



TURN **FOR THE VERSE**

Featuring contributions from the likes of Bono, Noel Gallagher, Edna O'Brien and Van Morrison, Bob Geldof's new documentary, *WB Yeats: A Fanatic Heart* offers a fascinating insight into the life and work of the iconic poet. Geldof here in his own words discusses his love of Yeats' work, and also offers his view on the Repeal referendum and the Pope's upcoming visit to Ireland.

When I was approached to make *A Fanatic Heart*, I was initially unsure. It's not natural for me to do TV, so I don't do very much of it. It can only be personal when I do it.

For example, the *Geldof In Africa* series was to explain Africa to people pre-Live 8, so I needed to do it to show that here was a very viable, vibrant continent – not the nonsense that we get served up in the press.

Elsewhere, I needed to do the *Bob Geldof On Fathers* documentary for Channel 4, because that bothered me at the time, although I don't think that was successful. I think *Geldof In Africa* kind of worked, but I think with the Channel 4 project I missed the target slightly. Perhaps it was effective to a point.

Anyway, with WB Yeats, there was an element of him being the original Irish punk. What he was saying to the Irish public was, "You are not defeated, you are this great people of Homeric legend." He was telling them, "You are not bereft, you are this great people with creation heroes as grand as the Arthurian legends or the Wagnerian Cycles. This is who you are, there's no defeat in that."

I first developed an interest in Yeats when I was in school. I was around 15 or 16 in 1966 when the 50th anniversary of the Rising took place, and I was dismayed by it.

I was into the Rolling Stones and The Who, and I was getting politically engaged. There was a war in Vietnam that I was against, there was all the anti-apartheid stuff that my mates and I were a part of.

I was in the Irish Blues Appreciation Society and going to Slattery's in Capel Street to watch all these old guys from Mississippi playing. I was tuned into 'Good Vibrations' and 'A Whiter Shade of Pale'. And suddenly into this comes crashing this 'Other Ireland' on what was now national television; this fucking North Korean kitsch-

"EVERY TIME A GREAT OGRE HOVERS NEAR, 'THE SECOND COMING' WILL BE REFERRED BACK TO."

fest. It was not part of me at all and was completely alien to the way I thought. It was trying to drag me back to a terribly evil understanding of the country. My reaction at the time, and that of my mates, was basically, "What the fuck!?"

It was about this time that my English teacher in Blackrock College turned me onto the work of Milton and Yeats. I was shit in school, and I paid no attention, but we read *Paradise Lost*. Milton told the story of Lucifer and God having it out in Heaven, and this intrigued me. To my mind, at the time, it seemed to be written in the same psychedelic language as 'Whiter Shade Of

Pale'. I had that same reaction of, "What is this? Whatever it is, it's moving within me."

And then we went onto Yeats, and here was a direct and immediate response to the Ireland I understood myself to live in – and that came about through the language and the rhythm, and the scansion and the metre. I was in tune to that because of the pop music I was into. This thrilled me, and it was a great corrective to the claptrap that I was being served on television, which was essentially the myth of the 1916 Rising as the creation stone of the modern Irish state. In fact, as I say in the film, it's the original sin of the Irish state.

With Yeats, here is the man in the middle of the narrow-minded thuggery of bullets as a solution, knowing that it's failed endlessly in the past. Knowing that you were pointlessly about to take on the might of the greatest military endeavour of the past 2000 years, the British Empire. Knowing that it is absolutely a waste of fucking time, and him arguing that is not the way to go. That is futility. That is the vertigo of self-sacrifice. What's the point?

Or as Shaw, his immediate contemporary, said, "Blood, that cheap fluid." Dude, we all die, you know. It's easy! Whereas what the fuck are you doing? It means nothing. Think, understand, plan the way forward, commit yourself to it. That is bravery – putting everything that is in your head, your abilities, your talent, into the effort. And in so doing, saying it isn't this

endless history of failure and defeat.

In terms of other aspects of Yeats' life, his repeated failed attempts to seduce Maud Gonne were not too far off the Hollywood casting couch approach. It's like Harvey Weinstein. That's what he was doing! "Hey baby, you wanna be in my film? Check this out!" And, of course, Maude told him to fuck off. It was like 'me too' – #MeToo!! You know: "But I can make you a star! I'll write you the part of Countess Kathleen in my play!" And she goes, "Yeah well, I'll do the part, but fuck off! You know, it's brilliant!"

