

Bad Luck of the Irish Was in Belfast During ‘71’

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Sectarian violence and terrorism were the norm in the days of the late 1960s and early ‘70s in Northern Ireland. Often mistook for a religious clash between Catholics and Protestants in the region, the conflict was actually about keeping the industrial region either part of Britain or part of Ireland. The extreme nature of the conflict is tensely played out in “71,” the year when it all boiled over.

The area devolved so quickly that British troops had to be called in – further escalating tensions – and the story of “71” focuses on one such soldier, stuck in the war zone. The film doesn’t take any sides, preferring to emphasize the dishonor of the clash between the enemies, and the “double agents” who caused more harm by taking advantage of the need for infiltration and subterfuge. The story also takes a personal turn, and that is where it’s a bit weak, using some war movie cliches like the improbably kind citizens and the son that waits for the soldier back home. But the film is also transporting, to a time in which politics – which is nicknamed in British history as “The Troubles” – created enemies out of brothers and sisters.

The year is 1971, and the street war in the Northern Ireland city of Belfast has turned for the worst. The nationalist Irish Republican Army (IRA), made up mostly of Catholics, are fighting to join a united Ireland, while the loyalists – made up mostly of Protestants – want to remain under English rule. The British army is sent in to quell the violence, and a soldier named Hook (Jack O’Connell) gets lost on the streets.



A British Soldier Named Hook (Jack O'Connell) in Belfast During '71'

Photo credit: Black Label Media

His strange journey leads him to a boy named Billy (Corey McKinley), a miniature street fighter who provides him a safe haven. When an extreme act of calamity separates him from the boy, a badly injured Hook is taken in by Eamon (Richard Dormer) and his daughter Brigid (Charlie Murphy). However, getting the soldier into the right hands to save his life might prove to be difficult.

First time director Yann Demange does an amazing job of setting the scene, and creating immediate historical tension. The initial segments that show regular Irish citizens expressing their resounding animosity on both sides is very unsettling, because it mirrors what could happen anywhere. There is no mysterious or exotic locales in that street fight, merely rows of National Trust housing with Irish lads and lasses spouting foul invectives and throwing rocks.

Jack O'Connell (also starring in last year's "Unbroken") brings a bit of vulnerable grit to his British soldier named Hook. His background is of indifference, in the sense that he joins the army to change his life, not fight his own people. His reactions to the variables of the situation is one of understandable perplexity – he represents the outsiders to the conflict, not quite realizing what's going on.

The screenplay by Gregory Burke provides a street level perspective. What was really surprising is that it expresses the duplicitous nature of some participants, working both sides of the fence to exchange information and curry favor. The story also emphasizes the milk of human kindness, from a tough talking boy forced into early manhood to a demurring Irish lassie, who helps to stitch up the injured soldier.



Fighting on Belfast Streets in '71'

Photo credit: Black Label Media

The romanticism of citizen kindness does lend itself to the seen-it-before atmosphere of war movies, and even though its a bit grittier, it isn't much different than that type of scenario in a 1940s WWII movie. Putting Hook at the right place at the right time is good for drama, but not good for originality. Although the history lesson in the film is vital, there could have been more of it, and less of the solider pining for his family, while being tended by innocent war victims.

As St. Patrick's Day weekend arrives, it's best to remember that Irish heritage includes periods of distress – like any other culture – along with the celebration. Raising a glass to Irish-ness, includes the memory of victims in a conflict that could have best been avoided.

'71' continues its limited release in Chicago on March 13th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Jack O'Connell, Sam Reid, Richard Dormer, Charlie Murphy and Cory McKinley. Screenplay by Gregory Burke. Directed by Yann Demange. Rated "R"



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