



Locarno Film Festival

FUORI CONCORSO
OFFICIAL SELECTION

Fréwaka

A movie by Aislinn Clarke

Synopsis

Haunted by a personal tragedy, home care worker, Shoo, is sent to a remote village to care for an agoraphobic woman who fears the neighbours as much as she fears the Na Sídhé – sinister entities who she believes abducted her decades before. As the two develop a strangely deep connection, Shoo is consumed by the old woman's paranoia, rituals, and superstitions, eventually confronting the horrors from her own past.



Director's statement

"The experience of Fréwaka is one of disorientation. As Shoo moves deeper into the village and the house, she becomes more and more unreliable as a narrator of her own life. As she begins to doubt the things that she sees and hears, so too should the audience.

The story is one of shifting realities, in which the two lead characters are pulled into each other's messy interior lives until one is inextricable from the other. The audience questions what is real and what is not throughout the film and, in the end, when Shoo is lost to the fairies and her girlfriend Mila is left pleading for her return, we don't know what is real and what is not. Fréwaka is a film about trauma and its

communicability - trauma as an inheritance. The difficulty of understanding another's trauma on a personal level, the difficulty of communicating trauma across divides like age and sex. Finally, it is about the trauma that comes from history and is embedded in a culture that grew out of that history, like a stone embedded in the bark of a tree.

In Fréwaka, Shoo is plagued by a trauma in her past, but more so troubled by the effect it has in the present – it affects her relationship, her career, her ability to function. She must reconcile the past with the present to have hope, but is she capable of that?

I hope the film can sit alongside some of the great non-English language horror films of the past decade, such as Under the Shadow, A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night, and Tigers are not Afraid. Similarly to these films, Fréwaka includes, but subverts, cultural expectations of the country in which it is set; it introduces elements of social justice; it deals with contemporary issues of mental health, including PTSD, trauma, and anxiety, while never forgetting that characters - filled with the texture of messy humanity - are the beating heart of any story."

Aislinn Clarke

Writer/Director Aislinn Clarke

Aislinn Clarke is an Irish Writer/Director. She holds the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Gold Fellowship for Women 2020. Her debut feature film *The Devil's Doorway* was released in the USA by IFC Midnight in 2018. It has also been released in Brazil, Japan, the Middle East, Germany, Canada, the U.K., and Ireland. The film premiered in the Official Competition at the Seattle International Film Festival and had its European premiere at the Galway Film Fleadh, where Aislinn was nominated for the Bingham Ray New Talent Award. The film played at many of the premier horror film festivals worldwide (Frightfest, Sitges etc). She was nominated for Screen International's Rising Genre Star Award at Frightfest. She has been described as a "real genre talent" by noted British genre critic Kim Newman and as "one of the most brilliant directors ever" by Oscar-nominated director Lexi Alexander (*The Punisher* and *Green Room*). Her newest film *Fréwaka* will be the first horror feature in the Irish language.





Interview with Aislín Clarke

BY MARTA BALAGA

The film is shot mainly in Irish and the title comes from the word “fréamhacha,” which means roots. Why did you want to do it?

Fréamhacha literally means roots, but the word has so much more heft in Irish than it does in English. It has a completely different feel in Irish. It evokes rain-lashed earth, thick, tangled roots, old and gnarly. The tough kind that are hard to dig up. The kind that stays put and says: “I was here before you.” The English word is delicate in comparison, the tender roots of a violet versus the intractable roots that stand between the farmer and any hope of planting at all. So, for this film, the word evokes important themes: generational trauma, substance reliance, addiction, mental health issues. The parts of Irishness that are endemic, difficult, hard to dig up. Language is the filter through which we see and understand the world. Each language carries its own perspectives, values, and priorities.

