

Review: 'Mickeybo & Me'

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A stage designer with only one short and several commercials to his credit, Belfast-born Loane gives pic a confident, cinematic feel from the get-go. Assuredly shot in widescreen with a period-muted color scheme to the interiors that's like Terence Davies Lite, film lays out its stall with a voiceover by 8-year-old John Wright (Niall Wright), aka Jonjo, only child of a Belfast Protestant family.

"Back in 1970, the whole world knew Belfast was a divided city...but I knew nothing of that," muses Jonjo. "My world was just four walls and a few streets. But that was before I met Mickeybo."

Mickeybo (John Jo McNeil), real name Michael Boyle, is a spunky little street brawler from “over the bridge,” the dividing line between Protestants and Catholics. Mickeybo’s colorful, chaotic family, with five sisters, a tolerant mom (Julie Walters) and idler dad (Adrian Dunbar), couldn’t be more different from the orderly world of Jonjo, whose mother (Gina McKee) is quiet and dutiful and whose father (Ciaran Hinds) is always inculcating him with homespun philosophy although he’s a serial womanizer on the side.

Turning point in the two kids’ lives comes when they finagle their way into a screening of “Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid” at the local picture palace. Mickeybo is so taken with the story of two outsiders taking on the establishment that the ragamuffin is soon stalking the neighborhood with a water pistol and kerchief, with Jonjo as Sundance.

In much the same way that Stephen Daldry (one of exec producers here) carved an upbeat atmosphere from a grungy, troubled setting in “Billy Elliott,” so helmer Loane splashes his canvas with occasional reminders of the political background (army trucks, burned-out vehicles, distant explosions) while remaining focused on the kids’ self-constructed world. As in “Elliott,” too, a lively, loud music track plays to the gallery.

The boys are so caught up in their own outlaw fantasy that they go AWOL from home, using a real gun that they’ve found in a dead man’s flat (pic’s darkest, most unsettling scene). “Hijacking” their way south to catch a boat to Australia, they become media celebrities, pursued by the law (on both sides of the border) like their adopted heroes.

Adapted, amazingly, from a stage play, pic steers an assured course between the unreal, humorous and (in the final scenes) melancholic. Most refreshingly, script doesn’t slip into sectarian lecturing or obvious moralizing. At core, it remains the story of a momentary friendship between two opposite types who try to put the world behind them but find that even kids aren’t exempt from inbred antipathies.

Period look is on the button, with plenty of small details in production design and costumes that will resonate with those that remember the time-frame. In the showier role, McNeil is a real find as Mickeybo, whose almost feral features hint at a terrorist of the future. (Pic’s sappy coda, taking the story to present, seems even more out-of-kilter in this respect.) Wright is in more of

an observer role but is fine as the wide-eyed Jonjo. Well-seasoned adult thespians blend smoothly into the fabric, with Dunbar especially good as Mickeybo's charming, loser father.

Mickeybo & Me

U.K.-U.S.

Production

A Momentum Pictures release (in U.K.) of a Universal Pictures, Studio Canal, Working Title Films presentation, in association with the Irish Film Board and Northern Ireland Film & TV Commission, of a WT² production, in association with New Moon Pictures, Inside Track 2, Octagon Films. (International sales: UIP, London.) Produced by Mark Huffman, Michael McGeogh. Executive producers, Stephen Daldry, Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner, Natascha Wharton. Directed, written by Terry Loane, from the stage play by Owen McCafferty.

Crew

Camera (Deluxe color, Panavision widescreen), Roman Osin; editor, Scott Thomas; music, Stephen Warbeck; music supervisor, Nick Angel; production designer, Tom McCullagh; sound (Dolby Digital), Ronan Hill; assistant director, George Walker; casting, Jina Jay. Reviewed at Edinburgh Film Festival (British Galas), Aug. 22, 2004. Running time: 94 MIN.

With

Adrian Dunbar, Ciaran Hinds, Gina McKee, Susan Lynch, Julie Walters, John Jo McNeil, Niall Wright, Brendan Caskey, Charlie Clarke, Gemma Hills.