

## The Quiet Girl

One of the Academy Award's newly nominated 2022's Best International Features, "The Quiet Girl," made its debut this month with, to my eyes, a splendid chance to win the trophy. It has a new wrinkle, too, because—though "Irish"—it is placed in the "international" category because it is, indeed, in the original "Irish," tongue, a foreign language to the rest of the English-speaking world. It also showcases one of the best child's performances in years

That touching and resonant child is Cáit (played by Catherine Clinch), an unassuming, reticent 9-year-old child in 1981 Ireland. She lives on a shabby farm within a dysfunctional family of five: her dull, repressed Mam (Kate Nic Chonaonaigh), two unremarkable sisters, a baby, and, her father, the coarse and irresponsible Da (Michael Patric), who gets his smarts from the bottom of a beer bottle. Cáit is the mute observer of the family dynamic, internalizing the family's petty missteps and quarrels and being a witness to the loveless marriage of her folks.

That dynamic reaches a breaking point when the wife stumbles into another witless pregnancy, and Da, knowing he cannot care for his growing brood, decides to relieve the family of another mouth to feed by farming out stolid Cáit to a distant country cousin, a move to which she succumbs without question. The new foster family, a childless older couple, lives miles away in another part of rural Ireland.

Cáit's new home is better kept than her own, with a warmer feel. Most of that warmth comes from the wife, Eibhlin (touchingly played by Carrie Crowley), while the husband Séan (Andrew Bennett), is the prototype taciturn farmer who speaks more easily to his cows than to any humans around. He stands apart from the girl, decent but distant, and, though their interactions are at first halting, they begin to slowly connect by doing chores around the place.

That is pretty much all there is to the plot of the movie, but one notes the forming of a relationship ever so slowly: through wearing rough boots in the slough, by absorbing recipes, through working the milking machines at night, by giving straight answers to tentative questions. It is a delicate weaving of domestic ties that little Cáit has never experienced. An incident at the family well threatens Cáit's life but turns out to prove how much she means to the couple, and a family secret is inadvertently revealed to Cáit, who, in her forthright way, passes it on to the older couple.

Young Clinch is a wonder in the film, a revelation of restraint and off-hand sweetness. She stands in as an all-seeing eye whom you see palpably (but barely) coming out of her delicate shell. A gesture as modest and benign as a big hug here has the power of an explosion. Even in her quietude, you can see how the foster parents fall for her.

The film was made by Colm Bairéad who also wrote the screenplay from a novella by Claire Keegan called *Foster*. His direction is enhanced enormously by exquisite, studied photography by Kate McCullough and a subtle, suggestive score by Stephen Rennicks.

Sure, and it's a wonder to behold.

*(The film, which opened in local cinemas in late February, is rated "PG-13," and runs 94 minutes).*

(February 2023)