

THE SUNDAY BUSINESS POST

Agenda

EDITED BY FIONA NESS

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The PRODUCERS



Jackie Larkin of Newbridge Pictures, Heidi Egger of Quidam and Lesley McKimm of New Grange Pictures

MCCALL STUDIO

Film producers in Ireland are still flying the flag, despite the tightening belts of financiers and decline of our local cinematic industry



Employees of Irish production company Quidam filming El Gusto in Algiers recently

INSIDE STORY



ANDREW LYNCH

Sadly, it's not all sunglasses and autographs. Producing films in Ireland today is, instead, a hard slog with no guarantees except an inhuman workload and lots of financial headaches. The glory days of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Irish films such as *My Left Foot* and *The Crying Game* won Oscars and big-budget productions including *Saving Private Ryan* and *Braveheart* were filmed here, would appear to be well and truly over.

Ireland is a nation of film lovers, with the second highest level of cinema attendance in Europe. Last year, however, Irish films took a paltry €5 million from the €104 million spent at the box office, and only two made it into the top 100 releases (*The Wind That Shakes The Barley* and *Breakfast On Pluto*).

So what's gone wrong? The producers on these pages are in as good a position to know as anyone. They're among the most successful working in the Irish film industry today, but none of that success has come easy.

Most of them complain about the pressure on budgets for indigenous productions and the lack of support for feature films from the national broadcaster. They worry that the growth in Brit-

ish dramas being shot here means that it's sometimes hard to recruit their own crews. They talk wistfully about how hard it is to obtain foreign distribution and sales for Irish films. They are broadly appreciative of the financial breaks they get from government and the Irish Film Board (they were all successful applicants for the IFB's new Multiple Project Development scheme), but they feel that a lot more could be done.

Luckily, they also have one important other quality without which no film would ever get made. They have optimism.

Martina Niland (Samson Films)

Martina Niland always knew she wanted to be in films. Studying communications in the Dublin Institute of Technology in the late 1990s, she found that "no matter how hard I tried to avoid producing, I always seemed to end up falling into it and enjoying it. It gives you immense satisfaction to see a film come together, from the initial idea all the way up to having a premiere. When you're the producer, you

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YOUR SAVINGS SPECIALISTS

coverstory

< FROM PAGE 1

are, or at least you should be, all over every aspect of the film, every step of the way.

"I also love working with writers and directors and connecting with the crew of people who ultimately make it all happen. For me, making films is 100 per cent a collaborative process, and I love being part of that team."

Having spent her initial post-college years producing low or no-budget short movies, she joined veteran producer David Collins at Samson Films, where her role is to nurture new writers and directors through shorts and into features. She has already amassed an impressive list of credits, including the Travellers documentary Pavee Lackeen and the film Once, which stars Glen Hansard of the Frames and recently won the World Audience Award at the Sundance Festival.

When asked what are the biggest challenges facing young Irish producers, she says simply: "Survival. There's a lot of uncertainty within the industry. Over the past five years I've produced three feature films on extremely tight budgets, all of which received great critical acclaim and, in the case of Pavee Lackeen and Once, recognition from prestigious film festivals such as Venice and Sundance.

"But it's impossible to survive financially on such projects, as it is with the larger €1-1.5 million budgets that are very typical of features here. For larger budgets, Irish producers must look to Britain and beyond.

"What is not so easy is the ability to produce smaller, more improvised, riskier films such as Once. It's a double-edged sword, really. If we'd shot on a bigger budget, we wouldn't have got the intimate and understated feel that resonated so well with audiences. For a start, there's no way we could have shot on the streets like we did if there were big units parked and lights erected.

"But to make a film like that more than once is a big ask, and if I hadn't produced it under the umbrella of Samson Films and also had other stuff going on, I'd probably be on the breadline now."

