

IRISH FILM

NEIL JORDAN & ANGELA CARTER

THE COMPANY OF WOLVES. Directed by Neil Jordan. Producers: Chris Brown and Stephen Woolley. Executive Producers: Stephen Woolley and Nik Powell. Screenplay: Angela Carter and Neil Jordan. Original short story by Angela Carter. Running time: 95 minutes. Starring: Angela Lansbury, Graham Crowden, Brian Glover, Kathryn Pogson, Stephen Rea, Tusse Silberg, David Warner, Micha Burgese and Sarah Patterson.

Reviewed by **DERMOT MORAN**

NEIL JORDAN, THE AUTHOR of two novels, *The Past and Dream of the Beast*, began his film career with a half-hour documentary on the film director John Boorman (*Excalibur, Deliverance*). In 1982 he released his own first film, *Angel* (retitled *Danny Boy* in the States), scripted by himself and starring Irish actors, notably Stephen Rea and Honor Heffernan. *Angel* was extremely well received in Britain and Ireland. It is a visually powerful, metaphysical thriller set in Northern Ireland, and it cost less than a half-million pounds to make.

The Company of Wolves was released in Britain and Ireland in 1984 and it was a huge commercial success, despite having only a low 2.3 million pounds budget. Based on a short story by the British writer Angela Carter (from her collection *The Bloody Chamber*), it is an extraordinary unclassifiable film which mingles horror, fairy tale, fantasy, and humor to produce a work of great beauty and originality. The film is a young girl's dream. It begins in a classic horror setting of an old country house where a girl has fallen asleep, her face smudged in an attempt at make-up. The film follows her dream into a forest-world full of standard fairy-tale features. There are clocks which run backwards and have mice in them, doll houses, and stuffed animals that come to life. The girl is pursued by wolves and cornered. Next we see her funeral; she is Alice, the sleeping girl's sister. The main character now is Rosalene who, like Little Red Riding Hood, goes to visit her granny, who lives deep in the forest. The granny, magnificently played by Angela Lansbury, tells the young girl many scary tales of werewolves, lecherous pastors, traveling journeymen, and dangerous men whose eyebrows meet in the middle. These tales are visually explored in a picaresque, loosely-related manner which gives the film much of its charm.

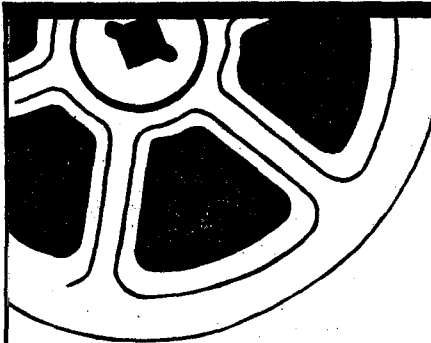
One of the main features of the film is the manner in which various people are transformed into wolves before the camera by means of powerful special effects, created by art director Anton Furst and supervisor Christopher Tucker. Although these images are initially disturbing, the mood softens as the film progresses, and the audience enters in beneath the skin of the beasts, as it were. The tone shifts from malevolent to wondrous and awesome. From initial fear of the werewolves we are led to sympathy and admiration for their dual existence in this world and the other. In the final sequence the girl is seduced by the wild freedom of the beat to enter into that world herself — the magic world of the dark forest.

What does it all mean? Under Jordan's confident direction, many Freudian themes are introduced. We have the entrance of a young woman into the sexual world of the adult, forests which have phallic branches, garments "as red as blood" (symbols of fertility and menstruation), and of course the continuous repressive influence of the world of experience (Granny) stunting the freedom of innocent exploration. Angela Carter's fiction has been characterized as feminist, and her study *The Sadeian Woman* has been hailed as a new departure in feminist criticism. Is this a "menstrual movie," as she has been reported as calling it? On the other hand, some feminist critics have found the film to be a typical male exploration of a fantasized female world. Neil Jordan sees the film as a virgin's dream, a dream of a series of old wives' tales designed to terrify the girl into submission. The film subverts this by entering into the world of the wolf. But although the work is rich in symbol, Jordan feels that it should not be analyzed as making some form of systematic statement. Much of the symbolism is spontaneous and playful. Indeed, Jordan sees this playful humor as a specifically "Irish" quality in the film.