My father was very invested in the Irish language, so I was educated completely in Irish. In school, until I was 16, we didn’t speak English at all, which is unusual in Ireland. The language itself was almost eradicated on the island, as a result of British policy over many centuries. Even now, very few people speak it fluently or speak it at all, although that is changing as a result of Irish-language education and investment in cultural output in the language. It is a part of us that was missing, the language that developed to describe how to live on and with this island. I guess it’s just a part of who I am and a part of my heritage.

My dad died in 2015 and that language got really tied up emotionally with him. I didn’t speak it at all after that, for several years. It got... rusty. Then I was asked to write an Irish-language film *Doineann*, which I wrote for Damian McCann to

direct in 2022, and it started the whole process of me even thinking like that again. When the producers asked me to make a film in Irish, I thought it would be a good thing for me to do, personally, and that it would be interesting to think about horror through the lens of the language. It gave me a license to lean into some very “Irish” things without having to dilute them for a primarily English-language audience.

One of the primary funders of *Fréwaka* was Irish-language broadcaster TG4 and they are committed to the preservation of the language. Their Cine 4 scheme – an initiative to produce two films a year in Irish – also produced *An Cailín Ciúin* (The Quiet Girl), a wonderful film which was nominated for an Oscar last year. It just seemed like a great time for all these things to finally come together.



Are any of the beliefs you are mentioning here based on actual local mythology?

The roots are in the mythology I was taught at school and at home. What I learned in my childhood. What kept me up at night. What I remember. Like all hand me downs, versions of the same stories tend to change a little as they move from mouth to ear to mouth to ear. There are different versions of these stories, and I have introduced some new elements of my own, particularly blurring the line between folkloric ritual and diagnosable disorder – Peig’s compulsive counting is both protection ritual and an obsessive-compulsive disorder – isn’t all superstition a coping mechanism? So, I’m not rigid, but the roots and the spirit are the same.

Irish folklore, like lots of other folklore, isn’t codified like a Dungeons and Dragons players manual – it varies, it changes, it’s hard to pin down. It also, in this case, exists in a modern Ireland and it should be reflexive and responsive to that, just as the original stories responded to a changing Ireland.

As I mentioned, I went to an Irish-language school and I am still in touch with one of the teachers. She is a wonderful woman, who carried our culture in her bones and she gave it to us when we were children. Including stories about fairies or, as we call them, the aos sí. In Irish culture, they are so different from Disney movies. Completely unrecognizable, actually.

They are malevolent, vindictive, they joy and delight in our misfortune and madness. As one of the characters in the film says, they hate us.

As a child, I was a custodian of that wealth of knowledge, a store of oral tradition. I’ve always remembered these tales and they would continue to haunt me at night. Now, I am presenting them as I understand them. As I recall them. As I see their resonance in a modern Ireland. In a way, this whole film is about me coming back to that part of myself. When my protagonist Shoo goes to that place, it’s alien but also familiar. That’s how I feel about it too.



Folk horror has made quite a comeback in the past few years. Did you enjoy combining old tales with a contemporary story?

The proposition of making an Irish-language film came first. Then, I started to think about an appropriate story. This is where it took me – back to my childhood, back to all these tales I was told. This is how I make sense of them: by looking at them through a contemporary lens.

There are movies like Robert Eggers' *The Witch*, which are all about period setting, but to me, Ireland has been stuck on a hamster wheel for centuries and centuries. The same traumas are being revisited again and again – they are passed on through families. That's what this contemporary story is all about. We inherit these things. The fears and beliefs of the ancient Irish people never left us. They reappear in different forms.

There was a psychic wound left by the loss of the Irish language. There are things about

ourselves, our environment, and our history that we feel but do not have the language to describe or understand. Ireland itself is slightly alien to us because we are barred from fully knowing it. Our ancestors found the words over many centuries and passed them on like you do with valuable and important things. For example, rain is plentiful here. Its various types could make or break the farming seasons of our ancestors. It didn't just matter that it rained, it mattered what kind of rain it was. It mattered enough that our ancestors developed dozens of words to describe specific types of rain, like the Inuit did for snow. For reasons already described, not all of us Irish still have access to that articulacy.