Notwithstanding all these concerns, Niland insists that



Jackie Larkin, Heidi Egger and Lesley McKimm outside the Irish Film Centre

MCCALL STUDIO



Katie Holly



Safinez Bousbia



Paul Young



Martina Niland

heavily on very personal experiences that are related to local areas," says Safinez. "Therefore, international audiences find it hard to identify with them."

"The most important issue

think we automatically have a direct route to creating mainstream and successful productions and that it's somehow easier for us than our European counterparts. But the truth is that we're in even great-

of emigration and alienation, and real issues affecting the forgotten Irish in London," says Jackie. "This is a film which we hope will reignite the debate on the forgotten Irish emigrants in London, who

"As always, there's pressure on budgets and rising costs. You have to compete for financing in the international landscape and then, once your film is made, compete for sales. The sheer volume of films being

ning animation company, specialising in original projects for television, film and multimedia. The company currently employs 70 people based at their new studios, which take up three floors of the Maltings

Say it with smileys?

OFF MESSAGE



NADINE O'REGAN



communication. It's not just the smiley faces you have to worry about. There's also that dastardly exclamation mark (too shrill?), the overall tone and then there's the most dangerous character of all – the "x" when it's not your partner you're addressing.

To smiley or not to smiley, that is the question. Not exactly Hamlet's question, admittedly, but it's an important one nonetheless. Yes, that smiley face might look like just another innocuous symbol on your mobile phone, but battle lines are increasingly being drawn over smiley faces, as most users of mobile phones have come to realise. Here's an excerpt from a conversation I recently had with a friend.

Me: "I know you hate it, but I'm going to use the smiley face anyway."
Friend: "Do you have to?"
Me: "Yes. Why not?"
Friend: "It's just... awful."
Me: " :) "

It is a sign of the new times that such a thing should become an issue. More and more, we communicate not through meetings and phone conversations, but via text messages, e-mail and instant messaging. The result is that we have bounded into a shadowy place where the etiquette and rules for communication have yet to

When should you use an "x"? Personally I'll use it if I'm in a rush, so people don't think I'm being brusque with them, or if it's a good friend. I recently put an "x" in an e-mail to one of my employers – a man who has been a friend of mine for ten years. When I mentioned this to my sister, however, she told me it was the equivalent of having flashed my cleavage at him. Yikes! I got a friendly response from him. My next e-mail could have been penned by a Carmelite nun.

No question, it's a jungle out there on the interweb. But for all the muddles and mayhem that can be caused, there is something lovely about the fact that we're making all this up as we go along.

When I was in primary school, we were taught how to write letters to employers.

IT WAS ONLY WHEN MY FRIENDS

wouldn't have got the intimate and understated feel that resonated so well with audiences. For a start, there's no way we could have shot on the streets like we did if there were big units parked and lights erected.

"But to make a film like that more than once is a big ask, and if I hadn't produced it under the umbrella of Samson Films and also had other stuff going on, I'd probably be on the breadline now."

Notwithstanding all these concerns, Niland insists that she's optimistic about the future. "I do think, despite all the uncertainty out there, that this is a good time for Irish film. We are once again shining on the international stage, picking up many prestigious awards. This is great for everyone involved on every level, from the government to the fundraisers to the filmmakers themselves, not to mention the cultural importance of having our own stories reach an international audience."

Safinez Bousbia and Heidi Egger (Quidam Productions)

For Safinez Bousbia, being a producer means getting used to frustration. She says that she constantly comes across people "who tell you that something is not commercial enough, people who constantly want to work with clichés and formulae". She believes strongly in "stepping away from what is expected, to create something new".

Safinez never set out to be a producer. Algerian by birth, she lived in various countries before coming to Ireland to do a master's degree in design.

Visiting a mirror shop in the Casbah on a trip back home, she stumbled across the story of a multi-ethnic group of Muslim and Jewish musicians who were scattered to the winds 50 years ago by the Algerian revolution. Fascinated, she determined to track them down and reunite them for a documentary. The result, *El Gusto*, has evolved into a multimedia project akin to the Buena Vista Social Club, including live tours and albums as well as the movie.

