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Chapter_11_-_Fuelling_our_Imagination_In_Conversation_with_Oscar_and_BAFTA_winning_writer_-_director_duo_Tom_Berkeley_&_Ross_White_An_Irish_Goodbye[1].mp3

Moderator questions in Bold, Respondents in Regular text.

KEY: **Unable to decipher** = (inaudible + timecode), **Phonetic spelling** (ph) + timecode), **Missed word** = (mw + timecode), **Talking over each other** = (talking over each other + timecode).

Moderator: Please give a very warm welcome to Ross White and Tom Berkeley, and the Oscar is in the room. It's also incredibly heavy, much heavier than it looks. Really lovely to have you with us today.

Ross White: Thanks for having us.

Moderator: Thank you so much and it's a really exciting sector for Northern Ireland, isn't it? The creative industries. But first of all, I, I just want you to tell everyone what life has been like since that Oscar win, and all those other awards.

Ross White: Yeah, it's been a-, it's been a good year for us, for sure. You know, you watch back that video, it's hard to believe it all really happened, to be honest. You're still, sort of, pinching yourself. I mean, for us, representing Northern Ireland on the global stage has been so important. And also, you know, being in these rooms, rubbing shoulders with so many of our cinematic heroes, Steven Spielberg, Tom Cruise and Mr Elton John, it's been a year of 'pinch me' moments, I think.

Moderator: Yeah, I'm sure a similar theme from you, Tom.

Tom Berkeley: Yeah, I mean, as baptisms of fire go, it's probably the most exciting one we could have imagined. I think there was a bit of a charm for us being a short film. You know, it's a small production, a very home-grown production, and it meant that we were, kind of, going through this crazy journey, you know, really just us and our-, and our cast. And I think, you know, that that was just the, the, the charm of the experience, really, for us was it felt like we had the, the whole country behind us, where maybe some of our, kind of, competitor films had bigger, sort of, maybe studios with them or something like that. We had Northern Ireland helping, kind of, sing us over the line.

Moderator: And charm is a great word, it really is an incredibly charming film. And I, I was thinking, Ross, that you were probably, doing some calculations, around about fourteen when

Game of Thrones started production here, and of course that, you know, a huge global hit, very much the leading edge of that surge in the creative industries here. What kind of influence was that for you?

Ross White: Yeah, I think Game of Thrones is clearly the sort of-, the trailblazer, you know. It came here as the first, kind of, global, kind of, super production to decide, you know, to set up shop here, but since then, this has become a base for so many huge international, sort of, multinational productions and, you know, credit has to go to our film board, Northern Ireland Screen, who've, sort of, stewarded that. And I guess we've got so many fantastic studio spaces now, we've got beautiful locations, which are clear for all to see, but I think, for me, what's been the most, kind of, inspiring is how that has led to a kind of grassroots change and stuff being-, you know, sort of, projects being made by local makers. You know, I look at Lisa McGee with Derry Girls that you mentioned. You know, that's a homegrown, kind of, project that, you know, you set up a project here, you hope that it travels. That is a success story to show that that's gone globally. You know, it's one of the most viewed things on American Netflix as well. So, it's great to see that people are hungry for these stories.

Moderator: Yes, and because of that buzz around this sector and, you know, the associations that people outside Northern Ireland have with this place because of the creative industries, do you think there is a crossover, that it helps create a general sense of a buzz around Northern Ireland and other business and industry here? I wonder what your sense of that is, Tom?

Tom Berkeley: I think massively, yes. I mean, the exports that we're talking about with Thrones and Derry-, I think Martin Scorsese said that Derry Girls was one of his favourite things on TV in, like, a recent interview, but, you know, it's, it's clear that it's operating at the forefront of the industry, and for such a young industry, comparatively, here as well is amazing to see the footprint that it's achieved in such a short space of time, but I suppose I see that, kind of, looking from an outsider's point in, as a more of a holistic representation of, of Northern Ireland, whether that's in industries that are directly linked and impacted to film and TV. I know we've got The Deluxe Group here and film tourism, hospitality, or whether other industries, I know there's obviously manufacturing and the tech side of things, I think there is a-, there is a sort of a hunger and maybe an underdog spirit. A kind of innovation that we've definitely felt like we've benefited from with the crews that we've worked with. Probably to do with the, kind of, the link between the, sort of, the industrial past and the, sort of, creative heritage here coming together and working, kind of, in harmony. And I think you can see that across multiple industries.

Moderator: And just staying with you for a second, Tom, what has it been like for someone who has grown up in, in Gloucester?

Tom Berkeley: Yeah, yeah, Gloucester, yeah.

Moderator: Yeah. Something of an adopted home now for-,

Tom Berkeley: Oh, yeah.

Moderator: Is Northern Ireland-, does Northern Ireland feel like that for you?

