

desperate optimists productions
presents



UK/IRELAND | 79mins | 2008

HELEN

Introducing
ANNIE TOWNSEND

Written and Directed by
Christine Molloy and Joe Lawlor

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SYNOPSIS

An 18 year old girl called Joy has gone missing. Another girl called Helen is a few weeks away from leaving her care home. Helen is asked to 'play' Joy in a police reconstruction that will retrace Joy's last known movements. Joy had everything. A loving family, a boyfriend, a bright future. Helen, parentless, has lived in institutions all her life and has never been close to anyone. Gradually Helen begins to immerse herself into the role, visiting the people and places that Joy knew; quietly and carefully insinuating her way into the lost girl's life. But is Helen trying to find out what happened to Joy that day, or is she searching for her own identity?

Helen is the debut feature by award-winning short film directors Christine Molloy and Joe Lawlor.

SYNOPSIS (long)

Helen is the story of a 17-year-old teenage girl. Helen has been in care since she was an infant. Helen has had a complex and troubled past. We first encounter her on the threshold of her 18th birthday, which, ominously for Helen, signals the end of her care order. This new beginning is full of anticipation and anxiety. Notwithstanding the support from her care worker, Helen knows that this official entry into adulthood is something she must ultimately undertake alone. Given everything that has happened to her in her life, being left alone is Helen's greatest fear and challenge to overcome. This is a highly volatile moment in Helen's life.

At the same time and in the same city there is a missing girl called Joy. A fingertip search led by the police is being carried out in a local woods. Only the day before a jacket and personal effects belonging to Joy were found. This revelation adds a greater urgency to the police search for Joy who has been missing for some time now. The pain this search causes Joy's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Thompson, is palpable. They have been clinging on to the belief, difficult as it was, that Joy's disappearance was nothing more than a teenage girl's cry for help and have lived in hope that one day soon she will return home safely to them. Although not hopeless, now the situation looks somewhat more ominous.

A reconstruction of Joy's last known movements is organised. For the police, a key part of the process is to find the right girl to play Joy in the police reconstruction. Hopefully, airing the reconstruction on national television will alert the general public and jog people's memories providing valuable clues as to what happened to Joy in the 24 hours leading up to her disappearance.

The audition for Joy's 'stand-in' takes place in the college that Joy was attending. It is also the college that Helen is attending. Helen, it is agreed by the police and especially Joy's parents, is perfect for the role of Joy. The parents sense that there is something uncanny about her resemblance to Joy. Indeed Mr. and Mrs. Thompson are slightly unnerved by the similarity. Somehow their encounter with Helen makes them even more volatile. It is clear that Joy's parents might actually need Helen to help them get through this very difficult time in their life. What Mr. and Mrs. Thompson do not know is that Helen also needs their help.

The role of 'stand-in' represents an important opportunity for Helen. She senses that to inhabit someone else's life, if only temporarily, could help her with her own life. In the days leading up to the lifting of her care order and the enacting of the reconstruction, Helen undertakes the task of preparing for her role in the reconstruction just a bit too seriously. Indeed as each day goes by she realises that Joy, who is the same age as her, had many of the things she never had: a secure home; loving parents; success at school; popularity amongst her peers; and a steady boyfriend. Helen wants to know what these

things are, especially the relationship with the parents and the boyfriend. What can they mean? What can they contribute to the development of a human being? Her hunch is that by knowing these answers she can make the successful transition into adulthood. Helen needs to resolve some key personal issues and she hopes that stepping into this missing girl's shoes might just help her to 'find herself'.

CREW

Director, Writer and Producer CHRISTINE MOLLOY and JOE LAWOR

Director of Photography OLE BIRKELAND

Original Music DENNIS MCNULTY

Production Manager JULIE LAU

Sound Mixer SIMON GILLMAN

Sound Supervisors BARNABY TEMPLER

JAKE ROBERTS

Re-recording Mixers GRAHAM DANIEL

ADAM DANIEL

Script Editor BEN SLATER

1st Assistant Director JAMES DAVISON

Filmed using Panavision Millennium camera and Panavision E – Series anamorphic lenses.