Heidi Egger is an Australian with a background in television and radio production, who came to Dublin six years ago for a holiday and never left. When she heard about Safinez's project, she was hooked, and the pair ended up forming a production company together.

Quidam Productions, partly supported by the Irish Film Board, aims to use music to tell compelling personal stories, often set against the broader backdrop of religion or politics.

"Many Irish films rely too



Katie Holly

heavily on very personal experiences that are related to local areas," says Safinez. "Therefore, international audiences find it hard to identify with them."

"The most important issue for Irish producers is to keep looking for strong universal stories that can travel internationally," agrees Heidi. "Many Irish producers seem to feel they have to look locally for their stories, especially because the funding sources here are limited and mostly geared towards Irish content. But we've found that there are a lot of alternative sources of finance out there if you keep thinking outside the box."

"Many Irish productions go into production when the screenplay isn't ready and, if you're working with a low budget – as most Irish films are – you cannot afford to go into production with a weak screenplay, because you won't have splashy effects, huge stars and a massive marketing campaign behind you to hide the fact that your screenplay just doesn't stand up. I've also found that there's a shortage of strong Irish screenwriters, which is surprising for such a literary country."

For Safinez, the most rewarding thing about producing is looking back and seeing all the obstacles that she's managed to overcome. "At the time, these things seem impossible," she says, "and it's a good feeling to see that anything is possible at the end of the day."

Heidi enjoys the cultural diversity of the job, but gets irritated by "people who talk the talk and promise the world, but deliver nothing. Also, people who are afraid or unwilling to make a concrete decision. These people cause unnecessary delays in a business that's already extremely time-consuming."

Quidam is developing several other features, including a documentary on the Egyptian trance music linked to a matrilineal Sufi cult and a drama titled *Nollywood Paradiso* about the Nigerian film industry.

Jackie Larkin and Lesley McKimm (Newgrange Pictures)

Producer Jackie Larkin feels that there's a key misconception about Irish films. "Because we're making films in the English language, people



Safinez Bousbia

think we automatically have a direct route to creating mainstream and successful productions and that it's somehow easier for us than our European counterparts. But the truth is that we're in even greater competition with two of the most dominant film-making territories in the world, America and Britain.

"Almost 85 per cent of films being screened in Irish cinemas come from the US in the form of studio blockbusters. It's difficult to get screen space alongside these films, or to compete with their huge marketing budgets. So the challenge for us is to forge a distinctive voice and identity."

Jackie, a highly sought-after television producer whose long list of credits includes *Ballykissangel* and the award-winning factual drama *No Tears*, created *Newgrange Pictures* in 2005. Last September, it was merged with *Comet Films*, founded and run by the equally experienced producer Lesley McKimm. The two women have now joined forces to produce a distinctive and innovative slate of films from emerging and proven Irish film-making talent.

"There is definitely less money around for financing films," says Jackie. "So an increased emphasis has been placed on delivering the whole 'package' to potential financiers, who are continually looking for established directors and a named cast to be in place before they will even consider a project. That doesn't bode very well for new talent."

"The Irish Film board has recently made changes which actually really help in that sense, as they are now willing to come in first on production finance. This means that you already have finance in place from your own territory before going to the marketplace to raise the balance, which automatically creates a sense of confidence in your film."

The producers agree that the most satisfying project they've worked on together is *No Tears*, which told the story of the Hepatitis C scandal.

"It was great to be able to bring such an important story to an Irish audience," says Lesley. "And it was one of the highest-rated dramas on RTE, which goes to prove their appetite for strong, true Irish stories."

The two are in post-production with the film *Kings*, based on Jimmy Murphy's play *The Kings Of The Kilburn High Road*. "It touches on themes



Paul Young

of emigration and alienation, and real issues affecting the forgotten Irish in London," says Jackie. "This is a film which we hope will reignite the debate on the forgotten Irish emigrants in London, who helped put the country on its feet by sending regular pay packets home, but now have no real place of their own to call home."