Tom Berkeley: I've been-, yeah, I've been coming here-, I mean, me and Ross have been, sort of, best friends since about ten years now and-, you know, so I, I first just came here, kind of, almost socially. I remember Ross taking me to a place called Ballyhackamore that he said had so many nice food places, they've renamed it Ballysnackamore, and I thought any place that's got Ballysnackamore, I need to visit. I remember my first Ulster fry, you know, which I, I think is probably better than our equivalent over in England. And I-, and I have to say, like, it's, it's-, I think the crews here are just so amazing to work with. There is such a love of craft and of-, and of hard work, but also they're the kind of people that you can go to the pub with at the end of the day and have an amazing time with, and I think that is a really particular strength that, that, that this place has above many others.

Moderator: Ross, you touched on support, and no matter what sector you're in, whether it's yours or any of the sectors that we've been talking about today, we know how important it is to have that atmosphere of support and help. What kind of advice and guidance did you get, the two of you get, starting out?

Ross White: Yeah, as I mentioned, the film board here have been, sort of, strong supporters of us. They helped us through this whole journey, you know, it's, sort of, something you can only really work out as you go and they really guided us through that. And I-, and I think now, moving forward to the next step, which is away from short films, and the feature-length things, we're receiving guidance and I guess looking at, you know, this is all about global, sort of, working together and collaboration, and I think our industry is one of the most purely global industries going, you know. Things that are dreamt up in Hollywood end up shooting here and, and the, sort of-, it's an arm-in-arm link between the, kind of, all these places around the world. So, even our collaboration is, you know, across the Irish Sea, so it's-, yeah, it's been fantastic on that front.

Moderator: Yeah, I mean, is it-, is it possible for you to compare what the atmosphere is like to work here in, in contrast to other areas? I don't know if that's something that you can talk about.

Tom Berkeley: I think-, I think-, I think as I, kind of, was alluding to there is the-, I think the, kind of, the artistic heritage here meeting with this, sort of, the industrial past is, is the real strength of it. And I think that the, the, the crews here for us are just so fantastic to work with. We've been-, we've been so blessed, especially working in short film, you know. It's-, these aren't the big studio productions that are also shooting here as well, but you get to use the same crews, and they're-, you know, they're, kind of, definitely up there with, with the best in the world. It's, it's, kind of, no surprise to me that so many of, of the huge studios are choosing this as the destination, because these are the people that, that, kind of, make

it happen, and on the ground there, they're wonderful to work with. They just go above and beyond at any point for the love of story telling, which is, obviously, you know-, it's in the fibres, you know, here and I think-, yeah.

Ross White: Yeah, and what-, and what I'd say as well, I suppose, in the strength of Northern Ireland Screen and our Arts Council here. They, they really punch above their weight, time and time again, you know. It's common knowledge that Northern Ireland, on these islands, is the, sort of, lowest funded for the arts and, you know, we look to our UK neighbours. We receive less than half per capita than England, Wales and Scotland, and less than a quarter from our neighbours in the Republic. So, I think what's exciting about that is that we are achieving these amazing things with a relatively low amount of investment, so imagine what could be possible with more backing, with more support, more grassroots funding. That's just a really exciting opportunity.

Moderator: And I think a thread in what you're saying there that's been a theme of the day is just, you know, people going-, when you're talking about the crews, Tom, you know, people going above and beyond to get-, to get the job done. How much, then, has it helped you, as you started out and as young writers, producers, directors, for people to know that you're coming from this place, or that you're working in this place where your work is based, you know, has that helped you?

Ross White: Yeah, well, we were fortunate to be part of the, kind of, the green wave that they were calling it this year at the Oscars, which was an unprecedented number of Irish nominees from all over Ireland, you know. I think there were fourteen nominees overall, a quarter of all of the acting nominees were Irish, which is unbelievable, really, for such a small place. So, I think, for us, you know, making An Irish Goodbye, when you're making a project in this place and of this place, you're hoping that it will travel and you're, kind of, waiting to see on tenterhooks, and what has taken us aback has been to see that it's travelled across five continents. It's found audiences all over the world who've reacted so warmly to it, and I think that's a testament to people's hunger for this place, people of this place, the stories of this place. And I think that goes from audiences right through to customers, you know. This place is having a moment and there's a real opportunity, as was mentioned in the last panel, for that to be doubled down upon. And, you know, I live here and to see the change that has happened in this city for the last five years even, it feels like it's constantly in a-, in a place of momentum and, and moving forward and becoming such a, Belfast especially, a metropolitan city that is a, sort of, go-to destination.

Moderator: You talked a little bit earlier about, you know, grassroots projects, and, and it would be interesting just to expand on that a little bit, Tom. You know, so with some of the really big movie companies and production houses working here in, in Northern Ireland, how much does that help people who are starting off on a much smaller scale?

Tom Berkeley: Yeah, I mean, if you think about the-, you know, the crews here that are getting the wonderful experience working with technology that's at the forefront of technology that were being used on this-, on this massive stuff that, kind of, by osmosis, sort of, trickles down and, you know, we then

become the, sort of, benefactors of that as emerging film makers that get to work with, you know, heads of department and, and studio executives that are working at the, the top of their fields, that, that we get to end up working with on our-, on our productions as well.

