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Neeson and Nesbitt movie picks up two Sundance awards

By Lesley-Anne Henry
Tuesday, 27 January 2009

A Northern Ireland-based drama starring Liam Neeson and James Nesbitt has won two awards at one of America's biggest film festivals.

Five Minutes of Heaven, which dramatises the story of Alistair Little, a young UVF man who spent 13 years in prison for the 1975 murder of 19-year-old Lurgan man Jim Griffin, received two gongs at the Sundance Film Festival in Utah.

Mr Griffin's killing was witnessed by his 11-year-old brother, Joe, and his death devastated the family.

Most of the drama takes place during an attempted reconciliation, 33 years after the killing.

Ballymena-born actor Liam Neeson plays Little as an adult, while Coleraine native James Nesbitt is the grown-up Joe Griffin.

Five Minutes of Heaven director Oliver Hirschbiegel, who made the Oscar-nominated Downfall (2004), which dealt with the last days in the life of Adolf Hitler, was given the festival's World Cinema award for his efforts.

The screenwriter, Guy Hibbert, who penned the award-winning 2004 film 'Omagh', scooped second prize.

Hibbert said his fictionalised screenplay tells "the story of two real people who stand up and say it the way it is".

"It was important to get their full permission and co-operation. Working separately with both Alistair and Joe provided a unique way to tell this story and revealed there were no easy answers."

Liam Neeson said it was a "wee bit nerve-wracking" for him to see the film for the first time at its world premier in Sundance last week.

"You work on something for quite a long period and then you see it and there's stuff you can't change. And you're seeing it with a room full of strangers, too," he said.

Alistair Little joined the UVF at 14. Three years later, too young to receive a life sentence, he served a 13-year prison sentence in Long Kesh and H-blocks.

Since his release he has been working with the Forgiveness |Project to tackle the causes of |violence.

He has trained with Michael Lapsley in South Africa and has been a facilitator of the Healing of Memories in Northern Ireland for the past five years. He has also run workshops in Kosova, Bosnia, Serbia and England.

Five Minutes of Heaven is due to be broadcast on BBC2 in March.

Screen Actors Guild awards, P13

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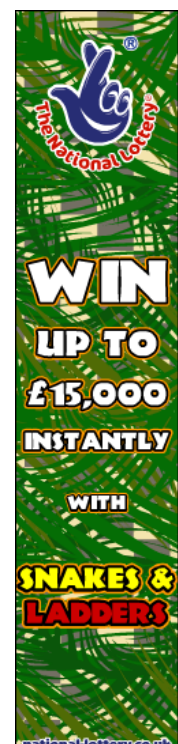
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