

The Craic

THE BEST IN IRISH ARTS, MUSIC, THEATRE, BOOKS AND FILM

Barry Ward and Tom Vaughan-Lawlor in *Maze*.



Smashing H-Blocks

The *Maze* (also known as *Long Kesh* or the *H-Blocks*) was once thought of as the most secure prison in Europe, but as the gripping new film *Maze* shows, that was until the daring real life breakout of 38 republican prisoners in 1983. CAHIR O'DOHERTY previews the tense prison break film, starring award winning Irish actors Tom Vaughan-Lawlor and Barry Ward.

If you don't know the story of the *Maze* prison breakout in the North in 1983 it can be summed up like this: After the national trauma of the hunger strikes had ended, the British government believed the spirit of the IRA prisoners in the *Maze* (or the *Kesh*, as they called it) had been broken.

Ten hunger strikers had passed away without their demands being met (apart from a renewed global focus they brought to their plight). It seemed to some commentators that their deaths had been for nothing.

What good was dying for Ireland if you gained nothing in return, critics – especially Unionist critics – asked? But as writer and director Stephen Burke reminds us in *Maze*, his new film about the aftermath of the hunger strikes and

the galvanizing effect they had on some of the incarcerated republican prisoners, what you see in Ireland often depends on where you stand.

Maze arrives later this month about a week before the Brexit deadline in the U.K., making this an ideal time to reflect on the long shadow of The Troubles. In case you weren't there, or weren't born yet, it was a bitter three decades long war that blighted the lives of everyone it touched.

Young and old, nationalist and unionist, Catholic and Protestant, believer and dissenter. As *Maze* reminds us, over and over, it was the sheer intimacy of the conflict, with the opposing sides often sharing and even living on the same streets, that made it so heart-breaking. Like the loyalist and republican prisoners being held together

in the same prison block, and like the prison wardens and the prisoners they guarded, it could seem that everyone was caught up in a giant unwinnable stalemate.

In *Maze*, award winning Irish actor Tom Vaughan-Lawlor, 42, (best known for *Love/Hate*) plays the real life Larry Marley, a committed republican desperately looking for a way to make the sacrifices of his comrades mean as much to the world as they do to him. Morale inside the republican section of the *Maze* is at its lowest ebb after the deaths of the hunger strikers and the apparent victory of Thatcherism and the state.

But Marley is a man on a mission. Volunteering to do cleanup work, he is in reality crafting an elaborate escape plan, mapping every inch of the

prison and even counting the time it takes (and all the turns the prison van makes) to create a map of the whole place.

In the beginning his breakout plan is dismissed by his operations commander Oscar, played by Martin McCann. It's too risky, the place is too impregnable, and the loyalist prisoners are certain to come to the aid of the guards during any republican breakout attempt, he reasons.

But Marley is adamant he's doing the right thing and so he continues to quietly plot the big escape without Oscar's knowledge, in the off chance that if there is a change of mind from the leadership, he'll be ready.

He is given unwitting help for his plans from the suspicious prison warden Gordon Close, played by fellow



Tom Vaughan-Lawlor in *Maze*.

Dubliner Barry Ward. Close doesn't trust Marley but he doesn't object to his presence mopping up the prison floor, or the cups of tea Marley brings him to get into his good graces.

Vaughan-Lawlor is outstanding as the steely but determined Marley, giving a fantastic interior performance that telegraphs to the audience (but not to the authorities) what his blank faced character is actually thinking and doing.

Ireland keeps on producing world-class screen actors, and Vaughan-Lawlor (who appeared last year in Marvel's big budget *Infinity War*) is the latest example of a talent that will rise all the way to Oscar glory.

The RADA-trained Dublin actor is matched onscreen moment by moment by his fellow Dubliner Ward, who plays the formidable prison warden Close. Close has a blind spot that Marley identifies early on: he refuses to think of any outcome he doesn't like, and that puts him at a disadvantage when Marley's plans go into operation.