You show a family marked by trauma. How dark did you want to go when depicting such pain?

In contemporary Ireland – and other places as well – we are dealing with mental health problems, substance abuse, alcoholism and alarming rate of suicides. Here, this is certainly

a result of a succession of historical traumas that haven't been fully resolved: the Troubles in the north; the legacy of Magdalene Laundries and industrial schools; institutional child abuse scandals; the War of Independence and the Civil War; the Famine. One thing after another. And Ireland still hasn't fully dealt with these things and moved on. There is a lot of inter-generational trauma, passed down from traumatized parents to their now-traumatized children. When you decide to tackle such things in film, you have a responsibility to be as "heavy" as it gets. You have a responsibility to be truthful, I guess. Shoo's relationship with her mother is bleak, but that's reflective of a certain stripe of contemporary life that's hopefully going to resonate with many people. There is hope there too...I hope. In Shoo's connection with Peig, for example, and what that could mean for breaking the cycle they are trapped in. Mila is another positive. She offers a future, a family, love. The potential is there.



In horror films, you are often rewarded with a sense of relief at the end. Here, it's a bit more complicated.

I think there's a joy in not saving the day, in going right up to the very bad thing that's been skirted around throughout a film. Leaning into an almost joyous dark final destination is part of what folk horror does – think of *The Wicker Man*, *Midsommar*, *The Witch* again. There is a promise of destruction in a folk horror film. That's part of the attraction. Folk horror is the home of cautionary tales and joyously unhappy endings, like many of the folk stories that inspired the genre. A lot of my stories tend to end like that too.

This said, if you deal with contemporary issues, you have to be honest and go: "What can we do? How can we change these things?" We have to talk about it, rather than give people a

false sense of hope. Because so many times, it's not going to be fine. These cycles do continue. If you talk about something like suicide, which is a real problem in Ireland and central to this film, there is no point in telling a fairytale, pun intentional! Ironically enough, in *Fréwaka*, the supernatural elements are not as heavy as Shoo's real world trauma. Perhaps that's how it should be.

These two women, Shoo and Peig, stay indoors for a very long time. Peig's house is practically devouring them alive. Were you interested in creating such a claustrophobic atmosphere?

The Irish constitution enshrines the place of an Irish woman as being at home, despite recent unsuccessful efforts to change the wording. Historically women have not been well treated in Irish law, with many rights taken for granted elsewhere only recently won here. It was legal

for a man to rape his wife in Ireland until 1990. Abortion was outlawed until 2018. Married women could not keep their jobs until 1977. Contraceptives couldn't be bought freely until 1991.

The home has been the locus of a lot of Irish women's injustice and pain. Home is also where most violence against women takes place. I wanted it to feel like a stultifying space. Even before, Peig was barely going outside. In the real-world, you would call her agoraphobic. Shoo goes there and at the beginning, she thinks this woman is crazy. She feels like the one in control, like the stable one. But then she starts to get pulled into Peig's way of thinking as the story progresses. By the end, you could say they are both just as mad. They have infected each other.



They have, but their interactions are still funny at times. You seem to have a dark sense of humor.

It's how my head operates. I wanted this film to have bad manners. To interrupt expectations and not be too demure or polite. When you have two women in one house, there is this expectation there will be politeness, that they are going to be nice all the time. Nice, or at least catty – acceptably feminine either way. I wanted to interrupt that as much as possible.

Shoo can be awful and she has issues, but she is spiky and I like that about her. She has guts. She feels like a real person. Embodied by Clare Monnelly's marvelous performance, she is real. The same is true for Peig. Sometimes, in films, you see older female characters and they are presented as very passive: as machines of their own madness. That's not my experience of older women I meet and talk to. I wanted Peig to feel like someone who has spirit. She doesn't purely romanticize her late husband, for example. She says: "He was a bit of a disappointment, to be

honest." Which is not that uncommon, I think. Historically, Ireland has been a fairly misogynistic country in terms of how it was organized. Women of her generation have every right to be a bit spiky and to express that.

