

## **Ireland's America: A case study of Sheridan's *In America* (2002) and *Get Rich or Die Tryin* (2005)**

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### **Abstract**

Jim Sheridan is one of the fathers of Irish national cinema with Oscar winning films including *My Left Foot* (1990) and powerful nation building narratives like *The Field* (1990) and *In the Name of the Father* (1993). His recent work has tried to become more internationally appealing with an evocative study of Irish emigrants in America and most controversially his recent biopic of the internationally known black rapper, 50 cent. By examining *In America* and *Get Rich or Die Tryin* this paper will assess how Sheridan adapts his Irish preoccupations while trying to take on Hollywood. More than any other Irish director, Sheridan uses family, race, otherness and Americana in general, to dramatise Ireland's affinity with America.

### **Keynotes**

Auteur, National cinema, Race, Genre and Hollywood.

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According to Jim Sheridan, *In America* attempts to reclaim a primitive form of spirituality, which existed before structured religion and Christian theology developed and commercially attempts to map this into a Hollywood mythos. In the DVD commentary Sheridan goes so far as to suggest that there is a need for a ‘pre-Christian structure’ when you lose your faith in God and believes that his films are striving towards a ‘new form of spirituality’. General representations of America, as an iconic and symbolic space, continues to provide a focus for such forms of spirituality, together with consolidating and renewing Irish-American identification within a well prescribed comfort blanket of a utopian mythos and consciousness.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, critics recognise the over use of mythic excess in many of his films often ‘collapsing into a kind of historicist nostalgia’ through their ‘essentially regressive ideologies’ (McLoone 2000: 120).

This article will discuss how Sheridan – more than any other Irish director - uses family, race/otherness and Americana in general, to dramatise Ireland’s affinity with its ‘next parish’ in the new world. This recurring narrative trajectory helps to carve a deep seam of cross-identification which remains both evocative and commercially

successful in spite of the current global tensions and fissures emanating from recent American foreign policy.

The lure and appeal of America in particular remains an abiding trope within Irish literature and for example *Into the West* (Newell, 1992) which Sheridan scripted, reflects popular cultures fixation with America.<sup>2</sup> A whole generation of Irish males in the 1950s were brought up with the lure and appeal of the Western, with John Wayne remaining the epitome of affirmative and progressive masculinity. Brian Friel's play *Philadelphia Here I Come* for example incorporates a myth of American popular culture as representing freedom, open-mindedness and escape from a restrictive Catholic sexuality. This trope extends to many Irish films, including very nihilistic ones like the *Butcher Boy* (Jordan, 1998) that valorises and celebrates American popular culture alongside more recent comedies like *When Brendan met Trudy* (Walsh, 2000) with its homage to *The Searchers* (Ford, 1956) for example.

### ***In America***

The healing powers of faith, hope and even magic hold sway in Sheridan's loosely autobiographical crowd pleaser about a contemporary Irish family facing the adventure of a lifetime in New York city. Some critics have read the film as Sheridan's 'post-September 11<sup>th</sup>' homage to America.<sup>3</sup> This reading is clearly indicated in the opening visual sequence, as the shaky camcorder shots of sun-drenched, flickering shadows gradually reveal the defiant, if decontextualised, signifier of the American flag. The intertextual link is further affirmed in the director's voice-over commentary on the DVD edition where he recounts how 'these images I shot myself ... soon after September 11' though, signalling the

danger of ideologically reductionist readings, which might simplistically align Sheridan with the bellicose nationalism of the Bush administration, the commentary also makes ambivalent references to the assertion that there was an ‘awful lot of flag-waving at the time’.<sup>4</sup>

Never shy of self-publicity the director has spoken of the film’s allusions to and homage to James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which in truth bears little resemblance to the film. The story ostensibly references Sheridan family history, most specifically his young brother who died at a very young age. This autobiographical tone is amplified by the fact that Sheridan co-wrote the screenplay with his daughters Kirsten and Naomi. The film received mixed critical reactions, citing overuse of sentimentality and a sometimes confusing narrative logic, nevertheless the film was relatively successful at the box office, grossing over \$15 million in America and almost \$10 million in foreign earnings.<sup>5</sup>

