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Neeson and Nesbitt: the real-life bravery behind our new Troubles drama

By Maureen Coleman Saturday, 21 February 2009

Liam Neeson and Jimmy Nesbitt have praised the 'extraordinary bravery' of the two men whose characters they play in a new fact-based BBC drama about the Troubles.

The Northern Irish actors told how they had both met the men — a convicted UVF killer and his victim's brother — and how lessons could be learned from their stories.

And they told how they hoped their involvement in Oliver Hirschbiegel's Five Minutes Of Heaven had gone some way to helping the two men find "a bit of peace in their lives".

Hollywood superstar Liam Neeson flew home to Northern Ireland to attend a Press conference alongside Jimmy Nesbitt in Belfast yesterday.

The drama is being shown at the Dublin Jameson International Film Festival today.

In Five Minutes of Heaven, Neeson plays the role of UVF man Alistair Little as an adult. At the age of 17, he gunned down Catholic man Jim Griffin at his Lurgan home in 1975. The shooting was witnessed by Griffin's younger brother Joe, whom Nesbitt plays in adult life.

Praising the two men for their co-operation with the drama Neeson said: "Both men were terribly brave to agree to work with the writer (Guy Hibbert) over a period of three years. It's an extraordinary act of bravery that is one wonderful step forward and something that we can all learn from."

Agreeing with him, Nesbitt said that the fact that Joe Griffin was now happy to say he was receiving counselling for the first time was "worth doing the film for alone".

I found myself thanking him for sharing this |tortured part of his life with us

He said: "Joe and Alistair would both say that of course for the most part it is fiction, but to them they would say it is psychologically and emotionally true and I think the fact that we have maybe been part of the process of them beginning to find a wee bit of peace in their lives is certainly, for me, a gratifying reason for doing it."

Both actors met their respective characters — Nesbitt met Griffin prior to filming but Neeson opted to wait until the drama was completed before meeting Little.

And he told of the moment he came face-to-face with the former UVF man, describing their meeting as a "wonderful" experience.

"I honestly did not know what to say to him so I found myself just thanking him for sharing this tortured part of his life with us, for committing to it and for trusting us to handle him with kid gloves and not to abuse him or Joe or the situation."

Neeson also told the press conference that he had shied away from films about the Troubles before, as he felt they "trivialised violence".

But he said despite rejecting a "chest full of scripts", he had been drawn to Five Minutes of Heaven because of Guy Hibbert's sensitive writing.

Nesbitt, who previously starred in Paul Greengrass' award-winning film Bloody Sunday, said that he had jumped at the chance of working with Neeson and described the script as "incredible".

"If you are a Northern Irish actor, maybe subconsciously more than consciously, you do have an instinctive responsibility at some point to tackle the recent history of where we have come from. It's not only a responsibility, but a privilege."

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And he said that Northern Ireland provided a "template for the rest of the world in terms of conflict resolution".

"Irrespective of whether you live here or have moved away from Northern Ireland, it's an exciting time to be from here," he said.

"But what was so good about the film is that as you emerge from conflict you must not forget the legacy of the past and I think that to deal with it in such a human way as Guy has is a lesson for anyone interested in Northern Ireland."

Five Minutes of Heaven was filmed after a three-year consultation period between Guy Hibbert, who penned Omagh, and both Griffin and Little.

Both men have seen the drama separately — they have never met since that day in 1975.

Producer Stephen Wright from BBC Northern Ireland drama said: "It is important to clearly understand from the two men's point of view what this film is about.

"It is not about truth and reconciliation.

"It is not about finding easy answers.

"Both men independently say that making the film has been a painful, but worthwhile process."

Five Minutes of Heaven, which won two awards at the Sundance Film Festival recently, will be broadcast in spring.

Protestant plays Catholic, Catholic plays Protestant

Liam Neeson has told how he teased Jimmy Nesbitt about being a "taig" when they were on the set of Five Minutes of Heaven.

In the BBC drama, Nesbitt, a Protestant from Coleraine, plays Catholic man Joe |Griffin, while Neeson, a Catholic from Ballymena, plays a former UVF gunman.

Speaking in Belfast yesterday, Neeson joked: "I used to come in every morning and call Jimmy a Taig and he would call me a Prod."

The two actors were in humorous form as they chatted about the BBC drama, |written by Guy Hibbert and directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel.

They said they were both "honoured" to be involved in the drama, which recently won two awards at Sundance.

And they said they would love to work together on again — on a comedy.

Neeson told a Press conference at the Holiday Inn in Belfast that shooting Five Minutes in Heaven had been a "cathartic" experience, while Nesbitt described it as "an odyssey".

Maureen Coleman

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