I didn't want this film to be too dour. There is a lightness, even though you are dealing with all these dark issues. Also, in Irish culture, people have such a morbid sense of humor – that's just how it is over here. That's how you handle grim stuff. If you are going to reflect Irish life, you need to reflect that too.

In a way, every relationship here feels a bit unconventional. Why did you want Shoo's partner to be a foreigner, though? Because she doesn't have any connections to this world?

That's the main reason, really. She is from Ukraine, but she could have been an immigrant from any other country. She is an outsider, she is not from here, so she's not stuck in that hamster wheel of the culture. She is the potential hope for Shoo; she could be that bright light. She can see

things from another perspective, without being burdened with your usual cultural baggage. She represents the new Ireland – or the Ireland that much of the country wants to be – cosmopolitan, welcoming to immigrants, friendly to the LGBTQ+ community. It was important that Mila, as an immigrant to Ireland, was shown trying to speak Irish. Irish shouldn't be an historic artefact, but a language that is important to the people who live here, regardless of where they come from. In fact, many immigrants do learn the language, which is partly why it's had a revival in recent years.

I love writing characters and there comes a point when they just start speaking in their own voices. I have to say that in my experience of actual human relationships, they have always been unconventional. I have never met a "normal" person. Ever! I don't even know what such a person would be like. Everybody has their own little flavor. Everyone is a little odd. I do try to express it in my stories: it helps the whole thing feel truthful.



I wonder if you have noticed a change when it comes to horror these days. Genre films are more accepted at festivals, I feel, and industry players are actively seeking them out.

It has changed a huge amount, yes. I've always tried to be really thoughtful with the stories I have been telling, exploring social issues and human psychology. That's actually my primary interest, rather than pure horror, although it's a great vehicle for that. If you wanted to combine all this with genre elements 10 years ago, potential

producers might just look at their watches and say: "Ok, but where is the monster?" Now, you can do that. You can say you are interested in making a film about trauma, but it's a horror film. I don't think it should be a choice between a monster and meaning. In fact, I think the best horror films have both. There have always been great horror films, but we have so many more coming up. It's an exciting time to be working in the genre.

Cast



CLARE MONNELLY

as Shoo

Clare is an actor and writer from Dublin. As an actor, Clare has worked with Druid, the Abbey, the Gate, Livin' Dred and many more and been nominated for three Irish Times Theatre Awards. On screen she has worked with Deadpan Pictures, RTÉ, Sky One and TG4 among others. She recently reprised the role of Anita Fallon in Series 2 of The Gone for Keeper Pictures and Kingfisher Films. She is best known for her roles of Mary in Nowhere Fast and Fidelma in Moone Boy. She will be playing the role of Helen in the world premiere of David Horan's Sandpaper on Sunburn in this year's Dublin Theatre Festival.



BRÍD NÍ NEACHTAIN

as Peig

Bríd appeared on stage in Samuel Beckett's HAPPY DAYS (Laethanta Sona) in 2021, directed by Sarah Jane Scaife for the Abbey Theatre and Company SJ for which she received the Irish Times Theatre Award for Best Actress in 2022. She most recently appeared in PERSIANS at the Peacock Theatre, directed by Conor Hanratty. She appeared in the feature film RÓISE & FRANK as Róise for which she won the IFTA for Best Actress in a Lead Role in 2023. She also appeared as Mrs O'Riordan in Martin McDonagh's multiple Oscar nominated film THE BANSHEES OF INISHERIN in 2022. Bríd was a member of the Abbey Theatre company until 1999 and has appeared on stage nationally and internationally for that company and every other major theatre company in Ireland.

