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THE FLATS

a film by ALESSANDRA CELESIA

Films de Force Majeure, Thank you & Good Night Productions
Planet Korda Pictures, Dumbworld and The Party Film Sales
present



THE FLATS

a film by
ALESSANDRA CELESIA

FRANCE, BELGIUM, REPUBLIC OF IRELAND, UNITED KINGDOM
DOCUMENTARY / ENGLISH / 2024 / 114'
FORMAT: 1.85 / SOUND 5.1

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Synopsis

In his tower-block apartment in New Lodge, Joe reenacts memories from his childhood amidst the “Troubles”. In this Catholic area of Belfast, the number of deaths was tragically significant. Joe is joined by neighbours Jolene, Sean, Angie, and others, all willingly participating in this process of revisiting the collective memories that shaped their lives and the district they live in.

Interview

with ALESSANDRA CELESIA

The Flats takes place around the New Lodge apartment blocks, in the North of Belfast. What attracted you to the location and what brought you to Belfast originally?

New Lodge is a visual experience because of the towers, the flats. They're really peculiar in Belfast because it's really not a high-rise town. And I'm in love with Kieślowski, so I thought, "I want to do a Dekalog here!" Then I started to make enquiries and it turned out New Lodge was the area where my husband's dad's family was originally from. Then I asked a friend, he was working there as a social worker, if he could bring me along and help me get introduced. It was just a crazy coincidence that I was digging into family history without knowing.

My husband is from Belfast and he lives here permanently, working in contemporary opera and for The Belfast Council. The first time we came was around '97, then we came to live for a couple of years from 2010 when I was shooting another film, *The Bookseller of Belfast*. During that period, Jolene was working in a café where the book-seller would go. She became a very important character in that film. At the beginning, I didn't think to necessarily involve her in *The Flats* but then I realised that she also lived in New Lodge. So she was very precious, because she had already worked with me and knew my process.

And Rita, the counselor we meet, did you get to know her through the same social worker? I was curious if her work was geared toward these specific kinds of patients, like Joe, still dealing with memories of the Troubles.

Rita I met through Joe. He was really worrying me at one point, I was afraid he was losing it and I knew he was seeing her, so I set up an appointment to have a chat and see how she could help, and she was just so amazing. Then little by little, I asked if we could maybe film one of the sessions—a "crash test", we called it. It was a week before we started shooting proper, so I had the team, and we filmed a session and it was just so mesmerizing. I knew right away that it was the right setting for these words to come out. It was just perfect.

Is she part of an organization?

Rita works in an association called PIPS that works at preventing suicide. North Belfast is the area in the UK with the most suicides, especially young men for some reason. Even just last week in New Lodge someone jumped from the flats. She works in this association where people who feel they might hurt themselves or have some problems with their family, they can just walk in and ask for advice or help. I think now they've started to get some government money, barely, but really it's families contributing. It's mostly voluntary work, tremendous work, and they're just up the road.

How did you first meet Joe?

There's a local historian called Joe Baker. I went to see him at the beginning, I'm talking seven years ago, and I said, as a joke (laughs), "I need you to introduce me to crazy people," and he said, "I have two of them!" So I met Joe and one of his best friends and thought they were hilarious. I was immediately sure about Joe. Then during the process of getting the money and making it happen, unfortunately the friend died. It made me realise how it really was the last chance to film this generation, because they're all dying early from smoking too much or drinking too much.

I went to see Joe so many times before we even started. At the beginning, I would sit there and record or write, but very soon I realised that he was not only potentially open to doing it but that he was an incredibly natural actor, with the potential to be a kind of incarnation of a man of that generation, not just a sad vision, because he was so poetic. And when I understood that, I think he trusted me.

In the film, we see Joe and some of his neighbors re-staging memories from their lives, some of which seem quite traumatic, including the funeral of Joe's uncle who was shot during the Troubles. At what point did you decide to introduce these re-enactments?

Joe was telling me so many things and I knew we needed images for it all, and that was the moment it clicked. I thought, "how can we get these stories out of the past?" The first thing I brought was the coffin, so I brought it to New Lodge and I said to Joe, "do you want to try this?" And when the scene started with his uncle's funeral, it was clear that he had been waiting for many years to bring that story to life.



The memories blend into the film in a fluid, almost uncanny way. Was that your intention from the early stages, that it wouldn't always be obvious to the viewer what they were watching?

It was the intention because I know the flats are so stuck in the past, and I wanted the re-enactments to emerge organically. I thought, it cannot be a super staged reconstruction because that's not the point. So, we just started very humbly. You know, let's bring this coffin in and see how it works, and how it works depends on how the people relate to that process. Quite quickly it became clear that Joe related to that process in the way that he was reliving it and directing his own story. I had to kind of stay out of his way. It was really following Joe's lead.

Do you think the process was therapeutic for him?