The story is told through the eyes of two children - Christy and Ariel – who have illegally immigrated to New York with their parents, Johnny (Paddy Considine) and Sarah (Samantha Morton), to escape a recession-hit Ireland as well as the recent death of one of their children. In New York, the father had little luck in auditions for the theatre, because Sheridan suggests, like many Hollywood films his character does not believe in himself enough to get what he wants. Nonetheless, he displays a strength of character and a quixotic tenacity, as witnessed in a memorable scene where he drags an old air-conditioner through the centre of a busy street, against the traffic, before carrying it up several flights of stairs to their very run-down and sweltering hot apartment, only to have it short circuit all the fuses in the building.<sup>6</sup>

A constant dilemma for all emigrants in America, and elsewhere, involves the balance between standing out and integration and this dichotomy is neatly articulated by the symbolic use of food and language translation in this film. The Irish emigrants make colcannon - a native Irish dish of cabbage and potatoes and served with bacon - for their new black friend. Sarah tells her visitor that the Irish name for black man is 'fear gorm' (literally 'blue man'), whereas 'fear dubh' (literally 'black man') means an evil man. Djimon Hounsou embodies the part that is strongly coded as 'other' is reinforced by the door to his apartment littered with graffiti, which includes a very dominant 'keep out' sign. But even this ultra-outsider status softens when confronted with the innocent guile of the angelic Irish children. He later responds to the offer of friendship at the party with a strange affirmation: '[Y]ou really understand us.' By befriending the racially coded other, these Irish migrants also affirm their positive multicultural credentials while giving comfort to a stranger, which remains one of the tenets of Christianity coupled with the well rehearsed articulation of Irish friendliness.

On the flip side of Irish integration however, we should consider the father's attempts to assuage the identity crisis of the children after they win a 'special' School prize for best 'home-made' Halloween costume. The kids express the simple wish to be 'like' the other American children whose costumes have all been purchased. The father's rejoinder, that 'what makes them different also makes them unique', can be read as a signifier of a cultural concern about how American assimilation can also threaten and re-interpellate identity; a reading further evident later in the Mother's defensive response - 'what do they know about us' - to professional medical advice over her fertility.

*In America* represents for some a celebration of an Irish-American encounter and universal affirmation of the certainties and sometimes hidden strength of the family unit – frequently coded as ‘conservative’ in the ideological readings of a Fordian or a Spielbergian aesthetic for example. Where so many Irish films from the 1970s onwards ended with the disintegration of the symbolic family, Sheridan argues for its durability, a prognosis aided rather than defeated by modernity – a trope which is continued with his black rapper biopic discussed later. Set in 1982, the year of the release of Spielberg’s *ET*, Sheridan has said his first American film is about getting away from that ‘death culture’ that is so prevalent in Ireland and expressed so repetitively in Irish literature.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, paradoxically when they arrive in Manhattan, the building, which is to become their home, is a dark and frightening place, in contrast to the spectacle of lights and the validation of American modernity as ostensibly filmed by the children as they first enter New York. The romantic idyllic images that beckoned to Sean Thornton in *The Quiet Man* (Ford, 1952) as he sat on the bridge returning to this native homeland are replaced by images of junkies who look beseechingly for money.

The film can be read as an artefact of Irish-American identification and help construct a dialogical chain of equivalence, where America is the ‘empty signifier’ linking optimism, emancipation, opportunity, redemption, universalism, multiculturalism, magic and progress while ‘Ireland’ metaphorically embodied and consolidated through the figure of the family, is chained to signifiers of loss, death and as Sheridan suggests on the voice over, ‘the emotional wounds of a past

sorrow'. This mythical representation of America is anchored in the construction of the narrative from the perspective of the family's two children, while the 'dislocated' Irish identity is metaphorically cued through the pre-America death of a third child, Frankie, whose loss is foregrounded in the opening scene and who functions throughout the film as the wish-fulfilment figure of the older child's voice-over narration. The reading of the film as 'homage' - to both America and New York - is further evoked by its alluring cinematography; its idyllically multiculturalist (if, from the father's perspective, initially close-minded and suspicious) representation of the family's relationship with its Othered black neighbour; the imaginative empathy and unfussy bureaucracy of the immigration official inspecting the family in its border-crossing from Canada alongside the general narrative valorisation of the importance of faith and belief.