Being a producer, they acknowledge, involves its fair share of frustrating experiences – most notably, having to shelve projects because of a lack of funding. "But this is the norm within the business," says Lesley. "You develop a slate of projects knowing all the time that you'll only get some of them into production."

Katie Holly (Blinder Films)

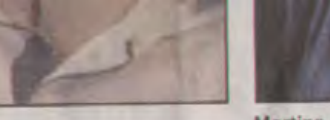
Katie Holly acknowledges that the Irish production scene has seen better days. "Certainly last year, there was a feeling that it was a quiet time in terms of feature films," she says. "The days are gone when Irish producers could avail of both British sales and funding, which in some cases provided up to 50 per cent of budgets."

"The films that have been notable, such as *Pavee Lackeen* and *Once*, were made almost under the radar, on very low budgets. If you want to be optimistic, maybe the constraints imposed by low budgets can engender a freshness and vitality."

"The problem is in the cost of releasing films internationally, particularly in the US – many distributors are just not willing to take the risk when the chances of having a break out success are so slim."

A film studies graduate whose credits include the BBC film *The Mighty Celt* (starring Robert Carlyle and Gillian Anderson), Holly was approached just over a year ago by the well-known Irish directors Kieron J Walsh and Richie Smyth. Together they've formed *Blinder Films*, a production company whose emphasis is on low-budget, contemporary dramas and documentaries.

"There's a definite sense that Irish producers are now looking to mainland Europe to forge partnerships and find stories that can translate, which will hopefully, also, ultimately help Irish films to travel. In recent times, I think there's quite a strong optimism about the possibilities of Irish film and the validity of Irish voices."



Martina Niland

"As always, there's pressure on budgets and rising costs. You have to compete for financing in the international landscape and then, once your film is made, compete for sales. The sheer volume of films being produced is staggering. It particularly hits home when you visit festivals such as Berlin or Cannes."

"It can be difficult to see how you can compete or stand out, and that makes it important as a producer to be constantly thinking about other ways to continue producing. For example, working in television drama, which is almost essential to staying afloat as a producer in Ireland, is also a great way to develop talent."

"For producers at the moment, there are far more competitive incentives out there in Britain and in eastern Europe. We're fortunate that we have excellent facilities and world-class crews. But this alone will ultimately, not be enough to keep productions coming here, once it stops making financial sense. So this needs to be reviewed and addressed without delay and it would really help if the government agreed to raise the spending cap for indigenous productions."

Widely acknowledged as one of the brightest new talents on the production scene, Holly's projects include *Whores*, a three-part documentary series for TG4 examining the history of prostitution in Ireland, and the feature film *Slice*, described as "a darkly tragic revenge thriller set in the world of Dublin sex trafficking".

Paul Young (Cartoon Saloon)

"Animation is a pretty risky business," says producer Paul Young. "My partners and I started working together so we could draw for a living. But you really have to love the projects you're doing, because it's not a career you choose if you want to make loads of money. If you have a hit show, then you can do well financially, but that can only happen after you've invested a lot of creative energy and taken a lot of knocks along the way."

Cartoon Saloon began as an informal partnership between a group of animators brought together by Young and Tom Moore, mostly from *Ballyfermot* and the *Young Irish Film Makers*, under the Fás Millennium Arts and Culture scheme in 1999. They've since developed it into a multi-award win-

ning animation company, specialising in original projects for television, film and multimedia. The company currently employs 70 people based at their new studios, which take up three floors of the Maltings building in central Kilkenny.

"Maintaining a critical mass of animation talent in the country is difficult when production is so sporadic," says Young. "The challenge for studios in Ireland is to keep productions going, so that when one finishes the animators can move across the street or county to another studio rather than over the ocean."

"All the animation producers in Ireland believe that RTE does not have a strong enough budget for commissioning young people's programming, so we must rely on Britain and other European broadcasters to buy into our shows instead. Unlike nearly all EU broadcasters, RTE does not have a quota to commission young people's programmes from Irish producers, which we all think should be addressed."

