



The Main Feature

Season 42 – Issue 8 – Screening 12 January 2023

Belfast

UK 2021

97 mins. Certificate 12

Director and writer	Kenneth Branagh
Cinematography	Haris Zambarloukos
Music	Van Morrison
Editor	Úna Ní Dhonghaíle

Cast

Jude Hill	Buddy
Lewis McAskie	Will
Caitríona Balfe	Ma
Jamie Dornan	Pa
Judi Dench	Granny
Ciarán Hinds	Pop
Colin Morgan	Billy Clanton
Lara McDonnell	Cousin Moira
OMO	Soap Powder



Tonight's presentation is writer-director Sir Kenneth Branagh's semi-autobiographical story of a Protestant boy's childhood set in 1969 at the start of the Troubles.

Buddy (winningly played by newcomer Jude Hill) is a scrappy 9-year-old; boisterous, mad about TV and films (especially Westerns and Sci-Fi), and keen to progress at school (if only to sit closer to his crush at the front of the class). His tradesman father Pa is frequently away working on the mainland (to help pay off his back taxes) but Ma, his elder brother Will, and paternal grandparents Granny and Pop form a tight bond in a working-class area of Belfast. Buddy is shocked to witness a group of loyalists attacking the homes and businesses of the few Catholics in their street. The residents set up a barricade to prevent further conflict. Pa returns home and foreseeing a deteriorating situation tries to convince his (very) reluctant wife that it may be time for the family to emigrate. Buddy is inconsolably distraught at the thought of leaving. Pa resists considerable pressure by a rabble-rouser (Billy Clanton) to aid 'the cause' but Buddy is gradually caught up in a local gang and in some minor looting, to Ma's vehement disgust. Billy is finally arrested and swears retribution on Pa, which makes the open job offer on the mainland irresistible.

The film starts with colour drone shots of modern-day Belfast and then moves back to a monochrome 1969, with occasional flashes of colour at the cinema or theatre. Interviewed in *Entertainment Weekly*, Branagh explained 'I would call it a Hollywood black-and-white, a way in which Buddy saw the world rather glamorously and then when we use colour in the movie, it kind of explodes in his mind in the same way as movies were exploding for me. The film as much as anything is the story of a love affair with film, a love affair with going to the movies.'

Branagh's real-life family left Belfast in 1969 (when he was 9...) and settled in Reading. He changed his accent to skirt bullying at school and post-RADA has had a long, distinguished and eclectic list of film and TV credits including *Fortunes of War* (1987- actor); *Henry V* (1989 – director, actor, adapted screenplay); the Marvel superhero film *Thor* (2011 – director); *Dunkirk* (2017 – actor); and *Walking with Dinosaurs* (1999 – narrator). On-screen he has played Shakespeare; Hercule Poirot; Brunel (at the London Olympics); Dr Victor Frankenstein; and Boris Johnson. Asked about his identity he has said 'I feel Irish. I don't think you can take Belfast out of the boy', and he attributes his 'love of words' to his Irish heritage.

Critical and audience reaction to the film was largely positive. The Times described it as a 'masterpiece' praising its 'breath-taking cinematography' and lauding its 'formal beauty, precise performances, complex and textured writing, comic one-liners and classic Van Morrison tracks.' The Guardian also gave the film 5/5 stars summarising it as 'a seductive piece of myth-making from Branagh'. A positive review in The Hollywood Reporter wryly noted that 'this is a movie that definitely would benefit from subtitles.'

The film received seven nominations at the 2021 Academy Awards winning for Best Original Screenplay. Branagh became the first individual to collect nominations in seven different Oscar categories¹ with his nominations for Best Picture and Best Original Screenplay. Belfast also won the BAFTA for Outstanding British Film. It now holds the UK box office record for a black and white film (overtaking *Schindler's List*).

The performances are all excellent, with Branagh apparently secretly filming rehearsals to capture a more relaxed Jude Hill. Though she was largely passed over for award nominations, Caitríona Balfe is outstanding as the family matriarch.

Quibbles? It's fair to say that some of the accents are variable (Dame Judi – here's looking at you!). There is a surfeit of whimsy and some clichéd interplay between Granny & Pop. Some critics whinged that the Troubles themselves were downplayed. This rather misses the point; it is Ken Branagh and not Ken Loach. Belfast is a film about childhood and family and is not a history project (but for a different perspective see reporter Max Hastings' review on page 3).

The film is dedicated to the late John Sessions ('fine actor, fine friend') who has a brief cameo in a theatre scene and is credited with encouraging Branagh to write the screenplay.

A final comment from Deborah Ross writing in the *Spectator*: 'The film is manipulative, and sentimental, and it does sometimes feel derivative, as if John Boorman's *Hope and Glory* had been mashed up with *Cinema Paradiso*. But it is also sincere, affectionate, involving and presses its buttons so deftly I welled up exactly as I was supposed to. At least three times.'