The parents want and need to experience the American dream for themselves as much as for their two surviving children. The young girl, Ariel, makes three wishes which function as the narrative hook and backbone throughout the film. The first wish being to ensure safe passage through customs, when they arrive at the Canadian border to make the symbolic journey into America, the land of hope and opportunity and escape from the pains of the 'old world'. The second is made in the very strange fairground scene, when Johnny tries to win an *ET* doll at a stall, risking the family's rent money to this end. He irrationally believes this unnecessary risk to be a marker of their need to have 'faith' in their destiny and the American mythos. Thankfully, they get their doll and later witness the aforementioned film.

Ariel's final wish was designed to help her mother survive her pregnancy. Having been told not to risk having another child by the white-coated specialists, the mother reacts somewhat irrationally, like the father in the fairground: 'what do they know about us?' The eventual cost of medical services to carry her pregnancy full term reaches over \$30,000, but as in a miracle, this is paid for by the eccentric 'other' African-American, AIDS-victim and artist whom they befriend before he dies.<sup>8</sup>

Prevalent stereotypes of the black male on film oscillate between: uncontrollable beast-like savage and innocent servile saint. Many films portray him as an Uncle Remus figure – naive, congenial folk philosopher – full of unsophisticated advice and hopeful prophecy, which incorporate the ideological myth of a black man who suffers, as examined in Heather Hicks fascinating essay in *Camera Obscura* (2003).<sup>9</sup>

Mateo is constructed as the 'other', different from the main 'white' protagonists'; in other words, he is an outsider looking in. Mateo's growing spiritualism 'represents the exotic and unfamiliar, and unlike the wholesome Irish family, does not conform to safe conventional values or codes of conduct. With such a characterization so firmly established, long before Mateo utters any coherent lines, his affinity with the supernatural comes as no surprise' (Hill and Rockett 2005: 147).

This Othered figure of the black neighbour who had a solitary atomised existence, prior to the 'magical' intervention of the *Irish* family, can be read as a signifier of the anti-collectivist effects of American capitalism; a reading affirmed in an extra DVD scene, where a drug-addled character, who subsequently mugs the father, nostalgically recollects the days when 'this place' used to be a 'real community'.<sup>10</sup>

The strong Irish connection with gangsters continues to have resonance within Irish-American film culture, as witnessed most recently in Scorsese's *Gangs of New York* (2002) and the multiple Oscar winning *The Departed* (2006).

Irish film culture of course has had a relatively short engagement with 'black politics', from the very unusual if small scale *The Nephew* (Brady, 1998)<sup>11</sup> to the more conventional identifications of the downtrodden Irish [inner city kids] as the 'blacks of Europe' in *The Commitments* (Parker, 1991) towards a more tenuous association of the Northern Ireland civil rights movement as inspired by the Black Civil Rights marches in America. In spite of a growing multicultural society in Ireland, Irish film is a long way away from adapting so-called progressive representations of black otherness with the miraculously successful Celtic Tiger economy emulating (white) American values, attitudes and even belief systems.

Furthermore, by failing to question the film's use of stereotypes, it is suggested we participate in the very process that naturalizes authority. The crisis of the film revolves around the restoration of the family's happiness and stability, relying on Christy's wishes and Mateo's magic to save the family at crucial moments. Ruth Barton reads Mateo as a guide for the family as they journey towards emotional well-being (2004: 190). Mateo certainly represents the exotic and unfamiliar, and unlike the wholesome Irish family, does not conform to conventional values or codes of conduct. But under the influence of the girls he turns out to be a kind uncle-figure.

Mateo's narrative trajectory is closely linked with the moment of birth and new life, symbolizing the regenerative cycle of life and dramatized when the new baby requires

a blood transfusion and he finally succumbs to his own death. Sheridan speaks on the add-on special features how he did not want to name the illness and thereby give it more power. Speaking in his own native African language, Mateo provides a magical blessing, rather than a spell. Such crude stereotyping of primitive mysticism leaves the family emotionally and spiritually in tune with the supernatural world while informing and encouraging the audience's belief in the film's magic. As racially coded 'other', Mateo embodies a representational 'black box' for the director to encode excessive meaning. At least Sheridan's subsequent nostalgic journey into a more fully-fledged black rap culture does not appear to emulate this dichotomy since the black character is framed around an Irish familial discourse.