Ward is best known for his star turn in *Jimmy's Hall*, Ken Loach's film about religious oppression in early 1930's Ireland, and in *Maze* he goes head to head with Vaughan-Lawlor in a screen acting prize fight.

Marley and Close's run-ins are among the most compelling in the film, with both men embodying the tragedy of the wider society that has made them. But by refusing to despair and by making use of every chance that he spots, Marley clearly has the advantage.

Close makes no effort to understand the man whose motivations he doesn't respect or share. That's his biggest mistake.

When he tells Marley that his friends starved themselves to death for nothing, calling them fools, Marley listens but does not respond. Minutes later when he's on his own he tears his cell apart in fury, though.

"We're doing this," he vows to his fellow inmates, meaning escape. "I don't know how but it's happening."

For Marley breaking out isn't just a plan – it's an expression of self-respect. Opportunities soon present themselves.

When loyalist prisoners attempt to stage an orange march through the republican prisoners' quarters, tensions predictably escalate. But Marley sees the opportunity that's hidden behind the insult, and when a riot ensues (which he suggests) the loyalists are taken off the republican ward, making the block an IRA stronghold.

In the outside world Close survives a murder attempt, but then his wife leaves him, taking their daughter to London to escape The Troubles. Taking security precautions in his own home, he installs iron bars that echo the prison he guards.

"Maybe you're a prisoner like the rest of us," Marley tells him, but Close isn't prepared to follow the logic to its conclusion yet.

At this point Close still believes the work he is doing is in service to the greater good, even with a broken marriage, an empty home and an assassination attempt behind him. Resisting the enemy, which is the men he guards, is what gives his life meaning.

The dance between the two men, as one tests the other, is fascinating to watch. Marley looks passive but finds endless ways to get the information he needs to fuel the mass breakout. He uses everything he sees and does to plot each step of his projected plan.

In fact he's often a one man vendetta, driven by the ghosts of his past and by his commitment to his mission, which can be described in one word: freedom.

Maze doesn't sugarcoat how complex and harrowing the escape and its consequences are. Some critics will grouse that it elevates one side over the other, but the film is not here to re-litigate The Troubles. Instead it sets its sights on convincingly showing us how this real life breakout was conceived and carried out.

It helps that *Maze* has assembled such a stellar cast of Irish acting talent to tell its tale. Getting out of prison and staying out of prison are not the same thing it shows us, and the film arrives at the perfect moment to remind us of just how far we have all come and how much danger a return to this broken era would mean.

Maze opens March 22.

Top Films for Kids Fleadh

BY CAHIR O'DOHERTY

YOUNGER sibling of the Craic Fest, the Kids Fleadh set for Saturday, March 9 offers the best of new Irish short films with a major emphasis on animation and fun.

This year the fleadh will screen the Oscar nominated Irish animated film *Late Afternoon*, directed by Louise Bagnall with the acting talents of Fionnula Flanagan and others.

Another highlight will be Limerick-born director Patrick O'Mahoney's stop motion charmer *Under the Weather*. This unique Irish short film begins on a seemingly normal day for poor Ed, a young man living a life of quiet desperation, until he discovers a secret room, a crazy old man and a sinister conspiracy that changes his life.

A New York screening is a major showcase for the Irish director, who first came to prominence via a YouTube animation account where he brought Transformer toys to life.

"They were the only things I had at the time that would be good for stop motion," he tells the *Irish Voice*. "Then they became the most viewed animations per month on the site, so it kind of took off from there."

"They did so well back in the early days of YouTube, especially with them coming out of Ireland. Eventually I realized it could be something I would like to do as a career."

O'Mahoney went to college in Cork and eventually found an opportunity to study in London. "I just kind of rolled with it. I was making my final film in university and one of the guys that helped me ended up offering me one of my first jobs. And then it kind of carried on from there."

Under the Weather got its start when he tried to imagine what the world would be like if you could actually see a person's true feelings. Not the things they want you to see, but what they were actually feeling inside.

"It's kind of based around a feeling I had when I was a teenager, that no matter how happy I was, no matter how good things were, I was always kind of aware that there was always a

cloud hanging over me," O'Mahoney says.