PRINCIPAL CAST

Helen ANNIE TOWNSEND
Mrs Thompson SANDIE MALIA
Mr Thompson DENNIS JOBLING
Police Officer Saville SONIA SAVILLE
Danny DANNY GROENLAND
Personal Advisor SHEILA HAMILTON
Key Worker BETTY ASHE
Drama Teacher GAVIN HUSCROFT
Police Officers CHARLENE JAMES
KEITH SAHA
Detective Williams MARTI WILLIAMS
Hotel Chambermaid MARIA VISHNJAKOVA
College Lecturer EDDIE HARDY
Hotel Manager PAUL GRAHAM
College Students ANNA MIDDLETON
SARAH MILES

DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

For us, it's very difficult to talk about *Helen* without reference to the nine short films that preceded it. This collection of short films, known as the *Civic Life Series*, were made over the past 5 years with a common set of rules running through them. Namely, they were all shot on 35mm cinemascope on relatively low budgets, they predominantly used long takes, and they mostly featured people from local communities with little or no acting experience.

When we started out on that venture we didn't have a clear sense that one day it would lead to the making of a feature film. It was perhaps when we had completed the fifth or sixth film in the series that we felt that there was something about this methodology that could lend itself to the feature length format.

Because these short films were each shot in one day, sometimes involving hundreds of people, with little or no time for rehearsals, the shoots themselves were often a case of staged chaos – a kind of under rehearsed performance event played out in real time over the ten minutes of the take. You see this in the completed films, the contradiction between something very composed and rigorously structured on the one hand, with people looking and waving into the camera on the other. The result is very much a cinema of 'making do'. We like this very much and feel this tension between the slickness of 35mm production values and the rawness in the performances allows for something admittedly flawed but ultimately human and honest to come through.

For *Helen* we set out to focus on two things in the making of the film. Firstly we needed to develop a more explicit sense of 'story'. In our short films the presence of story is very incidental and in several of the films actually non-existent. We felt over the course of a feature film a story, even a simple one, would be important and also an interesting challenge to us. That the story became so focused on one character was very surprising to us particularly given the fact that it was to be shot across four cities (and two countries) and would involve the participation of many local people from each of those cities in its making. Secondly we planned to keep the existing *Civic Life* rules with the addition that we would use cutaways and process all the takes. For the short films in the *Civic Life* series we only ever processed one take from each shoot, in effect having nothing to 'edit'. Normally the editing process allows the filmmaker to eliminate or disguise mistakes but with *Civic Life* the imperfections and flaws have become one of the defining features of the works. For *Helen* we knew we would have to cut ourselves some slack and give ourselves options, albeit limited, in the cutting room. With only 300mins of footage to work with, using cutaways for *Helen* allowed us to edit using all of the footage we shot which proved essential in dealing with how much the structure of the story changed during the edit.

In the end, the formal shifts we made were right for *Helen* but what we hadn't anticipated was how important the story would become. It slowly began to influence everything we did. We started out trying to concentrate on HOW we would tell this minimal and understated story – focusing primarily on how the camera would move through the locations to create the tone and mood of the film - but along the way we were surprised by how crucial the story became to all our decision-making. This became the focus of our approach in making the film, trying to find the balance between our desire to create something cinematic with the need to work through the various elements of the story. The resulting texture of the film has come out of this balancing act and has quite an enigmatic and poetic quality.

Helen is an attempt to draw a portrait of a deeply complex, marginalised young woman. This complexity exists in all of us but so often teenagers are not seen or portrayed in such a way. Given her personal history she is also intensely private. We rarely see her emoting or showing how she really feels. This emotional restraint is at the heart of the film and leads to a predominantly introspective and muted world in which the story unfolds. It's not that the film is unemotional but rather the emotion is quite hidden and subdued because of who Helen is and the reality of her troubled past.

At its most basic we hope *Helen* is a gentle and tender story of a girl struggling to discover who she is as she starts her adult life.

CREW AND CAST BIOGRAPHIES

Writer Directors Producers **CHRISTINE MOLLOY AND JOE LAWLOR**

Over the past 4 years Christine Molloy and Joe Lawlor have been working on a project called *Civic Life*. *Civic Life* involved local community groups in the production of nine high-quality short films for the cinema, shot on 35mm cinemascope making extensive use of the long take. In 2004, their *film Who Killed Brown Owl* won the award for Best British Short Film at the Edinburgh International Film Festival. In January 2008 their latest short film *Joy* won the Prix UIP Rotterdam at the International Film Festival Rotterdam. *Helen* is the culmination of the *Civic Life* series.