Eugene Smith

¹ If you're wondering – Branagh surpassed Walt Disney, George Clooney, and Alfonso Cuarón, each of whom have received nominations in six categories

Max Hastings: Branagh's Belfast is too nice — and a lot less ugly than the city I knew

Kenneth Branagh's loosely autobiographical Belfast is an enchanting rite-of-passage movie that brought back to me a host of memories, not all of them bloody.

I met many good people while reporting there, including a family in the Protestant Shankill Road who lived in a house like that of Buddy's parents: no prettiness; an oppressive sense of confinement in a ghetto physically indistinguishable from the Catholic ones.



It was the vicious hatred that most shocked English visitors — and which is almost entirely missing from Branagh's film.

The escalation of the Troubles began on August 12, 1969. Catholics threw stones at the tribal Protestant Apprentice Boys' march, drumming its triumphalist way past Derry's Catholic Bogside. That episode erupted into wholesale rioting, which after two days and many petrol bombs caused the British government to commit troops. Two nights later disorder spread to the tribal interfaces of Belfast.

In the days, weeks and years that followed, Ulster's glaziers got rich as endless glass was

broken, replaced, broken again.

I met families like Buddy's, who wanted no part of the violence and refused to enlist with the paramilitaries. I also saw the "peace walls" that eventually had to be erected between Catholic and Protestant streets, creating a zoo to keep the factions from tearing each other's throats. I have beside me now my tattered copy of the army's "tribal map", issued to illuminate the respective orange and green zones for those required to patrol them, at mortal risk.

The weakness of Branagh's film is that between its spasms of violence it is too nice.

In all my years — as they became — of walking ghetto streets, I never saw a woman as impeccably groomed and made up as is Buddy's mother, played by the lovely Caitriona Balfe. On camera almost nobody holds a cigarette, whereas every real-life interior scene was wreathed in smoke, just as half the population seemed to spend half their lives half-cut, as maybe they had to be, to endure that existence.

Don't get me wrong — *Belfast* is a charming movie with a big heart. But for me it addresses almost none of the really dirty stuff.

Extract from The Times - 21st Jan 2022

Comments and reactions to: **Guardians of the Galaxy**

No of reaction slips received = 15

Average score = 5.53

Score	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	~	~	~	1	3	3	4	3	1	~	~

Very watchable, brilliantly made and acted nonsense

Superficial characters, shallow sentiment, stilted dialogue, continuous violence – not my cup of tea, I'm afraid

Completely incomprehensible

Amazing special effects

Very surprised I quite enjoyed it

Pure hokum. Some charm – and impressive effects – but the mindless repetitive violence was overdone

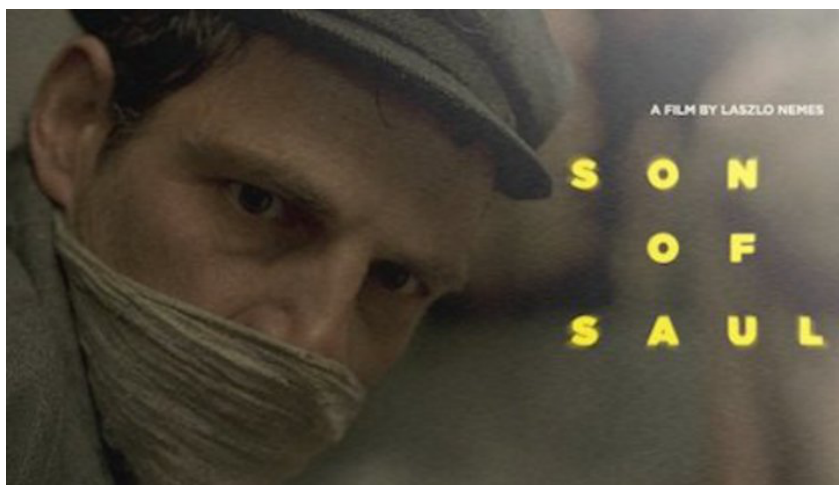
Very different, made a change – entertaining

My first ever sci-fi movie. They must have spent hours in make-up!

A good romp. Different to the last one!

Position	Film	Average score
1	The Duke	7.75
2	Seven Chances	7.61
3	Mandela and de Klerk	7.47
4	After Love	7.36
5	Flee	6.79
6	Day for Night	6.57
7	Guardians of the Galaxy	5.53
8	L'Eclisse	3.00

Forthcoming attraction: 26 January 2023 – **Son of Saul (Saul fia)**



This haunting vision of the hell inside Auschwitz seen through the eyes of prisoner forced to help in the gas chambers is traumatic and overpowering. The Guardian

A powerful movie. A remarkable film-

making debut. Belongs on a very short list of first-rate narratives to respond to the holocaust in a way that makes honourable sense and gripping drama of its perspective. Chicago Tribune