

The Butcher Boy

Eire / US : 1997 : dir. Neil Jordan : Geffen : 106 min
 prod: : scr: : dir.ph.: Adrian Biddle
Eamonn Owens [d]; *Alan Boyle; Andrew Fullerton; Ciaran Owens; Shane O'Connor*
 Stephen Rea; Fiona Shaw; Aisling O'Sullivan; Ian Hart; Sinéad O'Connor; Milo O'Shea;
 Brendan Gleeson; Patrick McCabe

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Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001 review:

"Amazing film about an Irish boy who doesn't have a chance in life: his father is a perpetual drunk, his mother a mentally fragile soul. Yet he greets the world with bravado and the gift of gab; the only problem is, he's deranged. Bold, darkly (even absurdly) comic, hallucinatory at times, hiding its heartrending truths behind a glib façade – just like its hero. A true original. Written by Jordan and Patrick McCabe, from the latter's novel; McCabe also appears as the town drunk, Jimmy the Skite. ***1/2 "

News Shopper note:

"Exceptional drama from Neil Jordan starring Stephen Rea. A must see!"

Radio Times review:

"Novelist Patrick McCabe's portrait of small-town Irish life in the sixties is viewed through dark-tinted glasses in this shocking adaptation by Neil Jordan. Armed only with comics, movies and visions of the Virgin Mary (Sinéad O'Connor). Eamonn Owens excels as the breezy teenager whose grip on reality begins to loosen as he returns from a pitiless Catholic remand home to witness the descent of father Stephen Rea into alcoholism and mother Aisling O'Sullivan into madness¹. Contains violence and swearing. **** "

¹ This would be difficult, since his father is an unregenerate alcoholic from the start of the picture, his mother was dead long before he entered the remand home, and it was in any case far from a pitiless institution, as such places go.

"Black comedy drama set in rural Ireland in the 1960s, Starring Stephen Rea, Fiona Shaw and Eamonn Owens. **** "

An essential film from the archive's perspective, not to be missed. The directing is fluid, the central performance a tour de force and the dialogue/narration witty and raw. It has to be a recommended title. The only problem for me was – the central character is so insufferable and full of himself that it plays like a **"QUATRE CENTS COUPS"** where the boy has every one of them coming to him – and more. The film's quandary is whether Francey Brady (Eamonn Owens) is indeed mentally disturbed or simply, in the idiot parlance of today, a case of "hyperactive attention deficit disorder" – in plain language, an unmanageable brat, whose misbehaviour escalates by degrees, in the absence of any effective discipline, from scrumping apples to cold-blooded murder.

He lies, he thieves (particularly from anyone who shows him the least trust), he's a bully and a thug, he regards all around him as "boney-arsed bogman bastards", he has respect for no-one and nothing aside from his drunken dad (Stephen Rea in a very low-key role) and his best mate Joe Persil (Alan Boyle), who by the halfway point is sick of the very sight of him. And he conceives a venomous private feud with the mother of a classmate he bullies, culminating by murdering her with a slaughterman's bolt-gun. It's kind of hard to find much sympathy for such a boy. Maltin's remarks above are simply staggering in their naiveté, but perhaps it's safe to conclude he hasn't lived much around boys of that kind. On the sink estates of London and all our other major cities, you will find thousands of arrogant, sociopathic, violent kids with the same impenetrable sense of their own importance. So much so, in fact, that Brady's manners and attitude to his own community (that's a word which has acquired a whole new meaning, to suit the times – "attitude") seem only par for the course, and not aberrant behaviour at all. This works seriously against the film's purpose, if we are meant to sympathise with the boy as a luckless outcast in a small early sixties Irish town.

For once the period setting is not mere icing on the cake. The Cuban missile crisis, fears of a nuclear holocaust and vague misgivings about "the Communists" pervade the film. "It'll be a bitter day for this town if the world comes to an end!" one village woman sagely observes.

Francis Brady's age is not given at any point, but Eamonn Owens plays him presumably from the age of 9 to 15 or 16, simply exchanging short trousers for long ones as the story progresses. His personal road to ruin begins with the simple boyish sin of stealing apples with his friend Joe. They then bully Philip Nugent, the son of the tree's owner, into "swapping" his entire comic collection for one of his mother's own apples. But his mother spots this extortion in progress, and complains to Francey's mother, showering contempt on the boy's drunken sot of a father, and dismissing the whole family as pigs. Francey takes this insult to heart and, despite a thrashing from his father for it, not only continues to bully Philip Nugent – half strangling the boy in a chicken coop – but attempting to menace Mrs Nugent as well. He blocks her way on the village street and demands payment of "pig tax" before letting her pass.

To the rest of the village Francey is just a bit of a tall character, always ready with the blarney, and they're aware of his family "difficulties". He and Joe are delegated to look after the water fountain in the town square, a duty they attend to diligently. One day Francey returns home to find his mother perched on the kitchen table with a distracted look on her face. Not fully realising what she was about, he isn't too much surprised when she's shipped off to a sanatorium for another spell, returning in time to begin furiously baking buns for the grand return of his uncle Al from London, a man "with ten men under him". "I ask you" Francey declares to Joe, "how many buns can uncle Al **eat?**" (his mother has baked enough for a small school). "Beats the hell outa me, compadre" Joe retorts. They've been watching a lot of **"The Lone Ranger"** on TV, and follow the progress of **"The Fugitive"** with keen interest.

Since I mentioned a small school, it's worth noting that the one thing absent from this boy's existence, from what we see in the film, is any schooling. The only time he's seen to set foot in one is some years later, when his friend Joe has moved on to a boarding school, and Francey tracks him there, bursting into the dormitory in the middle of the night to create a scene.

But that's jumping ahead of the narrative. "The Butcher Boy" is the title of a traditional Irish song which his mother plays to distraction during the great bun-baking binge. The welcome home party for uncle Al ends in a drunken quarrel between his parents, so Francey – more in boredom than distress – promptly runs away, thieves a little here and there to buy a peacemaking gift for his mother, and returns home to find her funeral in progress. "They found her at the bottom of the river near the madhouse" his father tells him once they're alone, "It wasn't enough to put her there, you had to wreck her funeral too!"

The two smaller boys who take over stewardship of the town fountain are played by Ciaran Owens (presumably the star's younger brother) and Shane O'Connor (son of Sinéad?)

See also "**BADKONAK-E SEFID**" and "**BASHU**" - both recent Iranian films, and subject index under **ARAB WORLD / MIDDLE EAST**.