

Maze

Produced by Jane Doolan, Brendan J. Byrne, Rory Gilmartin, Simon Perry, and Sean Wheelan; directed by Stephen Burke; screenplay by Stephen Burke; cinematography by David Grennan; edited by John O'Connor; music by Stephen Rennicks; production design by Owen Power; starring Tom Vaughan-Lawlor, Barry Ward, and Martin McCann. Color, 92 min. A Lightyear Entertainment release, <http://lightyear.com>. Now available in Blu-ray and DVD from MVD Entertainment Group, <http://mvdvisual.com>.

The Maze prison, located outside the town of Lisburn, County Down, eight miles from Belfast, is now disused, but at the peak of the Troubles in Northern Ireland it was regarded by the British authorities as the highest-security jail in the United Kingdom. Prisoners from both sides of the paramilitary divide in the Six Counties, Nationalist and Loyalist, were held there on long sentences, and the Northern Ireland Prison Service deemed its formidable enclosure—surrounded by eighteen-foot-high concrete walls and fifteen-foot-high barbed wire fences—to be escape-proof. A daring and ambitious escape plan devised by IRA inmates proved resoundingly otherwise, giving a boost to Nationalist morale that had been devastated by the fatal hunger strikes of 1981. That 1983 mass breakout, the biggest in British history, is the subject of Irish filmmaker Stephen Burke's feature film *Maze*—a taut and claustrophobic behind-bars drama. Written and directed by Burke, the film follows the stealthy planning of real-life inmate Larry Marley as he infiltrates the warders' security zone to gather intel needed to spring dozens of his comrades from their cells and enable them to escape through the front gate.

Burke chooses to zoom in on the emotional relationships among staff and inmates of the prison, rather than to focus on the complex political conflict outside that caused the men to be incarcerated. His plot follows the escape plan from its inception, in the months after the blanket protests and hunger strikes ended, to its conclusion in September 1983, when thirty-eight Republican prisoners wearing prison guard uniforms made a break for the gate in a hijacked delivery van. Marley (played by Tom Vaughan-Lawlor, star of the highly regarded Irish crime drama *Love/Hate*) faced more formidable obstacles to his escape plan than high walls, barbed wire fences, and the lookout towers that surrounded the prison. His Officer Commanding (OC) in the H-Block (Martin McCann) receives warnings from senior IRA figures on the Army Council in Belfast that they won't support the plot, given the high risk of their being intercepted—or the further blow to morale if it fails.

The scale of the breakout Marley's team has in mind cannot be undertaken without substantial logistical support beyond the prison walls in order to help the escapees dis-

appear upon exit. But the cunning Marley gradually persuades the paramilitary powers-that-be in Belfast that he can make it work. He volunteers for orderly duty in the off-limits area of the prison where the warders have their offices—a treasonous collaboration with the enemy, in the eyes of fellow IRA prisoners who aren't yet aware of his long-term plan. Unbeknownst to them, there is method to his apparent quiescent behavior, and Marley uses his time with mop and broom to infiltrate the offices of the prison staff and gather information from desk drawers and filing cabinets on pass codes, warder schedules, and weak spots in the security system—all as a means of developing a viable escape plan. He gradually fosters an unlikely cordiality with a surly Unionist warder, Gordon Close (Barry Ward), a composite character based on several prison staff members duped by the wily prisoners.

