



Stockbridge Community Cinema

Programme Notes 13 January 2023

The Quiet Girl

Ireland | 2022 | 94 min | Cert 12

Director: Colm Bairéad

Screenplay: Colm Bairéad (adaptation) based on the story "Foster" by Claire Keegan

Starring: Catherine Clinch, Carrie Crowley, Andrew Bennett



This sensitive adaptation of Claire Keegan's acclaimed short story 'Foster' follows a quiet, neglected girl as she's sent away from her dysfunctional family to live with foster parents for the summer in rural Ireland. She blossoms in their care, but in this house where there are meant to be no secrets, she discovers one. Centred on a remarkable performance by its young star Catherine Clinch, this poignant Irish-language film is both a moving coming of age story and a beautiful portrait of rural life.

Simon Duffy, BFI Programme & Research Manager

Spoiler warning: these notes are best read after viewing the film as they contain plot and character details.

Nothing puts the fear of god into a classroom full of raucous Irish children like the sound of an exasperated, nerve-shot teacher shouting 'Ciúnas!' (the Irish word for silence). It's a command that has the power to turn rosy cheeks porcelain, and transform small smiling faces into contorted masks of worry.

The terror that follows a call for ciúnas! is one that Cáit, the young girl at the centre of Colm Bairéad's Irish-language film, appears to carry at all times. It's as though she's been told to be quiet so often (or worse, ignored), she's learned there is little point in making any noise at all. Instead she wanders off into the long grass, stashes herself under her bed away from the clamour of her many siblings, and waits silently in the pub as her father sinks another 'liquid lunch'.

But what Cáit lacks in loquaciousness she makes up for in curiosity – a trait Bairéad underscores by keeping the camera on her almost constantly. When Cáit's parents argue over plans to send

her away for the summer and leave the family with one less mouth to feed, she is right there on the landing, absorbing every unguarded word: 'How long should they keep her, until after the baby?' the mother asks the father, who swats the thought away like a nuisance fly: 'They can keep her as long as they like.' These words are spoken in English, making the growing schism between Cáit and her family feel even greater.

An Cailín Ciúin – which made history this year as the first Irish-language feature to show at Berlinale – was adapted from the 2010 story 'Foster' by Claire Keegan, and the film takes much of the dialogue from Keegan's sparse but melodic prose verbatim. It's a book that runs on feelings – making it a perfect fit for Gaeilge, a language that can put the heavy physicality of emotions into words ('I'm sad' in Irish – tá brón orm – translates literally as 'I have sadness upon me').

Without the help of the first-person internal monologue that Keegan used, Bairéad has managed to transmit Cáit's every mood through the crystallising performance of 12-year-old Catherine Clinch, who had never acted in front of a camera before. When Cáit's father drops her off at the home of Eibhlín and Seán Cinnsealach, an older farming couple she has not seen since she was in a pram, we feel her unease through every eyebrow twitch and forced, slanted smile. Shooting in full-frame Academy ratio, director of photography Kate McCullough captures Cáit moving between pale yellow doorways, squaring the difference between this place, her home, and the discomfort that lies in between.

Here food is brought to the table without anxiety; a nurturing love is shown through cut tomatoes and ridged slices of beetroot – all of which her father treats with mild disdain as he gibes about how Cáit will eat them 'out of house and home'. It's what Keegan called 'the way men

have of not talking', men who instead 'kick a divot out of the grass with a boot heel'. To have brought the child here at all is an admission of struggle, and so he amps up the cruelty to give the illusion of choice. 'Try not to fall into the fire, you,' he tells Cáit as he drives off with her suitcase still in the car.

And so they dress her up in a plaid shirt and too-long jeans, with Eibhlín (Carrie Crowley) orienting her in her new home through instant maternal affection. This is a house without secrets, she tells her, though Seán's initial standoffishness – and the child's wallpaper in Cáit's new room – suggest they're living with more than one.

Through a shimmering near-montage of moments – onion-chopping, hair-brushing, trips to a spring well, slow-mo runs through an arch of trees – we watch Cáit move organically from awkward interloper to daughter figure. At times, the crisp shots and liquidy use of light can feel close to a Kerrygold ad, but the film's sharp emotional intelligence stops it tipping into the realm of commercial sentimentality. This is seen in Cáit's wretched encounter with a busybody neighbour, who dishes out more questions about the Cinnsealachs than nettles have stings. Her nosy, venomous chatter lets out that household secret. But instead of shattering the foundation they've built, honesty gives way to a greater connection between Seán and Cáit. 'You don't have to say anything,' he tells her in the light of a pearly moon. 'Many's the person that missed the opportunity to say nothing, and lost much because of it.' By the end, Cáit chooses ciúnas not out of fear, but because she has found a new sense of self – someone who understands all that can be gained in the simplicity of silence.

Katie McCabe, [bfi.org.uk](https://www.bfi.org.uk), 13 May 2022