worth of nationalistic, sectarian, and political tensions. *Belfast's* focus on the child's perspective of The Troubles provides the audience with an insight into the conflict in a new way. To further present Buddy's view of Belfast, Branagh keeps the camera low and utilises more unconventional camera angles to represent a perspective of events from the eyeline of a child. There are even a few examples of 360° point-of-view shots which allow the audience to be fully immersed in the action alongside Buddy, and witness them directly from Buddy's perspective. Throughout these scenes the audio is cleverly blurred together, and the unnerving sounds of alarms, traffic, and shouting evoke the same feelings of disorientation and fear that Buddy faces.

Furthermore, *Belfast* uses its own narrative structure as another means of exploring and evoking the sense of reflection. Despite following a linear narrative of the escalating violence, Buddy's parents' dilemma around

whether or not to stay, and Pop's failing health, the structure of *Belfast* is not necessarily based on these events. Instead, it centres around Buddy's experiences and/or reflection of snippets of his life during this formative period. In doing so, Branagh has created a film and a story about Belfast's violent legacy, and the fear and turmoil which engulfs anyone within the path of such violence. However, it is also a film which demonstrates how negative experiences within a place are only some of many memories which influence your sense of identity in relation to your home. For Buddy, the joy of watching your grandparents and parents lovingly dancing to the latest record, and waking up to the gift of a Thunderbirds costume on Christmas Day are just as influential as getting caught in the middle of mass riots.

A major part of the success of *Belfast* in balancing these two conflicting experiences lies within the dedicated performances from the cast. Newcomer Jude Hill is charming and charismatic in his role as Buddy. From beginning to end he is utterly captivating, presenting a wide-eyed and inquisitive view of the world. It is hard

not to fall in love with a genuine and kind-hearted character, who in one memorable moment steals a box of washing-powder for his mum in the middle of a mass looting because “it’s biological”.

Caitríona Balfe and Jamie Dornan give a beautifully balanced and convincing portrayal of a couple whose marriage is constantly tested; both by their financial situation, and trying to do right by their sons, but they do it with grace and conviction. They manage to make a performance, which includes transitioning between scenes of screaming matches and smashing plates to genuine moments of deep affection, seem natural. However, for me the stand-out performances of the film come from Judi Dench and Ciarán Hinds as Buddy’s Granny and Pop. The chemistry between the on-screen couple, and their grandson, was beautifully evocative. With loving and yet brutally honest grandparents like them, it is no wonder Buddy frequently seeks out their advice. There is something particularly special about watching their understated and yet powerful gestures of love and moments of affection, especially whilst they

contemplate their lives together as Pop’s health declines throughout the film. Overall, the cast bands together, and delivers a performance where you could be forgiven for forgetting that they are performing rather than living their characters' lives.

My only criticism of the film comes in the form of the alternative ending. In these scenes we see Branagh playing an adult Buddy (or indeed himself) arriving back in Belfast for the first time since 1969. After asking his confused tour guide to take a detour from pointing out the cities most famous landmarks to turn down his old street, he meets his old neighbour who reassures him that Belfast has and always will be his home. With his reassured knowledge he walks down his old street with the memory of his loved ones, represented by the film’s cast. Personally, I prefer the film’s original ending, which sees Granny seeing her family off and telling them not to look back with the end dedication “For the ones who stayed. For the ones who left. And for all the ones who were lost.” In this original ending, I feel that the subtlety of the message that you do not have to physically belong to a place for it to be

considered your home is more befitting. This message is so intrinsic to the core of the film, and Branagh's ambition to use the film as a way to explore his own sense of identity in relation to the city of Belfast. But that is the joy of an alternate ending; you have a choice in whether you can watch it and consider it the end of the story.

Admittedly I had been anticipating the release of *Belfast* since the first trailer hit the screens, so I was unsurprised by how much I enjoyed it. Whilst I had anticipated the film to be reflective, I had not anticipated it to have the potential to generate such a strong sense of nostalgia, even for those who have not personally experienced a similar situation to Buddy and Branagh. By evoking a sense of reflection and

remembered moments to explore ideas of identity and belonging, and doing so in such a personal way specifically in his hometown of Belfast, Branagh has created a film which anyone can relate to. Whether you relate to the full story, or just small elements of it, it is nearly impossible to watch *Belfast* and not consider how the place you grew up and the small everyday moments with those you consider your family have shaped you.

Bibliography

Bradshaw, P. (2022) Kenneth Branagh: "Making 'Belfast' was a chance for me to go home", NME, 13th January 2022, [Online].
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