In terms of what Yeats would make of Ireland today, he would be up in arms about this, that and the other. The thing is, he would commit himself to change. That's why he became a senator and that's why his brilliant speeches railed against censorship – that censorship that sent our geniuses off into exile forever until the '80s, basically. He was involved in an entire cultural, spiritual, economic and political revolution. He was not fucking around. And he dedicated his life to it.

Literally, in every sense: he became a man of state, gave brilliant speeches, and railed against what he saw was happening with the divorce laws.

Which, as he said, would only be understood 50 years after he was dead – and, for me, that moment comes exactly 50 years after his death in 1989, with the election of a woman involved in human rights as the figurehead of our country. And you can trace this to the Marriage Equality Bill, you can trace it to the Eighth Amendment. All these things for me are in a direct intellectual line stemming from this fulcrum of revolution, which has nothing to do with a bunch of headbangers with guns. *Nothing.*

Of course, the Pope is visiting Ireland this year, which is certainly interesting in the context of the Repeal referendum. In terms of what



Yeats would make of it all, Pope Francis has got a social view of the world based more on the South American model, stemming from the



Geldof with fellow Yeats fans Liam Neeson and (below) Edna O'Brien

revolutionary notion of the '60s. He is quite a brave man. I think he hedged his bets too much in Myanmar – he should've been more vocal and when he was criticised, he then became more vocal while he was there.

But Repeal is a tougher one than, say, the Marriage Equality referendum. That argument was about two people who love each other. Who cares? Get married if you

want to! It's a no-brainer to us today. We find it very hard to get our head around the notion that you could be discriminated against because your love is of one kind and not another. That seems preposterous, but I grew up when that was a common idea.

This one is different, this is visceral. It has religious overtones, but even the most secular of people have their reservations, and so you've got to take this argument, you've got to treat your opponent – whether they're for or against – with more respect and sympathy. You have to understand the profound emotional basis for why there would be reservations.

Of course, I am for Repeal, but that's a personal point of view. And I listen to other people and I get it, because you hear it everywhere, but you know the Pope's visit is possibly a propaganda coup for the people against the Repeal. It's a moot point as to whether this will sway people. I think there's a great emotional pull with the Pope, and I think people will still turn out for him out of respect. I also think that he will be listened to and that there will be an outbreak of religiosity.

I don't think you should try and manipulate... having said that, the other side should be treated with respect and I extend that now to the people who would oppose my point of view. And by that I mean the Pope should respect those people who want the repeal of the law, and leave it up to individuals whether they wish to have abortions or not. And given what he says in other areas, that would be the logical extension of this man's intellect. So he must be struggling with this as a man. As Pope, he probably has a gig to do and it will be interesting to see how he uses the language, but it's a great propaganda coup, no question, to bring in the main moral arbiter of the other side's religious views.

But there are secular people who will hold that view as well. So it's to be argued for and

BOB'S YOUR UNCLE

Geldof will discuss the early days of the Boomtown Rats, international fame, and why he will always be a musician, at the VINYL festival at Royal Kilmainham Hospital, Dublin on May 8. David Bell, VINYL organiser, talks about the philanthropist, AKA Bobby Boomtown.

In 1978, I bought the Boomtown Rats' single 'She's So Modern' on vinyl with my confirmation money. That was all my £2.70 could stretch to at the time, but I had to have it. People sometimes forget what a great artist he is – the Rats wrote some amazing songs. I've worked with Bob on occasion; we did merchandising for Live 8 and worked with him on the Rats. When I had my 50th birthday at The Workman's Club, Bob gate-crashed and ended up down the back watching Something Happens. He posed for pictures and was really cool – he's a generous man. He's also extremely articulate and always has me on my toes when I'm speaking to him. Bob is being interviewed at VINYL by the journalist Pete Paphides, which should be brilliant. Overall, Bob is very proud of his music and the records the Rats made."



it's to be argued with tolerance, respect and understanding. If it's done like that, let the chips fall where they may. I know which side Yeats would be on, without question, without a shadow. With no quibbling or reservations, you know precisely what side he'd be on.

In terms of Yeats' actual work, as I say in the documentary, 'The Second Coming' is probably the most terrifying poem of the 20th century. Remember, it's written in 1919. And in this pithy 18 lines or something, this horror, this image of this slouching dripping thing, slouching towards Bethlehem to be reborn... for us, we see Hitler, or we see now maybe a Trump, but that's why we are guaranteed that this poem will be read in 200 years.

Every time a great ogre hovers near, this poem will be referred back to. In 2018, you're responding to a poem that was written literally 100 years ago, and extending it into the contemporary political and intellectual view.

WB Yeats: A Fanatic Heart is out now on DVD.