



# ON THE JOB

THE HANDICAPPING AT CANNES LAST YEAR DIDN'T TAKE MUCH notice of Ken Loach, or *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*. "Another good Loach" and "Ken's on the job" were the prevailing sentiments over the salades niçoises before "Next!"

Loach's film went on to win the Palme d'Or 10 days later.

The conventional wisdom is that the prize makes the film. Actually, it's vice versa, and that can be up or down: *Crash* diminished the Oscar. *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* made the Palme d'Or brighter, better, more worthy.

It's Loach's 19th feature in a career that stretches back through *Sweet Sixteen*, *My Name Is Joe*, *Land and Freedom*, *Raining Stones*, *Hidden Agenda*, *Riff-Raff*, and all the way to the late Sixties with *Poor Cow* and *Kes*, which he made in his early thirties. Almost always, critics admire Loach for never giving up, preserving what's left of the rusty Kitchen Sink ethos, never losing faith that the average Joe is getting screwed. With its handmade feel, a new Loach film can be counted on to state the case with genuine regard for people, time, and place.

PHOTO BY MIKE FIGGIS

There aren't many like Loach working today—perhaps the Dardenne Brothers are his most prominent peers. With the impending release of his film stateside, it seemed like a good time to ask the 70-year-old director what has mattered most to him over the course of his career.

**As a young man starting out, what did studying law do for you?**

It was the Fifties, when being a student wasn't quite so pressurized. I read law, but I didn't read very much. I had a mis-spent youth really, doing plays and things like that.

**So why didn't you become a lawyer?**

The law was quite interesting, but I didn't care for lawyers particularly. The culture around the law was pretty hierarchical and hidebound.

**Do you think that you have accomplished more in film and theater than you could have in law?**

Probably not. If you really want to change things, you have to be in politics or the trade union movement. You know the old Wobly union slogan, "Agitate, educate, organize"? Films can do a little bit of agitation. They can't do much education, and they can do nothing to organize. And without organization you can't achieve anything.

**Do you think that the Sixties and Seventies deceived us about what impact film could have on social policy?**

Not really. I'm not sure films have ever had much impact. They can contribute to the climate of the times, but beyond that, the impact is pretty minimal. By and large, as a medium, film's about reassurance and indulgence. The politics of the cinema as a whole, if anything, are very right-wing.

**Forty years ago, when you started out, people thought there were remedies—that if people thought well, they'd act better. That was true of the Kitchen Sink socialists, who hoped for a social democratic utopia.**

I don't think we ever went along with a social democrat's utopia . . . From the mid-Sixties onward, we were socialists, not social democrats. Social democracy died with Blair. Economies aren't mixed anymore. Everything is now sold off to private companies or multinationals. Once Thatcher laid down her program, it just blew social democracy out of the water. And all the allegedly social democrat

governments or parties in Europe are now pro-business in every respect.

**You're socialist pure and simple?**

Yes. It needs definition, of course. But I suppose so, yes.

**Is there a future in that?**

Put so boldly like that, I . . . It's difficult to see how the world will sustain itself, if left to the mercy of the market and business interests. They used to say, "It's socialism or barbarism." Now I think it's more about survival. The planet is being consumed by business interests and shows no sign of slowing up. Unless a different economic model comes into being, it's difficult to see how the place is going to survive.

**There's a saying that the British press always eats its own first. Even after you won the Palme d'Or last May, *The Daily Mail* took off after you.**

The British establishment has one or two very sensitive points. One of them is Ireland. The other is the role of the British Army. If you criticize the British Armed Forces, you're dealing with sacred territory. And if you criticize what the British have done in Ireland, there again that's a very sensitive issue. So if you do the two together, then they really go for you. One paper said I was worse than Leni Riefenstahl . . . Hating my country and all this crap. The mask of British gentility is really quite cleverly done. When it slips, there's a really ugly brute underneath. And that's the British establishment—very ugly underneath.

**There's a commercial sensitivity to ethnic filmmakers. Why has labor not found a way to tell its story?**

Since Thatcher, the labor point of view has disappeared. It's not articulated in politics, never mind film. We're reaping the worst of that now.

**What about *The Queen*—both the institution of the monarchy and Frears's film?**

I haven't seen the film; don't tell anybody. The monarchy is a kind of ongoing soap opera that people affect to laugh at but nevertheless take great interest in. It's a desire for gossip, isn't it? The monarchy hangs on, but it's a ludicrous irrelevance.

**In *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*, as in *Land and Freedom*, you pair scenes of armed combat with ongoing haggling at the conference table.**

Both in Spain and in Ireland there were two questions. The first, in Spain, was, how do we beat the Fascists? And in Ireland, how



*The Wind That Shakes the Barley*

do we get the imperialists out? Then the question was, if we achieve that, what kind of society can we create? If you're risking your life for something, you want to know what you're risking it for. It's a very politicizing event, and people grow up fast. It's not academic, it's of real consequence.

***The Wind That Shakes the Barley* addresses that: how does one brother accept the necessity to kill another?**

There's a terrible logic on both sides. It's the logic that results in, at last count, 650,000 Iraqis getting killed.

**Your new film is called *These Times*. What's it about?**

It's about people who come from Eastern Europe to work in the West. What happens to them, how they're treated, and the agencies that employ them.

**What's changed about actors over your career?**

Nothing changes about actors, really. Actors are at their best when they just rely on their instincts. That's when the camera can see the authenticity of their feelings.

**Has the change in technology affected your filmmaking?**

Not a lot. Film stocks have gotten faster, so you don't need as much light. You can shoot more natural light longer. Which means you can put less artificial light in, intervene less.

**How about the spread of easy technology?**

The new technology has been a disaster. The worst effect is on the TV companies. They use the new technology as an excuse for eliminating crews and craft people. People just fire away and end up with hours of film that is not considered, not framed, not shot to make a sequence.

It's shot out of desperation. There may be some benefits, but by and large it has not enabled us to see the world with more clarity. Which is the only test really.

**What's changed about audiences?**

Twenty or 30 years ago they would have different expectations. People don't have a sense of political alternative like they used to. The cult of the individual is much stronger now, certainly in Britain. Audiences are much less optimistic, much less prepared to engage in the possibility of change. I should modify that: you just have to work harder to get that [change] in their minds.

**How would you change Britain?**

Where do you begin? The whole drift toward the business agenda. Everything stems from that. There's no point in changing anything unless you change that. That's what has led us into the illegal war [in Iraq], that whole disgraceful episode. It's what led Blair to slavishly follow Bush. It's what's led to the breakup of our public services into the hands of big business. That's the key to everything, really. I'd reassert the public against the private.

**What would you do differently in your own life?**

I'd have learned more languages when I was a student. I hate the feeling when you go to other countries and [you hear people asking] "Nobody speaks English?" It makes us seem very arrogant that we don't learn other languages.

**What one thing would you change about yourself?**

A terrible capacity to pass a happy day doing not very much. □