

GIRL WITH GREEN EYES

“Divorce! That’s worse than murder! Much worse!”

Aunt (May Craig)

Of the first seven Woodfall productions, *Girl With Green Eyes* is in many ways the odd one out—the only one to be filmed outside the UK, the Irish-shot affair nowadays has a much lower profile than its illustrious, award-garlanded predecessors. But in its time, arriving in the wake of Woodfall’s Best Picture-winning *Tom Jones*, this delicately-observed study of a young woman’s halting progress towards intellectual and sexual maturity caused quite a stir. Indeed, writing in the *New York Times*, veteran critic Bosley Crowther wrote that the central performance by Rita Tushingham “could win her an Academy Award.”

Crowther’s rave described the adaptation by Edna O’Brien of her 1962 novel (originally published as *The Lonely Girl*) as “another of those remarkably fresh and natural productions that come from the Woodfall organization... Little incidents allows us to see the multitudinous shimmerings and shadows that fly across the girl’s emotions and mind, some sly intimations of the Irish nature that bubble and pop through the film and flavorsome backgrounds of Dublin and the thorny countryside.”

Just as *A Taste of Honey* surrounded electrifying newcomer Tushingham with a strong gallery of more experienced co-stars, *Girl With Green Eyes* examines her character Kate Brady’s relationships with close friend Baba (Lynn Redgrave) and her main romantic fixation, the saturnine, much older writer Eugene Gaillard (Peter Finch). The lanky Redgrave, in her first real big-screen role (she popped up briefly in a *Tom Jones* bar-scene) would join Tushingham in BAFTA

nominations—eventually losing out to Marie Poppins’ Julie Andrews in the category “Most Promising Newcomer to Leading Film Roles.” Redgrave—at the time sister-in-law of *Girl With Green Eyes*’ executive producer Tony Richardson—was in good company, as all four of The Beatles were also shortlisted for their performances in *A Hard Day’s Night*.

The social changes personified by the Beatles had, by this stage, already transformed the United Kingdom. Ireland was a little further behind, however—especially beyond the cosmopolitan confines of Dublin. Novelists such as O’Brien—whose debut *The Country Girls* (1960) had been a true succès de scandale—were very much in the cultural vanguard. Having relocated to London in the wake of her debut book’s hugely controversial publication, she attracted the attention of Woodfall producers keen to make the *Taste of Honey* lightning strike twice.

Hence the casting of the decidedly Liverpudlian Tushingam and born-and-bred Londoner Redgrave as two Irish girls making their way in the big city—the Irish capital, then as now, one of the most cinematically neglected of European capital cities. They make a brave stab of the accents, in amongst unmistakably authentic Irishfolk in minor roles such as T P McKenna (a vivid priestly cameo).

Half a century later *Girl With Green Eyes*, as well as functioning of a time-capsule of Ireland in awkward, belated transition, arguably holds up best showcase for the subtle skills of future Oscar winner Finch. “Unlike many British actors,” as David Thomson later wrote in his *Biographical Dictionary of Film*, the London-born Australian “seemed to leave reserves untapped which implied a full character of which we were seeing only a part.”

Gaillard isn’t usually ranked among the actor’s most prominent screen achievements, but this is an injustice: Finch mines every inch of nuance out of this worldly, jaded cad, who casually drifts into a relationship, initially based on shared literary interests, whose contours now seem strikingly post-modern. His mature charisma renders Kate’s ill-advised infatuation eminently understandable—and her ultimate rejection of him all the more stirring in its independent audacity.

Girl With Green Eyes represented a quietly promising directorial debut for Desmond Davis, who had earned his Woodfall spurs by working as camera operator on *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, *A Taste of Honey* and *Tom Jones*—taxing jobs all three, with much hand-held camera-work. The O’Brien adaptation is infused with a similar freewheeling energy, notably boosted by the boldly abrupt editing credited to Brian Smedley-Aston—many sources also list Antony Gibbs as Pamela Milner-Gardner having contributed to the cutting. Regardless of whose hands wielded which scissors, the film’s fluent montages and breakneck transitions consistently bedazzle, as when a car-ride whooshes characters and audience alike from O’Connell Street to the windswept countryside in the blink of a green eye.

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