

## Some Mother's Son

In the grim chronology of the British conflict with the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Northern Ireland, the winter/spring of 1981 stands out as a defining moment, punctuated particularly by the fasting death of IRA activist Bobby Sands on May 5, 1981, in the Maze Prison in Belfast. The events leading up to that hunger strike and its eventual resolution form the political context of a splendid new motion picture, *Some Mother's Son*.

While this actual context gives definition and weight to *Some Mother's Son*, the film is much less about contemporary Northern Ireland politics than it is about the personal life-and-death battle of two women for the very bodies and souls of their politically committed sons. It is wrenching as is all real tragedy, with all its inevitability, its struggle, its ultimate calamity--but also its pity and catharsis.

The dramatic core of the film, co-authored by Irishmen Terry George (who also directed) and Jim Sheridan (*My Left Foot*, *The Field*), is fictional, presenting two Belfast mothers, teacher and widow Kathleen Quigley (Helen Mirren), and farmer Annie Higgins (Fionnula Flanagan), who, though of differing backgrounds and views, come together to support their IRA-member sons in prison after the young men's capture. There are class and taste differences between Kathleen and Annie: the former is more educated, high-toned, circumspect, and works in sensible heels, while the latter is earthier, tougher, more opinionated and sports rubber boots for work. Kathleen is prudent but no prude; more or less a pacifist, she doesn't want any trouble. Annie is a fervent IRA backer (she has already lost one son to the British Army) and wants the Brits out. These contrasts are sketched matter-of-factly, unobtrusively. They are highlighted at their sons' trial, where Annie's reaction to the guilty verdict is defiance while Kathleen is simply incredulous before what her son Gerard (Aidan Gillen) has done.

With their sons in prison, however, the two women's differences fade as they come to share concern for the welfare of their boys. They commiserate, picket, and lobby on behalf of the jailed IRA members, who first launch a "blanket protest" against wearing prison garb, then defile their cells when they are refused bathroom privileges, and finally launch hunger strikes to assert their rights as "political prisoners" rather than common criminals. The fast, launched by Bobby Sands (John Lynch), is in earnest, and the women are thrown into the dilemma of backing their son's protest--and watching them die--or defying their sons' convictions and having them tube-fed to survive.

George and Sheridan have maneuvered within this territory before. They collaborated in 1993 on *In the Name of the Father*, another film with a prison context and an IRA angle. This time, however, the raw power of that earlier, simpler story--of a man wrongly imprisoned as an IRA terrorist--has been supplanted by the more complex motives and emotions of two disparate women who have spawned true rebels. And the two lead actresses perfectly incarnate these women.

Fionnula Flanagan as Annie has the more straight-ahead, uncomplicated role, and she does it proud. A veteran of film, TV, and, especially, theater, Flanagan is a sturdy, forthright presence who exhibits ideological firmness together with tenacious tenderness for her boy (as well as a lovely brogue). She knows she is right, she knows

her boy is right--but she must watch him die.

Helen Mirren's Kathleen is a more equivocal character and all the richer for that. Mirren (best known as inspector Jane Tennison in the "Prime Suspect" PBS TV series) portrays beautifully a conventional woman gradually drawn, against her very nature, into political--and personal--extremis. The viewer, carried along by her compelling performance, joins in her reluctantly escalating battle with British authorities, from cajoling officials through joining IRA election campaigns to directly appealing to the government. Her ultimate actions to save her son are quietly heroic. It is film acting rich in authenticity and commitment.

The two principals play off each other superbly, too; there's a sweet scene of them over drinks, bonding as stressed-out mothers for the first time, with Annie suggesting to Kathleen: "Would you like to try a wee Valium?"

Secondary roles are well handled, too, especially Lynch as the minuscule martyr Bobby Sands, young Gillen as the dogged yet vulnerable rebel son Gerard, and Ciaran Hinds as the testy IRA political operative Danny Boyle. The one real false note in *Some Mother's Son* is the character of Farnsworth, the British government representative who plots the campaign against the IRA. Played too broadly by Tom Hollander as unremittingly nasty, it's a role lacking in the roundedness of the others (and as representative of the tough Thatcher government stand of the time, it will surely offend many English viewers).

George, directing his first film, achieves striking contrasts between the workaday life of the mothers and the bleak cells of their sons, and he maintains a good sense of pace, working up a sense of momentum as the hunger strike builds. He and his production designer, David Wilson, have also created a convincing Maze Prison, whose monochromatic cells and hallways are just as uniform and grim as they are meant to be. Adding considerably to the pulse and spirit of the motion picture is Bill Whelan's Celtic-tinged musical score with the distinctive flavor of poignant Irish airs (Whelan is the composer of the now famous "Riverdance" music).

For those filmgoers who admire and appreciate serious drama delivered by superior actors (in a medium where they are not found often enough), *Some Mother's Son* is thrilling. It may wring you out, but it will leave you feeling clean.

*("Some Mother's Son" is rated "R" for brief--and totally unlusty--nudity, curt violence, and very mature subject matter).*

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