

TOWN OF STRANGERS

A film by Treasa O'Brien



82 mins/Ireland/Colour/2021/Cert tbc

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SYNOPSIS

A stranger arrives in the town of Gort (population 2994) in the west of Ireland and announces that auditions will be held in the town hall for a new film. *"Come and tell me your stories, your dreams, your lies, your memories, any gossip. All genders, nationalities and languages welcome. No acting experience necessary"* is announced by the director via a loudspeaker on her van as she drives through the town. One by one, people sit into an armchair on the set of a kitchen, surrounded by old props found in the Town Hall that could have been from John B Keane's *The Field*, which had been produced by the local theatre group the year before. And they tell their stories....

"I've never been to bloody Ireland" recounts new age hippie Ralf from Northern England, *"I said to my girlfriend 'I'll be back in three weeks.' That was seventeen years ago. Do you think she's still waiting for me? She must have boiled the kettle a thousand times."*

"I came from under the truck," says Hamid from Afghanistan, *"I got off in Dublin and I asked someone 'where am I?', and they showed me to the refugee place."*



Further information and downloads [here](#)

Photo set download [here](#)

CREDITS

Writer / Director Treasa O'Brien
Producers Martha O'Neill (Wildfire Films)
Treasa O'Brien (Stinging Hornet Films)
Executive Producer Joshua Oppenheimer
Cinematography Gina Ferrer, Eileen Timmons & Treasa
O'Brien
Editor Mirjam Strugalla
Music Áine O'Dwyer, Matthew Noone, Ólavur
Jakobsen,
Fierce Mild, Ludmila Feber, Parde Awal,
Gerry Harrington, Leon Holmes
Original Score Irene Buckley
Funded by An Chomhairle Ealaíon / The Arts
Council of Ireland
Clare County Council

Ireland 2021
82 minutes

With

Ana
Chloe
Dido
Elham
Hamid
Josie
Ralf
Rosa
Rowan

TREASA O'BRIEN:



Treasa O'Brien is an award-winning filmmaker, writer and visual artist. She has made several short films, and two feature-length films including *Eat Your Children* (2015), and *Town of Strangers* (2021), a documentary of the imagination. Her films have travelled internationally in festivals and gallery exhibitions in New York, Australia, Greece, Palestine, Italy, France and Germany including the Berlinale, London Film Festival, Athens Ethnographic Festival. The influences in Treasa's work come from a deep engagement with activist social politics, psychology and philosophy as well as art, literature, and cinema. She makes fiction, documentary and experimental film works, but is most interested when these distinctions collapse.

Treasa was born in Ireland and originally went to art college. She lived in London for several years, where she studied film directing at Goldsmiths, gaining a MA honours with her award winning short fiction film *N25*, set on a London nightbus. She completed a PhD in Film Practice at University of Westminster where she worked on the film *Town of Strangers* with Joshua Oppenheimer and May Ingawanij as her supervisors. Much of her formal teaching was undone when she participated in Werner Herzog's Rogue Film School in New Jersey. She walked from New York to New Jersey in a heatwave to attend the school, making an essay film along her way, in which Herzog appears at the end.

Treasa teaches, writes and curates on art and film and has been published widely. She was Executive Director of Open City Documentary Festival 2012-14

and was part of the curatorial 'gang' of London Essay Film Festival from 2014-2018. She now lives in the west of Ireland between the woods and the sea and teaches film practice at Galway Atlantic Technological University.

Filmography:

TOWN OF STRANGERS / 82mins / Ireland / 2021 / Writer-Director

MEASURES EXTENDED (FLATTENING THE C-WORD) / 4mins / Ireland / 2020 / Writer-Director

MEMOIRS OF A SPACEMOTHER / 14mins / Ireland / 2019 / Writer-Director

THE BLOW-IN / HDV Cinemascope / 9mins / 2016 / Writer-Director

VIKINGS / HDV / 10 mins / 2016 / Director, Editor

NOOR AT MYTILINI PORT / HDV / 6mins / Greece / 2016/ Director, Editor

INTERVIEW WITH JOSHUA OPPENHEIMER / 25mins / 2016 / Director of Video interview for DVD *Joshua Oppenheimer Early Works*, produced by Second Run

EAT YOUR CHILDREN / HDV / 78 mins / 2015/ Writer & Co-director

SPIRIT OF SHUHADA STREET / HDV / 70mins / 2011/ Writer-Director, Editor

TURNIP STORY / SUPER-8, transferred to HDV / 10mins / 2011/ Director, Editor

ROGUE WALK: REVELATIONS ON THE ROAD TO HERZOG / DV / 35mins / 2011 Writer-Director

CROSS YOUR FINGERS / HDV / 17 mins / 2011, Script Editor (Dir. Yun-joo Chang)

N25 / 16mm / produced by Full House Films, 2010/ Director

FILTHY / 16mm / Full House Films / 2009/ Writer-Director

THE INVENTION / HDV gallery installation / 2009/ Director, Editor

BORDERBALL / DV gallery installation, in collaboration with Einat Amir / 2008 Director, Editor

