

Odd Man Out (Carol Reed, 1947)



Never mention the IRA – call it “The Organization”. Never explain what its aims are. When the RUC search a suspect’s premises, let them do it politely, leaving all the furniture in place, all the windows intact, and just a few domestic items taken away: Robert Newton does more damage chasing F.J.McCormick round the pub. As your Belfast IRA men, cast an English actor (James Mason), actors from the Republic (Dan O’Herlihy, Cyril Cusack), or a Canadian actor (Robert Beatty): no-one’s heard an Ulster accent, in the movies or anywhere else, so no-one will be able to tell (McCormick and Cusack do Ulster, but no-one else is sufficiently alert or competent to copy them).

It’s 1947, and English films are milking what they take to be a historical dead-end situation, with the IRA as blundering gangsters in a political time-warp, losers to a man. Clean-cut and articulate gangsters, but losers all the same.¹ Cusack, O’Herlihy and Beatty are either dead or in cuffs by halfway through, so we can tell that James Mason, bleeding to death, has no future, and can relax as the scenario goes sentimental on the subject of Lost, Tortured Hero Backed into a Corner, with his Loyal Girlfriend Preparing to Die with Him. It’s so well done that we almost forget that Mason is only a failed robber who killed someone when the raid went wrong because he was too ill to focus.



1: This was written the day after Ian Paisley sat down for a friendly chat with the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Ulster. All these years he’d just been kidding.

Despite these compromises and blurs, it's gripping stuff. Robert Krasker places his arc-lights just out of sight round the corners, as he will in *The Third Man*; the rain-filled streetscapes (filmed largely in Islington and Shoreditch) loom and recede, like James Mason's terminal hallucinations. Yes, they still had cobbles and hackney carriages in 1947. Fay Compton's reaction, as the WVS lady who thinks Mason's broken arm will be a fine opportunity to practise first-aid, and then finds, on taking off his jacket, that he's been shot, is memorable: Quentin Tarantino meets Hyacinth Bucket.

And as Kathleen Ryan hears her granny prattling about all the children she's had despite all the young men dead in the troubles and wars, and as she stares at herself in the mirror, and knows that an early death, not non-stop childbearing, is going to be her lot, the rhetoric of the tale takes over, and she and Mason stagger like Tristan and Isolde to their doom.

But not until we've been through the truly weird episode of Robert Newton and F.J.McCormick struggling for Mason's person. Newton, the drunk artist, wants to capture the authentic look of death in Mason's eyes, and McCormick wants the reward, either the financial reward for handing him in to the police, or the spiritual reward for handing him over to Father Tom – he's too dumb to know which. Both of them prolong Mason's agony. The scene between McCormick (he created O'Casey's Joxer and Fluther Good), and W.G.Fay as Father Tom (Fay was co-founder of the Abbey with Yeats and Lady Gregory), has a comical depth otherwise unobtainable in British films up to this time.² And Newton's reaction when he looks at the picture he's made of the dying Mason, and sees that it hasn't worked, and that he's failed yet again, is almost as moving as the deaths of the hero and heroine at the film's end.



2: DEELEY: So it was Robert Newton who brought us together and it is only Robert Newton who can tear us apart. / Pause. / ANNA: F.J.McCormick was good too. DEELEY: I know F.J.McCormick was good too. But he didn't bring us together (Harold Pinter, *Old Times*).