When you make a film, you want to protect your characters, but you don't always know if you're going to help them. I think it was an amazing voyage for him. And Rita really tells me, because she's still seeing him as a patient. I think it gave him a sense of achievement as well because the community, where he was a bit forgotten, a bit of an outsider, came together for him. For Joe, to tell his uncle's story like that, I know it was important for him. His generation felt abandoned somehow. They had a cause during the Troubles then they didn't. So to leave a legacy, it's something they wanted even if they didn't know they wanted it.

With everything going on, I found it interesting that the film doesn't go too deep into the contemporary politics of Northern Ireland. With the murals and everything, did you get the sense that some parts of New Lodge are somehow frozen in time?

I arrived in the North for the first time just before the Good Friday Agreement and I said I would never make a film about the Troubles. It's the past, it's finished, and now we're looking for something else. And I kept my promise until I found New Lodge, where it's just so clear there is this whole generation traumatized by this thing that they never got over. For any war, this is exactly what happens. Once you start it, there will always be a group left frozen in that time, for their whole life. My father-in-law was from the same area and he was able to move on and just live another life, but not all of them. You see so many of them in the flats, so many Joes. I actually inserted more politics than I thought I would, because for me it was really just trying to get to their soul and not involve the whole story. I ended up in New Lodge, which was probably easier, you know, I'm Italian, I'm Catholic, my son's name is Liam, it's the side of my husband's family. It would have probably been less easy to be on the other side but it's not a Republican film.

Was there ever a conversation about having a voice from the Unionist or Loyalist side?

I thought about it but I decided it just would have felt fake, that it would have felt too politically correct, which is no good either. And the story was already so rich that I didn't feel the need. I mean, of course there is the same on the other side, and they're so close, the two communities. But I'm not an activist, I'm not especially political in my films. In this case, politics was just a big part of that world. I was interested in Joe's story, and to explain that story I realised we needed to go into it. And then it was crazy because Brexit happened, the Queen died, all while I was shooting, then this confusion in Northern Ireland about who they were.

Was it still daunting in a way, as an Italian filmmaker, to approach something as dense as the Troubles?

It's very difficult to talk about Belfast without falling into all the references, so I thought, "my only belief is in Joe and his story. If I follow him and if I'm honest and right with his story, it will be ok." I was reading and trying to understand the conflict but it's so complicated. I don't even think a proper historian would get all the nuances. And then things would come up that I didn't even think of at the beginning, like the violence against women. You just realise that violence creeps in everywhere. When I started, I was very timid about the politics. I thought, "are we allowed to still talk about this?" But the more I got into it, the more I realised that we need to talk about it so it doesn't come back. It's so fragile. The peace is so fragile.

Maybe it was easier to come at it from a fresh perspective, without all that baggage?

John, my husband, said to me that he didn't think he could have done the film, that he knew too much. But then by miracle it worked, maybe because I didn't see the dangers (laughs). They called me "the mad Italian journalist", and I think it helped because to them, I was from nowhere.

But really, what always strikes me whenever I make a film is the generosity of the people involved. I'm always amazed how people just give you the gift of what they have. Even with Jolene's sister, it was probably the hardest thing to film because I wasn't even sure if she was giving me consent to film her. So I was really confused if I should do it or not, but they told me, "we need to show what the drugs are doing in our community. We need to do it."

So, in the end, the film we made is not the one I had in mind originally, it's something I made with them, something I weaved with them, little by little.

The film ends with a cathartic musical flourish. Watching it again, I noticed that you are credited as one of the song's writers. How did that come about?

In New Lodge, you see a lot of weeds in the pavement, creeping in all the time. I went to Jolene and said, "we need to write a song about the weeds!" So we brought the text together, and John helped with the English, but the idea was that the memories are like weeds—whatever you do they just come back.

INTERVIEW BY RORY O'CONNOR



Alessandra Celesia

Alessandra Celesia was born in Italy and lives between Paris and Belfast. After studying literature and theatre, she starts a career in performing arts. She makes her first film, *Luntano*, in 2006. Since then, she has directed several films including *The Bookseller of Belfast* (2011, ARTE, Visions du Réel, Best Film and Audience awards at Festival dei Popoli), *Italian Mirage* (Cinéma du Réel 2013), *Anatomia del miracolo* (Locarno 2017), and *The Mechanics of Things* (ARTE/ZDF, Torino IFF 2023).

Filmography

2023	The Mechanics of Things
2017	Anatomia del miracolo
2013	Italian Mirage
2011	The Bookseller of Belfast
2006	Luntano



Notes from the producers

The Flats has been quite an exciting production adventure and it has been a privilege to accompany Alessandra, Joe, Jolene, Sean and the rest of the team in this startling mix of documentary cinema, collective (re) creation, Irish dark humour, British realism and Italian warmth.