### ***Get Rich or Die Tryin (2005): New expressions of [Irish-American] Otherness***

Rather than having a black 'other' as guide and foil for an exploration of Irish identity, this very conventional biography of a successful black rapper, unfortunately has very few of Sheridan's famous narrative tags and sadly appears to lack an Irish dimension, which has driven all his work to date. A long way from his roots, Sheridan probably wanted to extend his range within the Hollywood studio system and like Neil Jordan was happy to consider other projects as a 'director for hire'. The film project which the Studio hired him to direct is inspired by the famous life of Curtis '50 Cent' Jackson who never knew his father and whose drug dealer mother was killed when he was very young. He ended up selling drugs on the streets of New York and survived gunshot wounds to become, in his early thirties, one of the best-selling recording artists of modern times. One can see why Sheridan was initially attracted to the story, echoing his recent fascination with black otherness through *In America*. The opening sequence has the main protagonist being shot, with a voice-over narration. 'I

was about to die' he intones, while continuing his psychological investigation of himself: 'I don't know why I was expecting my father to rescue me', echoing a continuing trope from the director's work including *In the Name of the Father* (1993), having been 'looking for him all my life'.

In a recent interview with the director<sup>12</sup> it was affirmed how he was good at openings and many would concur with this aesthetic judgment. Roger Ebert's review also speaks of the 'search for a father' theme, which has preoccupied Sheridan in many of his films, especially *In America* and *In the Name of the Father*. The best thing that happens to Jackson was that he was sent to prison, which probably saves his life. There he is approached by Bama (Terrence Howard), a guy he already knows from the neighborhood, who wants to be his manager and help him on the road to being a successful rapper. Bama is certainly a more positive role model than Jackson's erstwhile father figure and drug boss, who tells him somewhat paradoxically that 'respect is the most important thing in life'.

Unlike *In America*, which was closely inspired by Sheridan's own biographical memories of poverty and emigration, this first foray into non-Irish territory has him again working through his continuing fixations with working class poverty and striving for success. The DVD add-ons provide a rich reservoir of material for textual analysis and alongside a relatively conventional trailer for the film, we are rewarded with a special documentary titled: 'The Portrait of an Artist: The Making of *Get Rich and Die Tryin*' (Moviefed, 2004), drawing no doubt on the famous novel by James Joyce.

Sheridan reveals how he always loved Rap and when presented with the script wanted to make it an 'Irish story' of an emerging black family looking for some respect. It could have been a 'slick *Sopranos*' take on the material, Sheridan muses, 'but I wanted it more Irish?' To help reinforce the specificity of his Irish creative credentials, we are introduced to his maternal 'home' in Sheriff Street, in the erstwhile poverty-stricken ghetto of inner city Dublin. The local kids all swarm around their New York gangster rapper hero, while getting photographed with him. Sheridan looks on admiringly before whisking him off to his concert in the nearby Point venue; he desperately wanted to make the film a search for a 'father' or even for a 'God', he explains.

As a kid Curtis stood on the corner selling drugs, while Sheridan suggests such behaviour reminded him of an entrepreneur, having to graft for himself. But he found his true vocation in his music and his first album sold an unbelievable 12 million copies. The violence and misogyny in the lyrics is certainly palpable, but Sheridan provides some sociological insight and justification, explaining there is no initiation process for these kids nowadays, consequently the music provides them with a way out. However, Sheridan is careful not to allow his hero to be stereotyped as a murderer – in spite of the violent lyrics – acknowledging a dominant moral convention of film making. 'You can't justify killing someone in the movie, because you are 50 cent'.

The film opens with an exterior car mirror shot of New York at night, capturing the excitement of the street – a long way from the amateur camcorder invocation of utopian hope at the start of *In America*. The sound track compounds the image of a

music video with the famous lyrics; ‘two niggers in the front, two in the back’ while preparing for a robbery. As in many contemporary gangster films, *Carlito’s Way* (De Palma, 1993) comes to mind, it all goes wrong when he gets shot on the street and literally sees his life passing before his eyes. In voice-over he announces: ‘I was looking for my father all my life’.

