

Interview: Director Danny Boyle Goes Back to ‘T2 Trainspotting’

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CHICAGO – Rarely does a filmmaker have a long or influential enough career to revisit a story and characters that they’ve explored in a previous film. Oscar winner Danny Boyle has both qualifications, as he again takes on – 20 years after its 1996 release – his classic film “Trainspotting, which is elegantly titled “T2 Trainspotting.”

The boys of the original “Trainspotting” have reunited for the outing, portrayed by Ewan McGregor, Robert Carlyle, Ewen Bremner and Jonny Lee Miller. Middle age angst is the theme, as each of the characters are going through some life changes, but the spirit of their larcenous souls are still intact. The first film launched the uber-careers of Ewan McGregor and director Danny Boyle, and the re-exploration of the energetic style and quick-cutting scene work are back in the new story as well.



Jonny Lee Miller and Ewan McGregor in ‘T2 Trainspotting,’ directed by Danny Boyle

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Releasing

Danny Boyle skyrocketed after “Trainspotting,” which was actually his second directorial feature. It was followed up by an extraordinary run, including “A Life Less Ordinary” (1997), “28 Days Later” (2002), “Sunshine” (2007), the Oscar Best Picture “Slumdog Millionaire” (2008), “127 Hours” (2010) and “Steve Jobs” (2015). Coming back to “T2 Trainspotting” was the result of many requests he received over the years, paired with the right timing and script (by John Hodge).

HollywoodChicago.com sat on an interview roundtable with the director – other reporter inquiries are marked QUESTION – and learned about

going home again, in a cinema sense, 20 years later...

HollywoodChicago.com: Why are you going back to this story at this point in your career?

Danny Boyle: You're partly to blame, is the real reason. Most films that I do, whether successful or not, just fade away. They have their moment in the sun, then they are gone. 'Trainspotting' did not, and especially with journalists. So whenever I launched a new film, I'd end up talking about 'Trainspotting.' I'd actually joke about it. 'Yeah, I'd like to do a sequel but the actors look too good...they're always at the spa...too much moisturizer to portray hard drinkers.'

HollywoodChicago.com: Did these constant reminders create the desire for you to do a sequel?

Boyle: Well, a joke is a joke is joke, but it became a self-fulfilling prophecy. The source novelist, Irvine Welsh, did write a sequel to the book called 'Porno,' which is set ten years after the first film. We did have a look at that, but we couldn't get the script right. I know when I read something, there is a moment, when you know whether it can be a film or not. I just knew we'd get killed if we made the original sequel script, because I didn't feel it was worthy of the first film.

If we just rehashed it, which is what that script was doing, the audience would say 'f**k off!' The people in the first film meant something to them, wouldn't the sequel be a cash-in, and wasn't the first film intended to be anti-commercial? After putting it aside, I simply forgot about it.

HollywoodChicago.com: What re-invigorated the sequel idea?

Boyle: The 20th anniversary of the film was on the horizon, and we thought we should have one last go at it. We went to Edinburgh [the setting of the original film], and we sat around – me, John Hodge [the screenwriter], Irvine Walsh and some of the producers – and we talked about it, I think to further convince ourselves that it wouldn't work, but at least we could say we had a go with it.

Suddenly, in our conversations, it became a bit more personal. It was about aging and ill behavior over time, and suddenly we had a concoction where they do repeat the elements of the first film, and you get a sense of them reaching for it – as men do – into the glorious past. But also we got the part where they can't quite sustain it anymore.

HollywoodChicago.com: Was there a circumstance from the first film that became apparent, that could affect them 20 years later?

Boyle: Well, Tommy died in the first film, and there comes a reckoning, and it was about that reckoning as well. It could be the same, but different. They also look different, so even cutting from the first film to now, that's a story. Whether you're the president or a homeless guy, 20 years is 20 years. I loved that about it, and that's why we went back to it.

HollywoodChicago.com: There were two films that come to mind that did the same thing... 'A Man and a Woman: 20 Years Later' and 'Texasville,' the sequel to 'The Last Picture Show.' Did you look at these films as examples, to understand what you would or would not do?

Boyle: No we didn't. There are great sequels, of course, and there were a couple I thought of, but didn't watch – the Michael Apted documentary series, 'Seven Up,' and then recently 'Boyhood' by Richard Linklater.

Less well known, but familiar in Britain, was a TV series called 'The Likely Lads' [1964]. It was about two working class men from industrial Newcastle. The show mesmerized Britain, because it was about the impenetrable working class accents of these characters – which hadn't been heard before – and it was hilarious. It was a one-off series, but 12 years later they brought them back, same actors. One of them had moved upward to the middle class, and one remained a unionized working man. It was amazing, and really affected me. I thought, 'you can do that?' It was the same, but different. So it was that TV show, more than any other film.



'Arthur's Seat' in Edinburgh, in 'T2 Trainspotting'

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Releasing

QUESTION: Did you consider today's audience, one that wasn't born or doesn't necessarily understand the impact of the first film?

Boyle: No, you can't do that. I didn't think about what it would be like for someone who hadn't seen the first one, I couldn't approach the new film that way, but in ignoring it, it's kind of a mind f**k. 'Well, what if they don't know that, or don't know that? [laughs] Have they seen bits of it on YouTube?'...everybody knows the toilet scene, for example. It was a minefield, but I had to ignore it, and hope that people who didn't know the first film would find the new story interesting enough to be driven back that that first one.

