CARTOON SALOON AT 25

The Breadwinner

+ Q&A with Nora Twomey

Why make *The Breadwinner*? Why not? Nora Twomey already had a good thing running at Cartoon Saloon, the animation studio she set up in 1999 in Kilkenny, Ireland, with fellow animation school graduates Tomm Moore and Gerry Shirren, when the latter brought her a copy of Deborah Ellis's 2000 young adult novel back from an animation market as an adaptation prospect. 'Now every week we have different projects coming and going – "Would you be interested in this and interested in that?" – and these days most of our job is saying no to things. But I read *The Breadwinner* in an evening and was consumed by it – I loved the character of Parvana and loved how Deborah had written for children in a way that didn't talk down to them, but didn't over-complicate things either.'

Ellis had toured refugee camps in northern Pakistan in the late 1990s before composing her story of a young girl in Taliban-run Kabul who has to dress as a boy to feed her family after her father is frog-marched to jail – women not being allowed to go outdoors independently. Twomey worked with Ellis and the Canadian-Hungarian writer Anita Doron on the screenplay, and brought to bear on her production all the skills and resources Cartoon Saloon had developed through the making of Moore's two features, *The Secret of Kells* (2009) and *Song of the Sea* (2014). The digitised hand-drawn style of those films had to be transposed from Emerald Isle settings to the dust and rubble of Afghanistan, in collaboration with fellow animation studios in Luxembourg (Melusine Productions) and Canada (Guru). Angelina Jolie's Jolie Pas Productions also came aboard to help secure the funding. It's not quite the indigenous self-expression championed by current critical fashion, but feature animation takes resources and Twomey isn't apologising for considering herself a modern, empowered animator of the world: 'Having built the studio up over decades now, and having found production partners who have access to similar funding models, we didn't have to worry about somebody being frightened they wouldn't get their investment back. If we can use financing models and the stability in countries we live in to tell these kinds of stories that otherwise wouldn't get told, it was certainly a question of "Why not?", as opposed to "Why?"'

In the film, Parvana's father knows all about life at the crossroads. A one-legged veteran of the war against the Soviets, and a former teacher reduced to hawking family wares on a street stall, he rears his children on mythological histories of their homeland and the litany of conquering invaders who've passed through. 'Everything changes, Parvana. Stories remind us of that.' Parvana in turn improvises a story-within-the-story about a boy's quest to find a terrible Elephant King – animated in a symmetrical cut-out style based on Persian miniatures – at first to pacify her baby brother, but latterly for herself as a way of sublimating the unspoken tragedy of her missing older brother Sulayman. Outside, harsh concrete truths impose themselves. Venturing out as a boy brings the terror of discovery but also access to realms of male privilege (the easy laughter inside a food shop; boys simply playing football by a fountain). She meets kind men, fearful men, complacent men, a suspicious, bullying Taliban teen – and a fellow cross-dressing classmate who teaches her bribery and odd-jobbing and who dreams of escape. Back home, Parvana's elder sister is prepared for unwanted marriage; and in the skies above gather the clouds (and jet planes) of another round of war.

Twomey speaks of the film as a tool for channelling and confronting the complexities of the world. 'Seeing the world my children are growing up into and have inherited from me and my peers, the idea [was] something by which children can begin to have conversations about aspects of the world that are complicated; for there to be no easy answers, no simple soundbites,' she says. It's the morning after her premiere at the BFI London Film Festival and she's delighted with the questions she took from nine- and ten-year-olds. We talk about what age the film might be 'appropriate' for: 'Tomi Ungerer, who was a children's illustrator for many years, talked about how it's not our job to shield children from things: it's our job to give them the tools [to consider things]… Oftentimes, what adults will think children are going to feel isn't what ends up frightening them,' she adds. 'Certainly, as an

The Breadwinner
Directed by: Nora Twomey
©: Breadwinner Canada Inc.,
Cartoon Saloon (Breadwinner) Limited,
Melusine Productions S.A.
Production Companies: Aircraft Pictures,
Cartoon Saloon, Melusine Productions
In association with: Jolie Pas Productions
With the support of: Film Fund Luxembourg
Produced with the participation of:
Telefilm Canada, Talent Fund
With the participation of:
Bord Scannán na hÉireann/The Irish Film Board
Produced with the financial participation of: Gaia Entertainment, Shaw Rocket Fund, Artemis Rising Foundation, Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, Ontario Media Development Corporation, The Harold Greenberg Fund, RTÉ, The Movie Network, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation
In association with: GKIDS
Developed with the assistance of:
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Film Fund Luxembourg, Bord Scannán na hÉireann/The Irish Film Board, Telefilm Canada, Talent Fund, GKIDS, Ontario Media Development Corporation – Film and Television Tax Credits, Canadian Film or Video Tax Credit
Production Partners: Studio 352, Guru Studio
Produced with the support of investment incentives for the Irish film industry provided by:
Government of Ireland
International Sales: WestEnd Films
Executive Producers: Angelina Jolie, Gerry Shirren, Mimi Polk Gitlin, Jon Levin, Regina K. Scully, Eric Beckman, David Jesteadt, Mary Bredin, Frank Falcone, Karim Amer, Jehane Noujaim
Produced by: Anthony Leo, Andrew Rosen, Paul Young, Tomm Moore, Stephan Roelants
Line Producer: Katja Schumann
Associate Producers: Tommaso Colognese, Fabien Renelli, Philip Svoboda
Assistant Director: Stuart Shankly
Casting Director: Merle Anne Ridley
Screenplay by: Anita Doron
Screen Story by: Deborah Ellis
Based on the book by: Deborah Ellis
Creative Consultants: Walid Abouljoud, Jamie Bolio, Jericca Cleland, Darren Holmes, Sean McCarron, Amanullah Mojadidi
Story Consultant: Maureen Dorey
Head of Story: Julien Regnard
Director of Photography: Sheldon Lisoy
Animation Director: Fabian Erlinghäuser
Technical Director: Mark Mullery
Effects Supervisor: Claudio Pacciarella
Background Character Supervisor: Mark Mullery
Editor: Darragh Byrne
Art Directors: Reza Riahi, Ciaran Duffy
Storyboard Supervisor: Stuart Shankly
Music by: Mychael Danna, Jeff Danna
Conductor: Adam Klemens
Orchestrations: Adam Klemens
Score Produced by: The Danna Brothers
Sound Design by: J.R. Fountain
Sound Supervisor: Nelson Ferreira
Re-recording Mixers: Frank Morrone, J.R. Fountain
Voice Cast:
Saara Chaudry *(Parvana)*
Soma Chhaya *(Shauzia)*

