

WHEN IRISH

FUJIFILM behind the camera



SKIES ARE SMILING

AN INTERVIEW WITH PETER ROBERTSON



The economic turnaround in the Irish republic over the last quarter century has seen the country dubbed the “Celtic tiger”. And it’s no accident that with the inward investment that follows such boom times the roots of a domestic film industry can take hold and – hopefully – grow.

Which is good news for men like Peter Robertson, a cinematographer of wide and eclectic experience, who ranks among the top DPs in his native land. But his success has been hard won.

“To be honest, when I started in the business around 1980, I might as well have decided to become an astronaut as a cameraman,” he chuckles. “You’d have as much chance of getting work.”

This from a man who has just shot his eighth feature, *Garage*, after building his reputation upon the likes of *Song For A Raggy Boy* – for which he was recognised at the Irish Film And Television Awards, and also collected the Haskell Wexler Award at the Woodstock Film Festival. Other credits include *Inside I’m Dancing*, *Wilderness* and the as-yet-unreleased *True North*.

While Robertson’s astronaut quip must have seemed all too close to reality when he began, now, at least, the stars he is seeing are of the human variety. Arriving at this point in his career has required talent, diligence, guile and a degree of ingenuity.

“I tried several things in my twenties,” he recalls, “but none of them worked. I went to the States for five years; I travelled, drove a cab in New York, worked in bars and made pop videos in Los Angeles. I suppose that’s where the germ of my ambition came from; I thought it was fun and wondered how I could make a living out of it.”

The chance to find out came when a business venture he had

invested in seemed doomed to failure. “I came back and took a Betamax recorder and a camera, which was state of the art at the time, and persuaded a friend that he needed a carpet selling video for an Ideal Home exhibition. It must have been okay as my friend was delighted, and that was one of the first corporate videos in Ireland.”

From there, Robertson enrolled on a film and media skills course, which was the springboard to more corporate training films, and from there to news and magazine programmes, television work and documentaries – all, at this time, on tape.

“I always wanted to shoot film,” he adds, “and I got an opportunity to shoot a TV series here called *Waterways*. That was hugely successful for the national television service. They sold it all over the world. I loved that, and it’s funny because a lot of that series was shot in the area that *Garage* was shot in, so I had an affinity, I knew that landscape. The landscape of *Garage* – that flat, open, big sky landscape – was very similar.”

A story Robertson describes as tragi-comic, *Garage* tells the tale of a sweet but simple man (Pat Shortt) who finds himself the victim of an avaricious property developer, and malign local gossip. Anne-Marie Duff also stars, in a film from Lenny Abrahamson, who previously directed the well-regarded *Adam & Paul*.

“I ended up using mostly the Eterna 250 tungsten, but for a lot of the day exteriors, I switched then to Super F-64 daylight,” Robertson explains. “Had the weather been good, this probably wouldn’t have been the case. It was funny, because we’d had some of the best weather I’ve experienced in the country for maybe a decade. Then the week we started to shoot, it rained and a sort of leaden sky came in.

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Photo: Director Lenny Abrahamson and DP Peter Robertson shooting *Garage*

PETER ROBERTSON

“I THOUGHT THE 64 DAYLIGHT WAS FANTASTIC FOR THOSE BIG LANDSCAPE SHOTS.”



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“I thought the 64 daylight was fantastic for those big landscape shots. It worked really well.”

Cinema is where Robertson would love to spend all his time working, but there are never quite enough jobs available to make that a viable option. “There aren’t enough features made in Ireland,” he notes, “so I would have to look for work abroad. And how much do I want to spend my life in a hotel, whether it’s London or Paris or wherever?”

Robertson’s wanderlust has been spent earlier adventures, making documentaries all over the world. “I feel quite privileged,” he continues. “I’ve shot doc-

umentaries in places I would never have gone to in my wildest dreams. I’ve done an awful lot of travelling in places like Chile, Africa, East Timor, that you would just never have gone to.”

An admirer of Chris Menges BSC, for whom he shot Steadicam on *Michael Collins* and *The Boxer*, Robertson also cites cameramen such as Nestor Almendros as an inspirational DP.

“I read a book of his, about working in Cuba where they used to shoot scenes waiting for the light to come in through a particular window. I’ve never been in those places shooting a drama where you know where the light is coming from, where the sun is and that there’s not going to be a bloody great

cloud in the way. Or else it’s going to be chucking down with rain.”

The irony of his being a fan of someone more used to tropical climes than the ever-changeable Atlantic weather fronts which visit his own country is not lost on Robertson.

“On *Garage*, we’d shoot part of a scene in blinding sunlight and then the sun would go in,” he sighs, “so what do you do, re-shoot it? You just learn to deal with it. It’s all part of being a cameramen in this part of the world. I’m sure in California they’ve got other things to deal with.”

Yet sometimes, when Irish skies are smiling, the result can be every bit as impressive.

“When we were doing the telecine on *Garage* I looked at the stock with the operator, there was something different about it and he nailed it when he said it had a really earthy quality. For this particular project, which was done in that landscape in rural Ireland, it is so applicable. It had a real earthy quality, and I just thought it was beautiful.

“We were lucky because we had some very good skies too, although it wasn’t blue, ‘happy-happy’ sky there was layered cloud. That’s very interesting to the eye but hard to photograph.”

As memorable an image as that provides it reminds us that for Peter Robertson, the sky really is the limit. ■ ANWAR BRETT

■ *Garage* was originated on 35mm Eterna 500T 8573, Eterna 250T 8553 and Super F-64D 8522



Photo top: Pat Shortt, Anne-Marie Duff, Una Kavanagh and Adam O’Toole in *Garage*; above l-r: a still from The Irish Pensions Board commercial (shot by Robertson) and scenes from *Garage*