

Saying goodbye to Frankie : Sheridan's "In America"

When the director Jim Sheridan and his family came to America, across the border from Canada, they came with hope and baggage like many immigrants who are forced to illegally enter this country. When this movie was made immigration was not a political issue. They sought something that couldn't be found in their home Ireland, something they didn't get in Canada, and were searching for in Manhattan. Like other immigrants there is always a particular crises that fuels the movement from the 'village of birth' to a new country to become an immigrant. Ahktar, (1995) himself an immigrant to the United States, describes this search from a psychic perspective, as a third stage of re-integration of one's identity, one in which a fragile division occurs between the original 'native' self and the newly struggling 'immigrant' self. But it is clear that Sheridan, who in reality couldn't give up his long term investment in this script, a now successful Irish film-writer and director, had deeply personal reasons to make this film. (In the Name of the Father .My Left Foot, The Boxer). He also suggests an impetus for immigrating as being the tragic death of a child.

Sheridan and his daughters, Naomi and Kirsten Sheridan joined in creating and finishing this script, which manages to be artfully deceptive in its distribution of autobiographical facts and seemingly magical fiction. Sheridan, his wife Fran, and his two little girls *did* enter the United States illegally in 1982 by crossing the

Canadian border—they posed as "tourists on holiday," as in the movie, hiding their real intention to live and work in Manhattan. This sets a biographical tone to the work and it is in the first scenes and the casual miscounting of their children that we are first introduced to the missing child, Frankie. In public interviews he reported that the cinematic crossing goes much more smoothly in the film than it reportedly did in real life. What emerges is a pattern of juggling facts and fictions for a variety of melodramatic reasons that sentimentally lifts the plot to the level of a charming Irish family tale. In so doing it allows, if not seduces the audience to misperceive its underpinning in mourning for a dead child.

From Di Chirico including a hearse in the shadow of a painting in memory of his view of a hearse taking his sister's casket away, to Freud's understanding of mourning perhaps initiated by the early death of a sibling and the later death of his grandchild, to Andre Green's (2001) recent struggles to understand the psychic negativity that emerges through his metaphoric concept of "the dead mother," the literature on and representation of mourning is complex in both art and psychoanalysis. In all there is a search for understanding of that black and foul mood, that "shadow over the ego" that persists after the early death of a loved one. The history of melancholia clearly shows that relationship between a mood disorder and mourning while Wolfenstein's (1966, 1969) work on the capacity to mourn and effect of death of a parent on children's development is all

but forgotten today. There is little literature, other than anecdotal, on the impact of the death of a child on an entire family. While Freud recounting of his brother's death is but one piece of that evidence, to this day I remember meeting a well-known psychoanalyst at a cocktail party following a workshop introducing himself as having lost a sibling when he was younger than Freud. As he revealed, too casually, many family myths are built on death of an unborn child, and currently I have in treatment two men whose development was effected by following the birth of a still-born children, or the report of a series of miscarriages before their birth.

“In America “reveals the family death early in the film and then deals with it in at times a compelling and too often a sentimental manner. In the movie, the husband is named Johnny (Paddy Considine), the wife Sarah (Samantha Morton); the older daughter Christy (Sarah Bolger) and the younger one Ariel (Emma Bolger) are played by real sisters. Their sweet family closeness and silent seeking for the deceased “Frankie” serves as a safety net when the major characters face melodramatic hurdles, such as the moment when the out of work Johnny gambles his family’s entire savings on his skill at a pitch-ball stand in a street fair just to win an “E.T. “doll for his youngest daughter; or, when Sarah risks her life in a hazardous pregnancy in order to mitigate the guilt she feels for the earlier accidental death of her infant son in a melodramatic replacement fantasy. An act (

within the structure of the plot) that worsens the family's financial situation and sets up the improbable African-Irish ending

Frankie—to whom Jim Sheridan's film is dedicated—was, in confessional interviews, revealed to be not Sheridan's son as depicted in the movie, but his younger brother in real life. One result of this creative displacement is a kind of depressive ventriloquism spanning three generations, in which Sheridan is the master ventriloquist mourning for his brother in various disparate verbal and narrative elements of the film. Few director-writers have given us a close up view of the disguised process of mourning since the provocative and evocative scenes in *The Singing Detective* (1986) of the representation of the authors, Dennis Potter mother's suicide and Lasse Hallstrom's "My life as a Dog" (1987) about a parents death.

With sets mostly in Dublin and only partly in his adopted Manhattan, the pervasive look of the settings is a gritty abstraction of the poverty of their circumstances. One result of the lack of familiarity of the scenes is a heightened magnifying focus on the family vignettes allowing an Irish cuteness to emerge that leavens, if not masks the seriousness of the melodrama and the family's insistence on going forward. A unlikely friendship with an "dying" AIDS-afflicted painter-neighbor Djimon Hounsou as Mateo initiated by the girls, the inclusion of a gentle Halloween scene in a Catholic school bring at a safe distance through Mr. Sheridan's stand ins,

images of death and graphically realized unavoidable psychic pain. Finally the mystic merger of baby Frankie and a now deceased Mateo traveling to the moon and beyond offers an oddly acceptable magical (childlike ?) solution to the return of love between the parents and the birth of a replacement child, and the need for money.

As psychoanalysts we may wonder and likely speculate, in the absence of Jim Sheridan in our office and associating on our couch, what drove him to this indirect confessional movie. Private confessions are a powerful story line and its potential for complex psychic meaning beyond this current effort. Confessing may serve to stop punishing a guilty self while it may also indict or blame others guilty or innocent. The analyst as father confessor is a familiar figure in the world of transference yet setting up the audience in the capacity of receiving a disguised confession is an interesting creative adaptation to early mourning. The function of confession in the creation of art would seem to place its expression in public allowing the art's audience a transient identification with the experience or both guilt, loss and mourning. Yet we are unable to comb through the images in the film to find an inkling of something deeper. Movies as material entities, static and infinitely repeatable, can not engage in a reciprocal exchange with any interpreter. Nor can they reveal either an unconscious or differing levels of psyche repressed as

when there is a reciprocal relationship in the transference and through the uncovering process subsequent to interpreting

The status of a confessional truth by a movie's creator, as Jim Sheridan made in his interview revealing that Frankie was his brother, while delicate and suggestive has superficial currency when seeking deeper layers of repressed desires, shame, conflicts or fantasies. Such a public expression from a creative person likely further implicates more extensive, less sensitive, exposure-shame dynamics than other people. Public revelations of guilt, now so frequent in the media and stage plays, may itself serve to hide other dynamics such as a wish for forgiveness from some transference figure or they may evoke an infinite regress. From another perspective, certain creative individuals are able to use their crafts medium to publicly bear mourning and continue to create, generating artistic products certainly both instructive and illuminating. The action (praxis) of mourning, as revealed recently by the destructive 9/11 loss of life, while psychoanalytically similar among individuals remains individual, complex and often continuous, both effecting and contributing to the creation of myths, memorials and art.

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