HollywoodChicago.com: Sort of like a reverse order?

Boyle: Yes, we designed Spud's character to discover his writer side, to build in a way to watch the films in reverse order. You can watch the sequel first, then go back to the other one. How effective that would be, I don't know, it wasn't for me to judge as a director. I just had to create the story I was working on.

QUESTION: What were you saying about the nostalgia of men? The women characters weren't looking back at all, but the men characters were allowing their past defined them. What this a theme?

Boyle: I think women assess time passage much better than men – because of their biological clocks – and they are much more realistic about measuring out time, whereas men tend to hang onto things. They'll do it under the guise of sports obsession, for example, they may be showing love for their team but actually what they're doing is trying to be 20 years old again. We tend to think like that all the time, until maybe we get to 70? [laughs] The film becomes a study of that really, the aging of the women in the film is very quiet, and the film emotionally moves toward recognizing that type of aging and time assessment.

The film is also post-industrial, through the changes that have occurred in Edinburgh, and with that there is a certain tradition that has changed – you've got to move on from it, whether you like it or not. The main male characters emerge differently, they can't keep reliving the past. Women acknowledge the biology of their time, and dance through the beat of that drum...whereas men just drum.

HollywoodChicago.com: Your stage work is rooted in Shakespeare...how do those mother plays of the English language inform your approach to directing all stories, and do all stories have elements of the Bard within them?

Boyle: Well, he was pretty impressive. [laughs] I never attached myself to the so-called comedies. The play would start and not be funny, and you realize there is three hours to go. But he is a huge force in English language story telling. The four main male actors all have some Shakespeare in their experience, and it is something that comes out of British acting. That breeding gives you confidence as an actor. If you can make Shakespeare work – especially those comedies [laughs] – there is a sense of performance achievement.

One of the traditions of film acting is a sort of mumbled realism. Be minimal, and do less. 'Even less than that.' But this film and the first one is not like that, because they are big performances, and they all stepped into that bigness again. They are almost like stage performances, chaotic and theatrical... that's why American films like British villains. They'll actually play a villain in all the big villainy. They know how to turn it up.

QUESTION: You directed '28 Days Later...', which changed my perspective, and produced the film '28 Weeks Later...' Will you eventually do '28 Years Later...'?



Director Danny Boyle, 20 Years Later

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Boyle: You see, this is what happens in these interviews. [laughs] And the next time we meet, you'll ask, where is that sequel? Alex Garland, who wrote the scenarios for the first two films, has an idea for a third film. I don't know what timeline it would follow, but it would be clear that it is a third part. It's a good idea, but whether I'd direct it comes down to that moment when I read the finished script, as I mentioned before. Then I will know or I won't...there is a clarity that comes from that moment.

For example, people I knew never understood why I took on 'Slumdog Millionaire.' I had to go to India for a year and all that, and everyone was saying that no one would watch it. But I knew in my heart I wanted to do it, and conversely I know when I don't want to do it.

HollywoodChicago.com: The film is set in the mysterious town of Edinburgh. What feeling of character does being there give the story?

Boyle: It's amazing, isn't it? It medieval and Georgian, two cities built on top of one another. There is a mountain in this ancient city, called 'Arthur's Seat,' that they go running up in the film – for the most part people don't know it, because it is rarely shown – and it's just this natural monument in the middle of town. Walk up it, and see the whole city beneath you...it is an amazing place.

At the same time, there are the industrial docks, now being revived, that in the 1980s were a major source location for heroin use – it once had the highest rate of HIV infection in western Europe. The original stories that Irvine wrote, that became 'Trainspotting,' had their origin from that location, and that despair.

QUESTION: You have a signature and aesthetic that is thread throughout your films when I watch them. From your point of view, what it a 'Danny Boyle film,' and what characteristics do you think they have personally?

Boyle: I really can't answer that question purely, some of it is affected by what people have said back to me. Once, a French journalist told me that all my films are the same. I said, 'Excuse me? I work hard to make them different.' What she meant was that in my films there is a character that faces insurmountable odds, and they overcome them. But I thought that might be true, but you need certain factors for drama, and you need to overcome them. I do think there is hope and healing at the end of my films, that we'll leave the film feeling like that.

In my view, there are two things about the art form of film. One is momentum, a forward movement and motion. You'll sit down for 90 minutes, and you'll be so propelled with the film. I believe in that. The act of projecting a movie, before digital, was momentum, as it turned in the projector....it was f**king hurdling around at a huge speed.

HollywoodChicago.com: What do you think is the other element in the art form?

Boyle: Time. Movies are about time. You can take that momentum and manipulate time as well, or you can deliberately slow it down, stop it, and start it again. There is no other art form that does that type of manipulation in that way. And the act of being in the audience contributes to it, even though it's changing, the audience member commits to the time line that you're presenting. I hold those two elements close to me as I affect my films.

"T2 Trainspotting" opens in Chicago on March 24th, nationwide on March 31st. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Ewan McGregor, Robert Carlyle, Ewen Bremner, Jonny Lee Miller, and Anjela Nedyalkova. Screenplay by John Hodge. Directed by Danny Boyle.

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