The flashback narrative subsequently flicks through a conventional biography-by-numbers. After his mother was killed he lived with his grandparents, but eventually leaves when he needs more space having acquired a desire to make money. Later he set up his own crew who were ‘dedicated to getting paid and getting laid’. Completing the gangster image, he secured a white Mercedes 500 series with the proceeds from his drug dealing and happens upon his now beautiful childhood sweetheart, who in turn stands by her man and of course matures him by giving him a child.

Reminiscent of the superior *8 Mile* (Hanson, 2002) biopic, the conclusion has Curtis going on stage after his gangland nemesis has been shot. At last he can literally reveal himself to his adoring public by taking off his bulletproof jacket and vest. Narrative order has been restored. But such a shallow and conventional Hollywood story leaves no aftertaste, displaying little evidence of Sheridan’s skills of narrative complexity, while ensuring that the non-actor rapper can promote his ‘rags to riches’ image to his adoring public. There is even a regression from the nuanced complexity and heroism of the Mateo character from *In America*. Donald Clarke in an *Irish Times* review in early 2006 titled ‘Bum Rap’ is particularly critical of Jackson’s performance. The reviewer humorously claims that the main protagonist ‘takes solemn impassivity to places only previously visited by Easter Island statutes’. Nonetheless, in general home

reviews have tried to downplay outright criticism of Sheridan and his foray into American rap culture. Reviews spoke of its overly conventional ‘bad boy makes good’ rites-of-passage story line of a Rapper being ‘saved’ and finding his true vocation, aided by the love of a good woman. This validation of the American Dream rings hollow for many critics and audiences particularly post 9/11, with a questioning of America’s role both private and public upon the world stage. Nonetheless, the dream lives on for Sheridan and many other Irish migrants who have adapted the utopian, even mythic, space of America as home.

In a materialist and broadly secular Western culture, the need for some form of identification and belief in the benevolence of human nature, alongside strategies to cope with loss and bereavement remain paramount. ‘Sentimental’ narratives have long been the mainstay of Hollywood and such utopic expression continues into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *In America* focuses on faith in magic and belief to inspire their black friend, who in turn ensures their family survives the trauma of bereavement and succeed in their new utopian home. Unfortunately, *Get Rich or Die Tryin* has no such resonance of magic realism as the title suggests – except maybe for the endorsement of rap culture as visualised through the beating car mirror - in this pedestrian generic outing.

The prevalence of redemptive forms of magic realism in many of Sheridan’s films is beyond simple valorising of innocence and ways of seeing and corresponds with the striving for [real] magic in the struggle of life. The filmmaker, as surrogate witness for the filmgoers captures such moments of sublime synthesis, which reflects audience’s pre-existing utopian wishes for the real world. Sheridan is very effective in

executing this form of magic on film, be it through conventional fantasy or more usually on a journey of life to the Promised Land.

On a much smaller scale than Spielberg's oeuvre for instance, Sheridan adapts and sometimes transforms a nascent innocence while also tapping into an emotionally charged territory which excites mass audiences as also witnessed in many of his other films including *The Field* (1990), *In the Name of the Father* (1993), *My Left Foot* (1989) as well as *Into the West* discussed elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> Most notably, the nostalgic evocation of the 'New World' at the opening of *In America*, and to a much lesser extent the visualisation of an African-American underclass in *Get Rich or Die Tryin*, reflect deeply held emotions of a diasporic Irish population who have made America their home. Suspect intentions like those exposed in the so-called Spielbergisation or Disneyfication of popular culture, do not necessarily invalidate or negate the positive and productive utopic potentialities within these dramatic visualisations of innocence, family, love and bereavement as they continue to frame Sheridan's oeuvre while continuing to explore the meanings and pleasures of the Irish-American dream. Currently he is working on further projects, which hopefully will continue to develop his abiding fascination with this changing Irish-American relationship.

