

# BLACK POOL



A FILM BY DUSTIN MORROW

## 10 FAQs for Writer/Director Dustin Morrow

*Where did the idea for 'Black Pool' come from?*

I have a friend from Belfast who, at the height of the Troubles, discovered her cousin's body after he had been executed by the IRA. I know that more than four decades later this image still haunts her. She's told me stories of growing up in a working-class part of Belfast, walking to school everyday, hurling rocks at Catholic kids and dodging the rocks that were thrown back. Hearing gunfire and explosions in the distance. Seeing fires burning in the streets, marches with chanting unionists and nationalists, and soldiers with machine guns patrolling the neighborhoods. She lives in America now, and has since she was a young woman. She's thousands of miles and forty years from those events, and yet the memories linger. I was interested in telling a story about contemporary Irish identity as it is haunted by its past – in particular, the trauma inflicted on the psyche by what it must have been like to have grown up in what was effectively a war zone.

*How would you describe the film?*

*Black Pool* is a film about Irish history and Irish identity, particularly as they relate to the conflict in Northern Ireland, and how that identity is tied to questions about religion, politics, economics and culture. The conflict technically ended in April of 1998 with the Good Friday Agreement, but only on paper. The tension still exists between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, even if it's now more below-the-surface. Brexit is stressing the region, as it raises a lot of questions about the management of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland once Northern Ireland leaves the EU with the rest of the UK. And *Black Pool* is also a film about immigration. Ireland has long been a nation of immigrants. People have been driven from its shores for hundreds of years, for a number of reasons, from the Great Famine of the 1840s to the economic collapse of the 2000s. James Joyce once wrote that Ireland is a nation that confers honor only upon those who've left it. With *Black Pool*, I wanted to tell a story about the

conflict in Ireland, and contemporary Irish identity, through the lens of immigration. What must it be like to feel as though you were expelled from your home? The two men who engage in a deadly game of wills in the film are both adrift. They've left their homeland to seek something better in the U.S., only to find that they can't outrun their pasts. There's a great quote from Faulkner: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." This film is about what happens when the past comes, like the devil, to get its due.

*What were the biggest challenges of making the film?*

The budget and the schedule were the biggest logistical challenges. It's a microbudget production, and everyone involved was working for a fraction of what they'd normally be paid on a project like this. I was very lucky to have this cast and this crew, not only for their immense talents, but for their commitment to the project. We made the film on a fiendishly accelerated shooting schedule. Most of it is set in one room, so that was a challenge too: how to stage the actors, move the camera and light the set so that there is some visual kineticism in what is otherwise a very static setting.

*What is the most rewarding part of filmmaking to you?*

It's the various aspects of collaboration. Collaborating with a DP, collaborating with a sound designer, and especially collaborating with actors. I love working with actors, and writing good, dense material for actors to play with. And I was blessed on this production with an incredible cast.

*So what was it like to work with this cast?*

A dream from beginning to end. Tom Walton is a rock solid, dependable actor who breathes his whole performance through his body. He's a big guy, and yet he has moments of almost unbearable vulnerability in this film. Amber Stonebraker is a gifted, intuitive film actor. She has in many ways the trickiest role in the film, because she's the surrogate for the audience, and she imbues the part with extraordinary warmth and humanity. And my third principal, Todd Van Voris, delivers a masterclass in this film in how an actor can use his eyes and his voice to render the whole spectrum of human emotion. He spends almost the entire film strapped to a chair, so from the outset he was limited. And yet what he manages to do with his voice and his expressions is nothing short of astonishing.

*How did you decide on the look of the film?*

Michael Hull was my DP, and he's a very sharp and experimental cinematographer. I had a sense from the outset what I wanted the film to look like – noirish, black and white, grainy and gritty – and within that general outline he filled in the specifics, finding ways to enrich and expand the narrative through light and shadow. He's very gifted.

*Who are your influences as a filmmaker?*

They are so numerous that I will only mention the ones who informed this project in particular. As a microbudget filmmaker, I'm in awe of what Kelly Reichardt has been able to do with her films. *Old Joy* was very influential on me, as was her thriller *Night Moves*. For *Black Pool*, I also found myself thinking about the experimental techniques that Darren Aronofsky brings to his narratives in films like *Pi* and *Requiem for a Dream*. And I thought about the works of Krzysztof Kieslowski, who I think had more humanity as a filmmaker than just about any other director in the history of the medium. *The Decalogue*, *The Double Life of Veronique*, and the *Three Colors Trilogy* were on my mind as I designed the look and feel of *Black Pool*.

*Can you recommend other films about The Troubles?*

There are many great ones! *In the Name of the Father* is a classic. More recently, I thought *Five Minutes of Heaven*, *Bloody Sunday*, and *Omagh* were extraordinary. *Some Mother's Son* is a brilliant film, putting a human face on a well-known event [the Irish prison hunger strike of 1981]. And I think that Yann Demange's film '71 is one of the best pure action-thrillers of the last decade.

*Why do you think independent filmmaking is important?*

Because independent filmmakers are telling important stories, stories about real people grappling with real problems. Since Hollywood stopped making dramatic films for adults, and switched to a model focused on often creatively bankrupt superhero movies, dopey comedies and crummy horror movies, independent filmmakers have had to step up and make the films for mature, thoughtful audiences. Don't get me wrong – as a genre film enthusiast who likes escapist entertainment, I think there's a place for superhero movies and dopey comedies. But I also look to cinema for stories of empathy. I want to walk in other peoples' shoes, and better understand the world in which I live, and independent film is a place where I can do that.

*What do you consider the best film ever made?*

I wouldn't necessarily say they are my favorites, because I think there's a difference between your favorite film and the film which you consider to be the Best Film, but to me, the best films I've ever seen are Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, which is a film that I think understands film viewing as no other film has, before or since; and Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, which feels to me like the most purely visceral film ever made. That movie almost pulses and vibrates off the screen, like the celluloid on which it was imprinted could barely contain it. I love both of those films and never get tired of watching either of them.