

Into the West

Ocean waves lap the shore and an apparition, a white horse, gallops across moonlit sands. Dawn finds a grizzled beachcomber staring at the ivory steed, which tentatively follows the old man across a timeless Irish countryside. Ultimately--heralded by a jet overhead--they rattle into the outskirts of modern Dublin town. With this opening sequence for *Into the West*, we enter into an engrossing contemporary Irish fable of a mysterious white horse and the two boys who befriend him.

Moviegoers will be reminded--and the comparison honors both films--of Carroll Ballard's *The Black Stallion*. Both turn around boys' preternatural affinity for a horse of special gifts and depict them against handsome landscapes. The 1979 film ends with a race; the new film with a chase. Still, *Into the West* has more dimensions than the very linear *Stallion*; it has more human complexity and social context.

As the Irish might say: "Sure and it's a lovely film!"

A major plot element turns on the lives of people known as "travellers," Irish gypsies who survive by practicing the tinker's trade, who live nomadic lives in caravans and campsites (like the beachcomber mentioned above) and who have a taste for horses. John Reilly (Gabriel Byrne) is such a traveller gone awry. He still tinkers but plies his trade in the urban detritus of a Dublin housing project. Lamenting the loss of his wife, who died years before in childbirth, Reilly is hard-fastened to the bottle and only fitfully aware of his two boys, Tito, 12 (Ruaidhri Conroy), and little Ossie, 8 (Ciaran Fitzgerald), who live with him in a derelict apartment. The emergence of the white horse into their slum is accepted as natural by Ossie, who easily charms the edgy beast and rides him bareback instantly. They tag him "Tir n nOg" or "Land of Eternal Youth" after a tale told by an old traveller (David Kelly) who is their grandfather.

The boys keep the horse in their apartment where it is soon discovered by the local police and incidentally spotted as a great jumper. A smug policeman confiscates Tir na nOg only to underhandedly sell him to a rich businessman to compete as a word-class steeplechaser. While watching a jumping event on television, the boys recognize their horse and make it to the track to lure him away. Enamored of the American Old West as seen on TV, they are off to a "West" of their own imagination with the police, the businessman, their father, and a batch of travellers in pursuit. The rest of the tale is of their odyssey as Tir na nOg leads them on to the sea from whence he came.

Their odyssey is the core of the picture, and the two lads are its heart. The journey is made up of their tender and funny exchanges punctuated by spates of hard riding. The boys, born actors, are utterly convincing, full of spirit and spunk but still young kids, uncertain and afraid. One is aware of their hunger and their ache to find shelter. Too young to have plans and too poor to have much ambition, they let their magic horse define their destination. Without knowing it, they are becoming travellers.

Young Fitzgerald as Ossie is a particular delight. He looks like a trimmed-down Spanky McFarland, but he's more slyly funny than pie-in-your-face Spanky and often more poignant, especially when he quizzes his brother about the mother he never saw but somehow senses. Tito is just as effective, if not quite so constantly charming. They even look like brothers!

The two young men's performances make one realize how rich and rounded child actors can be, especially when compared to the one-dimensional roles of children in so many American films. So often Hollywood filmmakers feel they must produce acting in the Macauley Culkin vein, an unpleasant mix of cutesy-poo and smart-ass, attempting to appeal simultaneously to naive kids and jaded adults. These Irish kids, as expertly directed by Mike Newell, appeal because they are so *real*.

Gabriel Byrne (who doubles as Associate Producer) is, by contrast, mostly sullen and out-of-sorts, until he's shaken out of his mopiness by the boys' wild ride. He then rediscovers his old traveller persona, and, in riding after them, he is, perforce, riding to find himself. A traveller friend (Colm Meaney) and his sister Kathleen (Ellen Barkin) help Reilly in his quest. Barkin (Mrs. Gabriel Byrne in real life) appears as a supporting player, displays a decent brogue, a reddish mane, and a fair riding technique. She also delivers a piece of the traveller creed at one point when she says their wandering ways "are in the blud," and adds: "Out here, you're alone; you're part of nothin"--and thus with no ties that bind.

Newell (who last directed *Enchanted April*) and his cinematographer, Tom Sigel, make *Into the West* look right, dank and gritty in the Dublin slum, lush a lovely landscapes going "West." They capture the moistness, the mist and the grass as well as the mud and the trash, of today's Ireland. Patrick Doyle's music is evocative, featuring a poignant Irish air that sweetly course through the film, a theme that is occasionally heightened by a dulcet soprano singing in what sounds like Gaelic.

There are moments where plot complexities are glossed over. How, for example, do the boys get into a posh equestrian event to steal their horse, and how do they get the animal in and out of a boxcar during their escape? And how come Tir na nOg never seems to need a clean-up, especially in close quarters like a small apartment or a movie theater? But I said this was fable, didn't I, and horse manure has little place in myth. Chalk these ellipses up to a wee bit of Irish blarney.

The film is rated "PG," and I cannot for the life of me think why--unless a distributor simply wants to avoid the dreaded "G" of an outright "kiddie" flick. The film has no skin at all (unless you count the horse's white coat), a modicum of violence (consistent with the plot), and only one "bastard" and a couple of "bloodies" uttered.

Into the West is assuredly not a mere "kiddie" flick, but a most effective and touching film for both adults and children to see and treasure.

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