Helen **ANNIE TOWNSEND**

Annie is currently studying for a foundation degree in coaching and sports development. She has played for Newcastle United women's football team (mid-field). Annie has come very latterly to acting and more in a social capacity. She has previously acted in two plays and *Helen* is her very first film role.

Director of Photography **OLE BIRKELAND**

Since starting out in the industry Ole has made over 50 short films including the award winning *Who Killed Brown Owl* (Edinburgh Film Festival 2004). He has also worked as principle cinematographer on the BAFTA nominated feature *Everything* and the currently on release *Ruby Blue* with Bob Hoskins. He divides his time between features, commercials and music videos.

Music **DENNIS MCNULTY**

Dennis McNulty is an artist based in Dublin. His installation and sound performance work deals with the friction between the planned and the unplanned especially with respect to urban space. In 2004, he represented Ireland at the São Paulo Bienal and had a solo show in February 2008 at Green On Red, Dublin. He also makes film soundtracks, most notably for *Seaview*, a documentary which premiered at the Berlin Film Festival in February 2008 and *Brazilia/Chandigarh*, a film by French artist Loudigi Beltrame.

THE COMMISSIONING PARTNERS

The commissioning partners are: NewcastleGateshead Initiative via Culture¹⁰ its regional events and festivals programme; Tyneside Cinema; Birmingham City Council; Dublin Docklands Development Authority; the Liverpool Culture Company; and Arts Council England.

ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

Helen is funded by Arts Council England, the national development agency for the arts, through its Grants for the arts programme for individuals and organisations.

DUBLIN DOCKLANDS DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

The Dublin Docklands Development Authority is a self-financing government agency which exists to guide and drive the durable social, economic and physical development of the area and to capture the vision of an attractive and sustainable environment.

The Dublin Docklands development project is one of the most far-sighted and clearly focused developments ever undertaken in Ireland. It involves the physical transformation and the social and economic regeneration of a large, and previously neglected, part of Dublin city into a world-class city quarter.

CULTURE¹⁰

Culture¹⁰ is a curated programme of exceptional cultural events and festivals across the North East region. It is intended to build upon and consolidate the successes achieved through the European Capital of Culture bidding process and to give the region an international launch pad for the rest of the decade. This project exemplifies the work of Culture¹⁰ in programming and producing high quality work that highlights the iconography of the region, engaging its people actively in celebrating its uniqueness while making national and international connections. The commissioning of Christine Molloy and Joe Lawlor, artists of excellence in this field, with three partner cities contributes to sharing best practice and building new networks. The final work will be shown as part of the opening programme of the newly refurbished Tyneside Cinema. In early 2008 we will reopen the Tyneside Cinema in Newcastle in its newly restored and extended building. It is the home of NorthEast moving image culture and will be the most distinctive cinema in the UK.

The financial partners supporting this film are Newcastle City Council, Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council, One North East, Tyne Wear Partnership and Northern Rock Foundation.

TYNESIDE CINEMA

Tyneside Cinema is the leading regional exhibitor of specialist film and new media in the north east of England. It screens the best in independent and world cinema, complemented by retrospectives, educational and special

events. It runs regular screenwriting workshops and delivers a range of events to support its programme of screenings, from short courses in digital video production to specialist seminars on film analysis, guest speaker introductions and film and new media festivals. The Tyneside has just returned to its home on Pilgrim Street, Newcastle after an exciting and ambitious £6.5m restoration and redevelopment.

BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL

Birmingham City Council Arts Team is committed to providing engaging experiences across the arts for the people of Birmingham. The Arts team are keen to encourage new audiences for the arts through positive participation in high quality projects. Christine Molloy and Joe Lawlor have been commissioned for their innovative and meritorious way of working. Working with the partner cities contributes to building new and strengthening existing partnerships, sustaining a shared vision and opening a dialogue for the future of cross-city collaboration.

THE LIVERPOOL CULTURE COMPANY

The Liverpool Culture Company was established by Liverpool City Council in 2000 to lead the city's bid to be European Capital of Culture 2008. In June 2003, following a two-year nationwide competition featuring 12 cities, Liverpool was chosen as the UK's representative for 2008. The programme for 2008 includes more than 350 events and festivals - many of which are free delivered in collaboration with major cultural institutions, artists, performers and venues throughout Liverpool and beyond. For more information visit www.liverpool08.com.

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