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<sup>1</sup> Vivid media models of the desired role for assimilated Irish Americans are portrayed in films such as *Patriot Games*, *The Devil's Own*, where Irish Americans represented law and order, thwart the revolutionary designs of the IRA'. The character Jack Ryan in Tom Clancy's *Patriot Games* makes the point explicitly of how proud but assimilated Irish American is 'the glue that holds society together'. In other words, assimilation has invigorated Americans with new patriots, while at the same time dissolving the ancient bonds of revenge and violence that have always bedevilled the Irish. (Hayden, 2003: 6)

<sup>2</sup> As displayed in the universal childhood myth embodied in Spielberg's classic *ET* (1982)– which is directly referenced within *In America* – both narrative experiences are heavily predicated on Christian imagery and strive to reformulate the sacred, drawing on various forms of emotional excess linked to childhood innocence and bereavement in particular. Consequently, film critics as evidenced by reviews of Spielberg's oeuvre, find it relatively easy to dismiss such films as a crude exercise in manipulative emotionalism rather than acknowledging how they affect and 'work' for mass audiences. One could suggest that this story presents a prelude for Sheridan's mature American evocation of 'black otherness' as a counterpoint to his continuing exploration of the Irish [American] psyche.

<sup>3</sup> Diana Negra (2006) continues to provide some interesting research on the way the 'Irish' have been appropriated in New York as the new 'safe' and acceptable face of multiculturalism following the destruction of 9/11.

<sup>4</sup> While the film can be clearly read as a 'homage' to America, it does not follow from this that it has to be read as a 'homage' to the post-September 11 politics of the Bush administration; indeed, one could even suggest, as Sean Phelan does, that the film's most overt 9/11 gesture, the opening sequence flag is open to looser political readings which de-couple it from a particular 9/11 signification. (See forthcoming paper by Phelan and Brereton 2008)

<sup>5</sup> See [www.boxofficemojo.com](http://www.boxofficemojo.com)

<sup>6</sup> Sheridan assures us on the DVD commentary that all incidents are authentic, drawing on his own illegal journey with his family to America.

<sup>7</sup> On the DVD he speaks of how bad Ireland was then with the 'Troubles' in the North and up to 15% inflation in the depressed economy.

<sup>8</sup> As Susan Sontag in her follow up essay on 'Illness and Metaphor' writes about AIDS 'the sexual transmission of this illness, considered by most people as a calamity one brings on oneself, is judged more harshly than other means – especially since AIDS is understood as a disease not only of sexual excess but of perversity' (Sontag, 2002:114).

<sup>9</sup> Hicks analyses films like *The Green Mile* directed by Frank Darabont 1999 and how it has portrayed African Americans as magical figures, reminiscent of Mateo in this film or Danny Glover in *Grand Canyon* (1991); which I read in *Hollywood Utopia* (2005), suggesting that perhaps black characters must be assigned saintlike goodness to counteract the racism white audiences automatically direct towards a black character on screen. For white audiences, Anthony Appiah suggest, a saintly black character is the moral equivalent of a 'normal' white character. Or, he speculates further, perhaps 'the Saint draw[s] on the tradition of the superior virtue of the oppressed' (Appiah, 1993: 28).

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<sup>10</sup> Consider, too, the figure of the hospital administrator, who, in coldly relaying the exorbitant cost of the medical services for the Mother's pregnancy (a \$30,000 bill 'magically' paid for by the befriended Other) can be read as an emblematic figure of the inhumanity and inequalities of American capitalism.

<sup>11</sup> In a perceptive essay Kathleen Verjvoda compares *The Nephew* and *In America* across race and gender lines. Like *The Nephew* with Chad coming to Ireland bearing his mother's ashes, *In America* is also a film in which the 'dead ultimately must be released' (2007: 372). I take issue however, when she concludes that 'racial otherness is the cure for the psychically wounded Irish family, but it is in this otherness they ultimately find the repressed – and best – aspects of their own Irish identity' (2007: 373). While having a point of course, I suggest instead that with *In America* at least, it is more a weakness in narrative development of character and allowing Mateo to become a cipher for the Irish families' need for recuperation, rather than explicating a fully rounded character in himself which remains the racial problem.

<sup>12</sup> This was carried out at the end of a 'Screening Irish-America' conference in UCD on 13-15<sup>th</sup> April 2007 by Tony Tracey. Sheridan spoke of the difficulty of representing a black man 'thinking', which were apparently conceived by mass (white) audiences as reflecting more malevolent stereotyping. Sheridan went on to suggest that in both his recent films – his erstwhile 'strengths' in dealing with family and emotion turned against him at the box office.

<sup>13</sup> See 'Characterises of Contemporary Irish Film' in *Mapping Irish Identities* (Horgan, 2007).