MOSQUITO BITES / DV / 2007 / 10mins / Director, Camera



Director's Note

When I started making *Town of Strangers*, the town of Gort boasted two remarkable statistics: it was the town with the most nationalities in Ireland, relative to its small population (2994); and it was the town 'worst hit by austerity'. I had been visiting Gort with the idea to make a film there when the Goethe Institute, after seeing my film *Eat Your Children*, commissioned me to make a short film based on the theme of home. The project, called Europoly, matched filmmakers around Europe and that is how I got to work with Catalan DoP Gina Ferrer. It was a kind of blind date – she came and worked with me for a week-long shoot that became the short film called *The Blow-in*. I used a day of the shooting schedule and budget for that film to shoot auditions for *Town of Strangers*, a film script I was developing. I did not yet know what form that film would take but I knew it would not be a 'straight' documentary nor a fiction. I was searching for a cinematic language that would transcend the binary of documentary and fiction and find a way to express the lived experiences of people with hybrid cultural identities. I wanted to incorporate stories from the town and potentially cast first-time actors as themselves.



The auditions, however, irrevocably changed the course of the film, due to the particularity of the encounters that occurred. I was astonished and honoured by the stories divulged to me. People showed me their strengths and vulnerabilities in a way that moved me. The more I got to know the people from the auditions, the more I adapted and improvised the film. I soon left the script far behind and together with some of the people I met, we went on a cinematic journey to explore their waking and dreaming lives.

I asked people in the auditions to tell me “*a dream, a lie, a memory, a story or a piece of gossip*”. The resulting scenes are not re-enactments but rather performative enactments improvised together. By inviting the participants to enact their dreams or memories, I was documenting the process of this imagining, rather than trying to create a product based on the content of the story itself. Sometimes it is the making-of the scenes that were more interesting than the scenes themselves and these form part of the film’s story.

Town of Strangers is a poetic film that experiments with form and it is also a human rights film. It is a cinematic and philosophical exploration of the lived experiences of ‘the other’, people who make their home in a small town in the west of Ireland, in the age of austerity politics, the refugee “crisis”, and the rise of nationalism and rightwing politics in Europe and the USA. Migrant experience, Traveller’s experience of belonging to two cultures, and the experience of being othered as an outsider by both, is part of what this film explores.



I had spent time working in refugee camps in Greece and Calais in the winters over the three years of making this film and had made several short films about the journeys people were making, working with them as co-creators. *Town of Strangers* explores the aftermath - the shifting sand between the migrant’s longing for home, and their efforts to belong in their new home.

Ireland’s history has been one of mass emigration with more people with Irish passports abroad than in Ireland. Many Irish emigrants have experienced racism and xenophobia, and a longing for home. But in the past two decades

that trend has changed as Ireland has experienced immigrants into the country, changing what Irish small town life presumes itself to be and changing our perception of ourselves. In this film, migrants, Travellers, refugees, hippies and even the director herself are both insiders and outsiders.

When I made *Town of Strangers* I was searching for a cinematic language that would transcend the binary of documentary and fiction to find a way to express the lived experiences of people who have undergone displacement through migration or through a hybrid cultural identity. The resulting film is formally innovative in how it works with the audition and 'making-of' as a performative space and in its treatment of first-person filmmaking. Many of the dream and memory scenes I made with the film participants are explored for their 'behind-the-scenes' documentary value because to me it is in the process of making of the scene that our emotions are revealed, rather than in the finished scene itself. My own emplacement as director is semi-fictionalised within the film, revealing a poetic truth of my engagement with the people and place that is nevertheless based on my real lived experiences.

We are all running from something. Losing and finding ourselves over and over. We think we encounter characters when we watch films but ultimately, we encounter ourselves. Was each person that I was filming somehow playing a different part of myself? Had I been drawn to each person not because I needed to meet them but because I needed to meet myself in them?

I am Ana when I am lonely, I am Elham when I miss my mother, I am Ralf when I am feeling reckless, I am Chloe trying to fit in and ready to run away, I am Dido making my home in a chair, I am Rosa when I am strong, I am Rowan when I am vulnerable and I am Hamid running in the Afghan hills of the Irish Burren.

It occurred to me that perhaps I was the stranger who came to town and went on a journey once I arrived.

Interview with Treasa O'Brien in the Irish Times by Donald Clarke

Somewhere in Treasa O'Brien's fascinating hybrid feature (her own "reluctant" description), she makes reference to a famous Tolstoy quote. "All great literature is one of two stories; a man goes on a journey or a stranger comes to town," the great man wrote.

We need hardly wonder why she settled on *Town of Strangers* for a title. Dr O'Brien, an experienced academic and film-maker, is one of the strangers in Gort, Co Galway. Others could be the various immigrants – some English, many Brazilian – who have helped make that town such a cosmopolitan hub. Yet they are now locals. This is home.