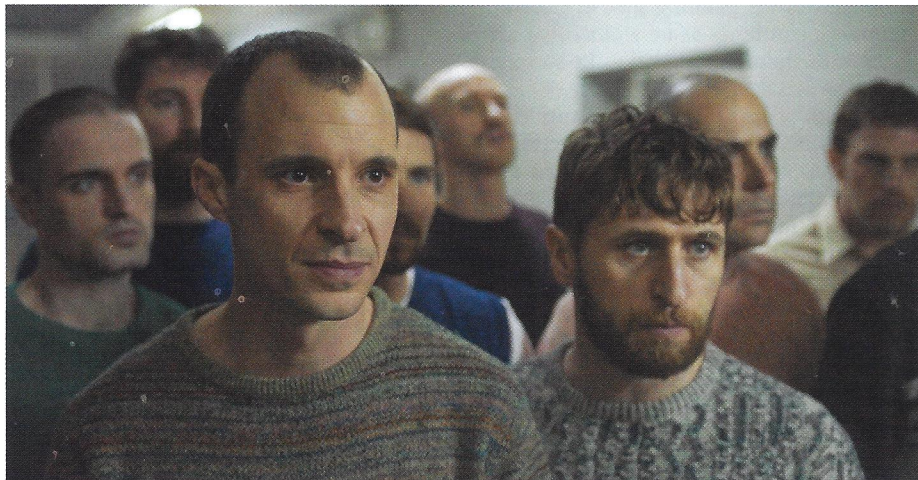
Close despises the IRA and all that it stands for, and his loathing increases after an attempt is made on his life, by an IRA gunman, while out on a weekend shopping spree with his wife and young daughter. Terrified by this incident, his wife takes the child to London, refusing to return and demanding that he quit his dangerous job. Gordon is left alone and isolated in his heavily fortified home. At work he becomes more vulnerable to Marley's affable overtures that wear down his brusque demeanor over numerous cups of tea, cheery banter, and meticulous swabbing of his office floor.

Much of the drama in standard jailbreak films lies in the classic exit via a tunnel, dug with utensils and tools stolen from the prison canteen and workshop, with the attendant risks of discovery and betrayal while trying to disguise the noise of excavation and dispose of the excavated earth in the exercise yard (John Sturges's 1963 epic *The Great Escape* being the obvious benchmark to guide all that follow in this genre). All of Marley's planning and execution takes place above ground, and the stealthy pace of his

cat-and-mouse game with the warders will demand from viewers the kind of patience that the long-term incarcerated must have in abundance to endure their sentences (the real-life Larry Marley was serving a ten-year term in the Maze for weapons possession when he planned the escape).

But such patience is well rewarded. The slow but intriguing sparring match between the film's main protagonists (Vaughan-Lawlor and Ward give excellent performances) allows Marley and his co-conspirators access to enough classified information from his oblivious custodian to seize control of the command center of the H-Blocks, strip the guards of their uniforms, pack the stolen delivery van with thirty-eight prisoners disguised as prison staff, and head for the exit. The filmmakers wisely roll credits fairly promptly after the prisoners' escape, as (Spoiler Alert) the slipshod coordination of the mass exodus on the outside by IRA volunteers during the actual events negated the meticulous planning carried out by Marley's team on the inside. The majority of the prisoners were soon recaptured.

The Maze prison break exists in Northern Ireland's political memory in the penumbra of the more cataclysmic events of the hunger strikes that preceded it. Previously addressed in fiction films—Terry George's *Some Mother's Son* (1996), Les Blair's *H3* (2001), and Steve McQueen's *Hunger* (2008)—and in documentary format—Brendan Byrne's *Bobby Sands: 66 Days* (2016) and Margo Harkin's *The Hunger Strike* (2006)—these diverse and harrowing accounts of the IRA protests in the early Eighties give ample background to understand the prisoners' circumstances in the Maze prison in the wake of these events, and the need to lift their esprit de corps by plotting a breakout. Burke's *Maze* screenplay trusts its audience to glean without overexplanation the tone of those prior events, as well as the despair of the IRA prisoners in the aftermath of the hunger strikes that left ten of their men dead from starvation.



In *Maze*, IRA prisoner Larry Marley (Tom Vaughan-Lawlor, left foreground) is involved in a potentially violent encounter between IRA and Loyalist prisoners in their cell block.

The deaths of the hunger strikers drew worldwide attention to the plight of the blanket men, but their protests had ended in a standoff in which neither side could claim victory. The great sacrifices made had gained little, and at a terrible cost. Margaret Thatcher's government held its position of intransigence, refusing to formally restore the political prisoner status demanded by the IRA prisoners that had triggered the protests (she insisted they be treated as common criminals and murderers), and had previously been accorded to the IRA and Loyalist prisoners alike until the mid-Seventies. But in the months following the October 1981 abandonment of the hunger strikes, government concessions were made that met all but one of the prisoners' five demands—the right to refuse to do prison work. This final concession was granted in 1983, after sabotage of the prison workshops, and Marley's audacious jailbreak, brought an end to chore duty.