That boy with a cloud idea spiraled into the main character Ed, who is constantly being rained on by a little personal cloud that follows him everywhere.

"I took it a step further then by saying, well, if you're constantly being rained on what would your job be?"

Working in a big anonymous plant where water is otherwise scarce is where Ed ends up, because of course it is.

"In Irish comedy is often people are often waiting for the worst thing they can imagine happening, which is very fatalistic and funny and that's exactly the kind of humor I gravitate towards," O'Mahoney explains.

As is often the case, there is a girl who lives opposite Ed but the attraction, if there is an attraction, is so understated that it barely registers on either of them.

"What I wanted to avoid to avoid was romantic clichés," says O'Mahoney. "So if anything the girl is more of a neighbor. She's also a manager of company Ed works at so she's she's above him. I remember someone suggesting what if the two of them got together and had a kid, her sun and his rain would make a rainbow and I was like no!"

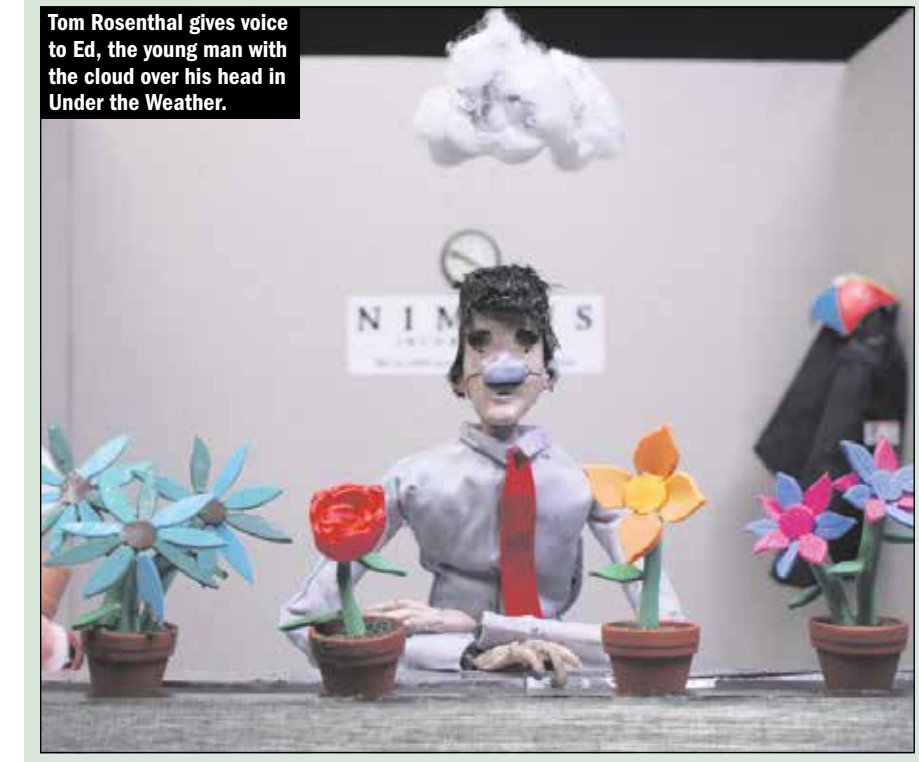
No cheap sentiment for O'Mahoney, if you please.

Is he excited for the New York screening? "Oh man, I can't wait. I'm flying on Thursday to New York City, where it is generally really hard to get films into. And it's an Irish film festival as well. So I think it ticked all the boxes."

O'Mahoney sees *Under the Weather* as a kind of pilot for a longer series now, perhaps the kind of dark comedy that performs so well on channels like Netflix and HBO.

Meanwhile, the Kids Fleadh will also offer an Irish stepdancing class hosted by Niall O'Leary. Admission will be \$10 for kids and families. Visit thecraicfest.com for more details.

Start time is 11:30 a.m. at Village East Cinema, 181-189 Second Avenue.



Tom Rosenthal gives voice to Ed, the young man with the cloud over his head in *Under the Weather*.