Laara Sadiq *(Fattema/old woman)*
Shaista Latif *(Soraya)*
Ali Badshah *(Nurullah/Talib security man)*
Kawa Ada *(Razaq)*
Noorin Gulamgaus *(Idrees/Sulayman)*
Patrick McGrath *(Zaki)*
Finn Jackson Parle *(Lily Erlinghäuser)*
Canada-Ireland-Luxembourg-USA 2017©
93 mins
Digital

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The Secret of Kells
Sat 6 Jan 12:10
Song of the Sea
Sat 13 Jan 12:00
The Short Films of Cartoon Saloon + Q&A with Cartoon Saloon's Nora Twomey, Tomm Moore and Paul Young
Sat 20 Jan 11:30
The Breadwinner + Q&A with Nora Twomey
Sat 20 Jan 14:10
Wolfwalkers + Q&A with director Tomm Moore
Sat 21 Jan 12:15
My Father's Dragon
Sat 27 Jan 12:00
Funday Workshop: Puffin Rock and the New Friends
Sun 28 Jan 10:30
Funday: Puffin Rock and the New Friends
Sun 28 Jan 11:45

adult watching a scene where someone's on a journey carrying belongings on their back, that has connotations from newspapers I read every day, images I see on the news. Whereas children don't have that field of reference, and with *The Breadwinner* they take things very much how Parvana takes things. If she looks like she can handle a situation or is not too frightened then they're not either.'

On the other hand, the complexity of Afghanistan's story, as she researched deeper, 'nearly paralysed me as a filmmaker – thinking about what I was trying to depict in some way, shape or form and how wrong I could go, I guess. I slowed myself right down to think about beats in the story, empathetic beats such as the mother putting her head on the pillow next to her toddler. For me, some of the quietest moments of my life have been like that, putting my head on the pillow when my children were young and realising how quiet my internal voice went and how slow my heartbeat. Or just the effect that eating has on Parvana – she comes home, she's ratty, she's arguing with her sister, until just by virtue of eating something… I'm like that; my husband won't talk to me until I've eaten my breakfast. So finding universal truths in the film was the most important thing.

'As far as having no easy answers, that was never going to be the case from Deborah's book. I knew we had to find a way to show hope in the film, but hope was in the characters, the people we got to see in the film and the potential for change and love, I suppose, coming from really unexpected places. Those were all really important things to put in there.'

In her telling, the film's creative germination was as iterative and layered as its multiple production stages: 'Different beats came in at different points […] There were scenes I was watching yesterday and remembering how little nuances came about – an animator stopped me in the corridor and had a story point and it goes into the film. So your film that ends up at 90 minutes can have the thoughts and contributions of 300 people at different times.' She lists some of her fellow travellers: Doron, an Eastern European-born expat 'who's moved her entire life and has a world perspective: she's a listener.' Another listener was the short-filmmaker Julien Regnard, who she picked to work solo through the first pass of the film's storyboards: 'I needed one personality through that first pass and knew we were aligned in terms of our sensibilities.' And so on to the voice cast, recorded in Toronto, where they gathered a number of Afghan expats for roles major and minor. 'We had Afghani-born parents with Canadian-born children… people whose parents had [fled] from different regimes in Afghanistan… a dialogue between generations, and they brought their own sensibilities and stories to the process.'

There's an increasing fluidity and an internationalism to the organisation of Cartoon Saloon and its methods, too, as Twomey describes. 'The older we've grown the more we realise that we have to dovetail all our production so that we have stability for our crew – to create a culture and stability for the animators in Kilkenny, so they don't have to move off when production ends. People invest in you and you invest in people. You have teams working together who discover different techniques: to let all that go is a dreadful loss, and then you have to build it back up again.' Meanwhile the task of collaborating with animators abroad has taken a technological upturn since *Kells*: where previously they were shipping their paperwork around the world for approval and clean-up, there's now a web-based production pipeline where drawings drop straight from screen to screen. 'Because it's always difficult when you have a character walking out of one scene that's animated in Kilkenny, into another that gets animated in Luxembourg, composited in Toronto, to make sure it gels and people still believe it's Parvana. There was a powerlessness about trying to put that really traditional medium through that shipping process it was never really meant for. Disney, when they were working on paper, everything was in one building. It's amazing that *The Secret of Kells* works as one film considering the hands that never got to see each other. Whereas now if I'm not happy with a scene I can pull it down, draw notes on top of it and put it back up again and somebody in Luxembourg can pull it down. Certainly it opens up independent and small-budget films: it means you can use talents from around the world more easily.'

Nick Bradshaw, *Sight and Sound*, June 2018