The content of the film is, however, not Irish but European. The lore of the werewolf, the world of the forest, the once-upon-a-time fairy-tale village are all part of the European folk tradition. Jordan sees his work as having moved in this direction for a number of years. He has an abiding interest in the late medieval world, the poetry of Dante, and the tradition of the *Fabula* in particular. He read a number of medieval bestiaries while writing *The Dream of the Beast*, and this film continues that exploration. His work is emblematic rather than symbolic, and it is for this reason that critics who are used to deciphering a coded structure have run aground on *The Company of Wolves*. Perhaps in years to come it will be seen as the advent of a new type of cinema, or else it may be classified a "children's film," just as



Scene from *THE COMPANY OF WOLVES*, directed by Neil Jordan. Screenplay by Jordan and Angela Carter.



Irish Film on the Current Arts Scene

ONE OF THE MOST encouraging aspects of the current Irish arts scene has been the emergence of a bold new "Irish" cinema. This is due partly to the efforts of the recently formed Irish Film Board, and partly to the resurgence of British film (for example *Chariots of Fire* and *1984*). Another important factor has been the arrival of a new independent television channel in Britain — Channel 4 — which has funded a number of full-length feature films for commercial release and television screening.

In 1984, four feature films were released in Ireland. There was *Cal*, a screen adaptation of Bernard McLaverty's novel of the same name, which was directed by Irishman Pat O'Connor and produced by David Puttnam, and which starred Irish actors and the celebrated British actress Helen Mirren. There was *Pigs*, produced and directed by Irishmen David Collins and Cathal Black, respectively, and which had an Irish cast. Then there was

Ann Devlin, a film based on the life of the woman associated with Robert Emmet, which was directed by Pat Murphy, who also directed *Maeve*, a stark film of the impact of the Troubles on a young Northern Ireland woman. *Company of Wolves* was a major box-office success in England and Ireland. It was directed by the novelist Neil Jordan, who won the British Film Critics Award for Best Director.

Due to the complexities of funding, casting and directing involved in some of these films, however, notably *Cal* and *Wolves*, there has been a vigorous debate in Ireland as to how far these films can be classified as Irish, especially when major film festivals appear to classify films by their national origin.

Cal was made with British money; was it, then, the British or the Irish film entry to the Cannes Festival? Did Cannes in fact have a system of national classification of films at all? Both *Cal* and *Wolves* have been claimed by the British movie industry as their own; similar, I suppose, to the way that George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde are considered to be British writers. Yet it is true that no Irish money was involved in *Wolves*. Indeed, aside from its director and Stephen Rea, a Northern Irish actor with the Field Day Company, the film has no Irish links. The debate has been embittered by the accusation leveled by independent Irish filmmakers that they were passed over by the Irish Film Board on its inception, when the Board contributed to the funding of Neil Jordan's first film, *Angel*, which was being backed by Channel 4. Part of the problem is that the Irish government has not taken its nascent film industry as seriously as it could have. Certainly it has not provided the kind of incentives offered by Britain and other European countries, notably France. It is unlikely, however, that Irish films will be produced in large numbers without collaboration with Irish films and British producers, and the Irish public will probably settle for calling films "Irish" which have some Irish element — be it actors, directors, locations, scripts, or money.

— Dermot Moran

the Gothic novels of the 19th century have become children's books.

Whatever the outcome, Neil Jordan is busy writing three film scripts — a children's musical set in outer space called *Lucky Stars*, a study of a prostitute entitled *Mona Lisa*, and

a film about the life of the Irish revolutionary leader Michael Collins. *The Company of Wolves* will be released in the States this spring.

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