Producers



DOUBLEBAND FILMS

Established in 1988 by Dermot Lavery and Michael Hewitt, DoubleBand Films is an award-winning Belfast-based production company with a 30-year+ track record for making quality films and documentaries with distinctive storytelling, the most notable being the feature documentaries ROAD and Lost Lives starring Liam Neeson, Kenneth Branagh and a host of Ireland's top acting talent. DoubleBand has strong links to broadcasters BBC, Channel 4, RTÉ, and TG4, as well having its films stream on a wide range of international platforms including Netflix, Amazon, and Disney+.

In 2021 Dermot Lavery produced the Irish language feature film Doineann, the first cinema thriller produced in the Irish language in the north of Ireland, starring Clare Monnelly, Bríd Brennan and Peter Cooney. Doineann was also written by Fréwaka Writer Director Aislinn Clarke.

WILDCARD

Established in 2013 by Patrick O'Neill, Wildcard is Ireland's leading film distributor, having released the biggest Irish titles of the last few years including Black 47, The Young Offenders, and the Oscar-nominated Wolfwalkers. Wildcard has recently moved into film production and recently produced two new films: Kneecap, a feature film about the popular Irish Hip-Hop band of the same name; and Fréwaka, the first-ever Irish language horror film.

Patrick O'Neill is also a partner in Wild Atlantic Pictures (Evil Dead Rise, The Green Knight, Cocaine Bear), and was a Producer on Crock of Gold: A Few Rounds with Shane MacGowan, Winner of the Special Jury Prize at the San Sebastian Film Festival 2020. Patrick's Executive Producer credits include The Hole in the Ground, Black 47, Redemption of a Rogue.

WORLD PREMIERE

Locarno International Film Festival 2024

FILM INFORMATION

Original Title: Fréwaka

Genre: Horror

Countries of production: Ireland

Shooting locations: Ravensdale, Co. Louth,
Ireland

Language: English / Irish

Year: 2024

Duration: 90min

Picture: Color

Exhibition format: DCP

Framerate: 24 FPS

Aspect Ratio: 2.39:1

Sound: 5.1

Available Format: DCP

CREW

Written and directed by: Aislinn Clarke

DOP: Narayan Van Maele

Production Design: Nicola Moroney

Costume Design: Zjena Glamocanin

Sound on set: Chris Woodcock

Original Score: Die Hexen

Hair and Make-up: Bernie McBride

Casting: Maureen Hughes

VFX: Outer Limits

Cast: Clare Monnelly, Bríd Ní Neachtain,
Aleksandra Bystrzhitskaya, Olga Wehrly

Producers: Dermot (Diarmuid) Lavery
for DoubleBand Films Patrick O'Neill for Wildcard

Executive producers for TG4: Máire Ní Chonláin,
Seirbhile Ní Churraighín

Executive producer for Fís Éireann /

Screen Ireland: Greg Martin

Coimisiún Na Meán, Sound & Vision

managers: Philip Cooper, Sara McNamara

Associate Producer: Róisín Browne

Executive Producer for DoubleBand Films:

Michael Hewitt

With the support of: Screen Ireland, TG4,
Coimisiun na Meán, Section 481 (Tax Incentive)

WORLD SALES

New Europe Film Sales
Puławska 152/5
02-670 Warsaw, Poland
www.neweuropefilmsales.com

Sales

Jan Naszewski
+48 600 173 205
jan@neweuropefilmsales.com

Katarzyna Siniarska
+48 698 900 936
kat@neweuropefilmsales.com

Festivals

Natalia Dąbrowska
festivals@neweuropefilmsales.com
+48 698 903 038

Marketing

Paulina Ciok
paulina@neweuropefilmsales.com
+48 570 000 147

INTERNATIONAL PR

Alibi Communication
Brigitta Portier
+32 477 98 25 84
brigittaportier@alibicomcommunications.be