Moderator: Okay. Something I really want to chat to you about is, and again, a thread running through today, as we've talked about the quality of the workforce here, but quality of life is obviously really important. The two go hand in hand. And I, I wonder, from your perspective as someone, you know, who's been brought up here and, and, and, lived here and work-, works here, you know, what you can say about the quality of life. And then, Tom, as someone who has come to know Northern Ireland since you were eighteen, for the last ten years, what that quality of life here feels like to you in contrast to other places you've been?

Ross White: Yeah, well, I mean, I would say, when I was eighteen, I, I moved away from the place for five years. I thought, at that age, you know, I'd, I'd seen it all, I'd got all the place had to offer me and I, I moved away thinking, quite naively, that I'd, I'd seen all of Northern Ireland. And I came back when I was 23 and, not just what has changed, but what has always been there, the, the place is so rich, historically, in this moment with what is happening. You know, my, my partner moved over from England. You know, we met in England and she moved over here and she, I mean, she's more of a Belfast lover than even I am. She just is, you know, smitten with the place and she works in the video game industry, which is another thriving, kind of, industry here. So, look, I-, I've got so many friends who have moved, who have made that move for work or for partners or whatever reason to live here, and everybody feels like it is the best-kept secret, you know, in, in the UK and Ireland. The, the, sort of, affordability of life here, the, the metropolitan state of the city, the brilliant, you know, the music scene here, they come-, all these things that make life so-, sort of, add that little bit of extra on top for people and for people living here. So, I think we're very privileged here. As I said, it feels like the best-kept secret and I feel like I'm, kind of, giving it all away and you're all going to move here now, so.

Moderator: You're, you're giving away the secret. Well, I think, actually, possibly, some people have done that earlier in the day, but, you know, let's say it again. And Tom, your thoughts on that question?

Tom Berkeley: Yeah, no, I mean, Ross was a, a wonderful, sort of, tour guide, really. I mean, I think you'd, you'd left Northern Ireland at, at eighteen to, to come over and train in London, and then it was quite-, it was something about rediscovering the place again with you when you decided to, kind of, move back home and there's just some-, everything you could, kind of, really want within a stone's throw. I mean, we've done some, sort of, lovely day trips out to the coast, up to the North coast. You know, we're going there for your birthday next month, you know, and, and it's, it's, it's just such a pleasure to be able to come somewhere, as you say, with such a rich culture. I remember the first few visits feeling quite envious. You know, Gloucester, where I grew up, is not the, sort of, centre of the universe, but it definitely felt like, here, there was, you know, a love of, of the artistic, a love of story-telling, you know. Journeys with taxi drivers are the, sort of, the most enjoyable parts, almost. You know, the, the stories that you end up, up getting there. And there's a-, there's a friendliness-,

Moderator: Yeah, there have been a few shout-outs for taxi drivers today.

Tom Berkeley: Yeah, yeah, yeah, rightly so.

Moderator: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Definitely characters, that's for sure, in Northern Ireland. And just, you were talking about 'pinch me' moments. I mean, obviously, your Oscar is, sort of, living in your home and part of your, your daily life, but you must look at it sometimes and think, 'Wow. That's really surreal. I've got an Oscar on that shelf.'

Ross White: Oh, it's totally daft, yes, and I was saying earlier, you know, you were asking where I keep it, and I was saying it just-, it lives in a poor little Ikea sideboard, so it's really an, an unglamorous life for my Oscar, compared to all of its mates over in, you know, Beverly Hills and that.

Moderator: And, of course, everyone here will be really interested to know what is next for you both? What, what's in the pipeline, Tom?

Tom Berkeley: Yeah, we're, we're just back from Telluride Film Festival in Colorado where we did the international premier of our new short film, which is called The Golden West. We were set out to make three short films before we, kind of, hopefully, move into feature film-land, and that's what we're doing now. We're, we're writing our, sort of, debut feature. So, we're, kind of, hibernating away and trying to make that jump between the, sort of, short form and the-, and the long form.

Moderator: And is that all top secret-, talking of secrets, can you tell us anything about that at this stage or not?

Tom Berkeley: It's top secret, what can I say?

Ross White: It's early-, yeah.

Tom Berkeley: It is early days. It's another-, we have a 'siblings' theme in a lot of our work because of some-, probably some sort of Freudian thing going on here, but it's another sibling rivalry story. I can tell you that.

Moderator: Well, if you haven't seen An Irish Goodbye, please do take a look, and we look forward to seeing what comes next. It's been fantastic to talk to you. Congratulations again on a fantastic

year, all your awards, and may you go from strength to strength.

Tom Berkeley: Thank you.

Ross White: Thank you so much for having us.

Moderator: Ross White and Tom Berkeley. Thank you so much.

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