Alessandra and producer Jean-Laurent Csinidis (Films de Force Majeure) met in 2018 in Lussas, a French historical venue for independent documentary filmmakers. *The Flats* is now the second film they are releasing together, after *The Mechanics of Things* (2023).

We wanted the financing strategy to really match the purpose of the film, which is about healing the wounds left by history - and ultimately, reconciliation. This is why we have been so grateful that Screen Ireland, Northern Ireland Screen, and the British Film Institute all decided to support this film.

In the same spirit, gathering partners from the UK, France, Belgium, and Ireland was so meaningful to us. Belfast-based production company Dumbworld and Alessandra had already a long companionship, and Dublin-based Planet Korda has been following the project since its early beginnings. On the other side of the Channel, Films de Force Majeure (France) and Thank You and Good Night (Belgium) had been coproducing on a regular basis. Half jokingly, we called this a "coproduction against Brexit". As a matter of fact, we signed the contract the day after Brexit came into effect.

This Eurimages-supported coproduction turned out to be strong enough a vehicle to protect the film during the COVID-pandemic, which interrupted the shooting for two full years.

We hope this film contributes to broadening the relevancy of films like *The Flats*, echoing the way Alessandra widened the framework of documentary filmmaking to tell a story of relevance to us all: that of collective trauma inflicted by history, and the way different generations can (and must!) go forward to write their common history together.

We want to thank all our financial partners in France, in Belgium, in the UK, in Ireland and in Europe, being national or regional public funds as well as private partners.

Jean-Laurent Csinidis
Geneviève De Bauw
Jeremiah Cullinane
John McIlduff



Notes from the protagonists

Joe:

"I met Alessandra with the help of our friend Joe Baker, roughly eight years ago. The best thing I got out of making the movie was a lot of friends: Angela, Gerald, Jolene, Sean. Also Rita, the angel, she opened my eyes a wee bit and made me think positively, cause I was all negativity. I was happy to have met a lot of people, sometimes early in the morning, sometimes late at night. I can't really explain it in the correct way, but making this film was emotional, funny, sad, and most of all it opened up a lot of old wounds. I've let the genie out of the bottle and I hope everybody is proud."

Jolene:

"Me and Alessandra met and became friends when she made The Bookseller of Belfast and we always stayed close. I've worked with her now for years, and every part of it I've enjoyed, making a lot of friends and memories and becoming a better person in myself. Alessandra has been almost like a councillor to me (laughs). She's shown a part of Belfast in this film that people don't really see and she's actually made me see Belfast in a different way, how people go through so much suffering and pain and still manage to get on with their lives. It's not every day that people go through pain and hurt and are able to speak about it. It's not easy for anyone, but Alessandra made it easy for me to open up and become somebody else and see it in a different light."

Sean:

"My favourite part of the shoot was being on top of the flats and watching the bonfires and getting to meet and work with filmmakers and of course the dog, Freedom. The most difficult part was probably the first day, meeting everyone and thinking about what was expected of me. It was good working with Joe, listening to what it was like in the old days and what kids got up to back then. It was interesting to learn what Catholics and the British army felt about each other."

Rita:

"I met Alessandra when I'd been working with PIPS for maybe two years, a suicide prevention group in North Belfast, which started as a reaction to four young men - Catholics and Protestants - taking their own lives. I was working as a befriender councillor, for clients who are too traumatised and fragile to go through counselling. One day, Alessandra came in and asked if she could speak to me about one of my clients, Joe. Due to confidentiality and ethics I said that I wouldn't be able to. However, if she spoke with Joe and he gave permission and I spoke with Joe and he was comfortable with it, it could maybe happen. When he said yes to Alessandra making a film about his experiences, we agreed that I'd be there to help inform her on what she needed for the film, but also to guide them and look out for Joe's emotional, physical and mental welfare. We took it from there and it's been a huge experience getting to know Alessandra. She prioritised Joe throughout the whole experience, even down to filming being done only when it suited Joe. She's an amazing woman and anyone she deals with she deals with in a caring way."

Credits

Director and writer	Alessandra Celesia
Cinematographer	François Chambe
Editor	Frédéric Fichet
Sound engineer	Quentin Jacques
Sound mixing	Gilles Benardeau
Production manager	Jérôme Nunes
Postproduction coordinator	Nora Bertone
Producers	Jean-Laurent Csinidis, Geneviève De Bauw, Jeremiah Cullinane, John McIluff
Production companies	Films de Force Majeure (FR), Thank You & Good Night Productions (BE), Planet Korda Pictures (IR), Dumbworld (UK)

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This project was selected at

Doc Market (development) - Belfast Film Festival (2019 - Northern Ireland), Pitching du réel - Visions du Réel (2019 - Nyon, Switzerland), Doc Corner Prize, Film Market - Cannes Festival (2019 - France), HEAD Prize - Geneva post-production (2019 - Switzerland), Doc Market (postprod.) - Belfast film Festival (2023 - Northern Ireland)