It may seem a cruel joke played by Her Majesty's Prison Service on these long-term inmates to name Northern Ireland's highest-security facility "The Maze"—underlining the futility of any attempt that might be made by them to escape. But the site of HM Prison Maze (to give the jail its official title) was called the Maze long before it came to notoriety in the late Seventies as the place of detention for hundreds of violent paramilitary prisoners.

The prison's name is anglicized from the Gaelic *An Mhaigh* meaning "The Plain." The Royal Air Force used the flat well-drained land of the Maze as a landing strip for short-range fighter aircraft in the Supermarine Seafire and Spitfire categories during WWII. The airfield fell into disuse after the war, but when the mass incarceration by the British government of civilians suspected of paramilitary activity began in the Seventies, the wartime huts were repurposed as detention centers for hundreds of people from Northern Ireland's Nationalist communities.

These prisoners were initially accorded Special Category Status, a designation that allowed them to wear their own clothing rather than prison uniforms, receive frequent family visits and food parcels, freely associate with fellow inmates, and decline prison work duty. The British government revoked this status in March 1976, and detainees sentenced for violent offenses after that date were officially treated as common criminals. In protest at losing what they regarded as political prisoner status, the inmates, by then housed in the new high-security H-Block buildings, embarked on a series of escalating confrontations with the prison staff. Initially, they rejected prison uniforms, then refused to leave their cells for slop-out and showers. The standoff resulted in the blanket protests (denied their own clothing and refusing to wear prison garb, the protesters wore as garments the blankets from their bedding) and, ultimately, the Hunger Strikes.



Prison warder Gordon Close (Barry Ward) thwarts an IRA assassination attempt in *Maze*.

Stephen Burke shot his film in Ireland and Sweden in 2016 on a meager budget of less than two million dollars, giving *Maze* an authentically claustrophobic atmosphere, from the tightly framed camerawork and confrontational close-up shots by David Grennan, the unsettling score by Stephen Rennicks, and the use of actual prison interiors shot in the recently decommissioned Cork prison in the South of Ireland. Significantly, Belfast filmmaker Brendan Byrne, who made the highly regarded BBC documentary *Breakout* about the same escape, was co-producer—bringing a great deal of in-depth knowledge to the project.

Maze divided opinion in the North of Ireland on its release there in 2017. Unionists predictably denounced it as IRA propaganda that glamorizes violent criminals and plays down the serious injuries inflicted on two prison guards during the escape. The broader Nationalist community saw it as a tense real-life thriller that revels in the ingenuity of the escape planners and gives a brief victory to the underdog.

The DVD issue of *Maze* includes an intriguing oddity—an earlier twenty-eight-

minute short titled *81* by the same writer/director, Stephen Burke. Made in 1998 in mock-documentary style, *81* features a French news crew shooting in Belfast's working-class enclaves on either side of the religious divide, in order to try to understand the basis of the conflict that separates ordinary families who are in many ways very similar, yet vehemently and often violently opposed to the "Other." Burke's film is set (the clue is in the title) in the year of the fatal hunger strikes, and he incorporates news footage of the funeral of H-Block prisoner Bobby Sands, the first of the ten hunger strikers to die, to trigger polarized opinions from the Unionist-Protestant Campbell and Republican-Catholic Friel households in Belfast about the status of the prisoners and the rights and wrongs of both sides of the struggle. Lalor Roddy, who has a minor role as a Loyalist prisoner in *Maze*, plays the head of the Catholic Friel household. Tackling this fraught subject with a light touch, Burke's short film goes a long way to answering questions about the sociopolitical intransigence of Northern Ireland that are beyond the remit of his prison-centered *Maze*.—Michael Gray

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