Young's big breakthrough came at the 2003 Cartoon Forum in Varese, Italy, when his cartoon series *Skunk Fu!* attracted major international interest. It has subsequently been sold around the world and will soon be shown on the BBC.

"As a producer, every time an investor signs up is a great thrill and a vote of confidence. There are so many projects doing the rounds that the competition to get broadcasters and distributors on board is very daunting, especially as budgets are getting smaller all the time."

"The reaction we got after pitching *Skunk Fu!* at the Cartoon Forum was very rewarding, as myself and the director Aidan Harte had spent months in preparation. We had 45 minutes to pitch our show to a turnout of over 200 broadcasters and investors. There was great potential for it to go horribly wrong in front of everyone and never be seen again. But after what was probably the most nerve-wracking 40 minutes of my life, we got a wonderful reaction, and managed to pre-sell it to the BBC and other European broadcasters."

Cartoon Saloon has also recently begun production on its flagship feature film *Brendan And The Secret Of Kells*, the animated story of the boy behind the famed *Book of Kells*. It features the vocal talents of Brendan Gleeson and Mick Lally.

awful. Me: " :) " It is a sign of the new times that such a thing should become an issue. More and more, we communicate not through meetings and phone conversations, but via text messages, e-mail and instant messaging. The result is that we have bounded into a shadowy place where the etiquette and rules for communication have yet to be defined.

While Lynne Truss was busy scolding the world for its poor grammar in *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, the world was busy trying to learn the rules for an entirely different game. The same questions keep cropping up. Romance: "How soon can you text someone after the first date?" Careers: "Can you ever text your employer?" Friends: "Are they a smiley face kind of person?"

With the aim of having people avoid new media gaffes, there are now classes you can take in e-mail etiquette. "Don't use caps for emphasis in the body of an e-mail. It looks and 'sounds' angry," counsels one teacher. "Don't use an automatic signature with every e-mail," says another. "Use only in your initial e-mail, not when replying to a message." And here's an important one: don't e-mail while angry. "Don't be too blunt. E-mail is the coldest form of communication."

Truly, it makes you long for the old days when mobile phones were the size of small boulders and nothing technology-wise had developed to the point where we had much choice.

By 2004, I was one of the few hardy souls still clinging on to a mobile phone that – forget glamorous smiley faces – didn't even have predictive text. While I marvelled at the long text messages being sent to me, I continued along my usual path – producing text messages that made it look like I was auditioning to be a member of *Public Enemy*. "NY1 goin to d pub?" I'd ask. "I b der with L at 9."

It was only when my friends started talking to me homie-style that I realised it was probably time to upgrade and become a bit more sophisticated.

Unfortunately, becoming sophisticated in new media terms isn't as easy as simply buying a more up-to-date phone or getting broadband installed in your house.

According to studies, more misunderstanding occurs with e-mails than with any other form of

about the fact that we're making all this up as we go along.

When I was in primary school, we were taught how to write letters to employers.

IT WAS ONLY WHEN MY FRIENDS STARTED TALKING TO ME HOMIE-STYLE THAT I REALISED IT WAS PROBABLY TIME TO UPGRADE AND BECOME A BIT MORE SOPHISTICATED

We were instructed when to say, "Yours faithfully", and when to say, "Yours sincerely". We were given clichés, in other words – and told to harness them relentlessly. This generation, by contrast, gets to slowly develop a new system of manners all by itself. It's exciting.

Still, though, with so many landmines waiting to explode beneath our feet, I think it's my Dad who's got the whole thing sussed. He has owned a mobile phone for years now, but while he can read text messages, he claims he hasn't learned how to send them. "Sure, why would I need to learn how to send texts?" he told me recently, with a smile. "If it's important, couldn't I ring them?"

Now there's a man who knows how to get the best from new technology.