"It is the town with the largest number of people not from Ireland living in it," she says. "The amount of people from Brazil was about half the population at one point. Though when I came to the town a lot of people had moved away because of austerity. But it was still a sizeable part of the community."

O'Brien says an Irish businessman initially brought over 25 workers from one Brazilian town where, following the closure of a meat factory, there was a great deal of unemployment. Families followed and a community was formed. Most of *Town of Strangers*, a charming, beautifully composed piece, consists of immigrants – some who have been here for decades – talking about their experiences in a changing Ireland. That wasn't exactly the film O'Brien initially had in mind.

"There is a meta-story within the film about how I made the film," she says. "In some ways Gort came to me and in others I came to Gort. I was working on a fiction script called *The Miracle of Colonel Sanders' Tears* that I had set in Gort. It was originally set in Texas. I went to Gort to research it. I found myself feeling pigeonholed between definitions of documentary and fiction films."

Influenced by Iranian cinema – works that so often wriggle free from those confining definitions – she decided to cast non-actors in a fictional film that told real stories from the town. She called for auditions. Something rather different emerged.

“Yes. But in some ways the ghost of that idea is still in the film. It’s still there,” she says.

Hamid, Ana, Rosa, Elham, Chloe, Ralf and others sit before the camera and discuss their dreams and ambitions. We hear about work, sexuality and struggles with identity. Few hold back in opening up their inner lives. It seems as if the participants were already telling stories in the audition period.

“I felt like I was encountering people in a way I didn’t expect,” she says. “They told me these stories. I embarked upon this journey with them. I was trying to do two things at the same time and somewhere along the way the fiction fell away and what I would call a documentary of the imagination started happening.”

O’Brien is keen to stress that this is not any sort of anthropological study, but one narrative that comes through is of two very different waves of immigration to Galway. The smaller, older movement found hippies from western Europe seeking a sort of idyll in the Burren hinterland. The larger, more recent wave takes in – once an unthinkable notion – the world moving to Galway in search of work.



“One of the reasons I wanted to make this film was because the long, long history of Ireland has been one of emigration and colonialism,” she says. “Now

we are post-colonial and we have immigration rather than emigration. That's a huge change. For better or worse, we are used to the other identity. We have so many songs about longing and being away. To an extent this film is about people coming here and longing for their places."

O'Brien is herself a bit of a stranger in Galway. She was born in Dublin and moved to Kerry with her family when she was three years old. "I identify as a Kerry woman, we'll say," she says. Her website reveals a daunting array of qualifications and achievements. She has a degree in fine art, a master's in fiction directing and a PhD in film-making by practice. She has taught at (deep breath) University College London, University of Westminster, NUI Galway, Limerick School of Arts and Design, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology and – alma mater of Steve McQueen and Damien Hirst – Goldsmiths in London. The web page jokes that "much of her formal teaching was undone when she was a participant of Werner Herzog's Rogue Film School".



So how does she balance film-making and academia? The two can work against one another.

"My honest answer – I may not get another job after this – is that I use or exploit the academic side to make my films. So making my films is what I am most passionate about. When I did my PhD it was very practice-based."

We are used to the notion of Hollywood doubling up on familiar stories. There were the two versions of The Jungle Book recently. Remember when Kevin

Costner and Patrick Bergin offered rival takes on Robin Hood in the same year? Few could, however, have guessed that, in a little over 12 months, we would get two fine documentaries on the changing face of the same Galway town.

O'Brien was impressed by Keith Walsh's *When All Is Ruin Again*. Melding meditations on Yeats with discontent concerning a new motorway, that piece could play as the complementary half of a double bill with *Town of Strangers*. Does O'Brien see her film as being in conversation with Walsh's monochrome reverie?

"Yes. I know the film-makers. So we had conversations during the film-making. It's wild that they came out at the same time and they're set in the same space we now call Gortywood. Mine is very much the town of Gort, whereas *Where All Is Ruin Once Again* is based on the new road and the environs of Gort. It's great really. The more, the better. And there are another couple of films that were made at the same time."

Hooray for Gortywood!

MUSIC

The soundtrack for *Town of Strangers* is as eclectic as the characters in the film, ranging from Afghan pop of Parde Awal to Brazilian evangelist power ballad of Ludmila Ferber. Irish artists featured include Dublin queer-feminist punk band *Fierce Mild*; Clare-based Matthew Noone who composes versions of Irish trad on the Indian sarode; Limerick-London avant garde composer and musician Áine O Dwyer and a field recording from a kitchen in Gort of Gerry Harrington playing the fiddle.

An original score was commissioned from Cork composer Irene Buckley whose ethereal soundscapes form a backdrop to the dreamy cinemascapes of the character's dream scenes. *Town of Strangers* is also proud to introduce Leon Holmes, Gort rapper, who was 14 when he composed the Gort Anthem, featured in the scene with Chloe and her friends high-jinking in the back of the director's campervan.