Interview: Neil Jordan The Irish-born director enlists Liam Neeson and Julia Roberts to bring the controversial 'Michael Collins' to screen



Actor Liam Neeson (C) poses with co-star Aidan Quinn (R) and director Neil Jordan at a premiere of their new film 'Michael Collins. Los Angeles, California, October 8th, 1996 Vince Bucci/AFP/Getty **By**[**Fred Schruers**](http://www.rollingstone.com/contributor/fred-schruers) November 14, 1996

Neil Jordan is trotting, with some urgency, across what the locals in Bray, Ireland, call a pitch. In this case, it's a sports field where the director has just recreated a Nov. 21, 1920, massacre in which British Black and Tan troops fired remorselessly on a stadium crowd, killing 14 and injuring many more. The scene marks a pivotal turn in Jordan's historical, hot-button *Michael Collins*, starring Liam Neeson as the Irish Volunteers strategist whose guerrilla attacks against the British earlier that day sparked the reprisals at the stadium. Though rugby clearly lost no star when Jordan turned to the arts, the 46-year-old filmmaker hustles nimbly through a large flock of excited, chattering extras on its way home. The extras don't know what he's just been told on the phone — one of the flock lies injured after a collision in the simulated panic of the scene. As Jordan arrives, worried crew members flanking the fallen adolescent girl let loose a communal sigh of relief when she half-lifts her head with a wan smile. "Luckily she was only shocked; she fell under some people," says Jordan, who had rehearsed the scene carefully for weeks with crowd marshals. "But when you get 4,000 people running around, someone can get injured. What's eerie is, the girl is Michael Collins' grandniece. She had turned up without my knowledge to be an unpaid extra in the crowd scenes."

Although Jordan's concern as he rushed to the injured girl was first of all humane, in the back of his mind, the notion of negative publicity had to loom large. He has been risking criticism since he wrote the first draft of the screenplay, in 1982. Michael Collins may be little-known in the United States, but he remains a strongly divisive figure at home, where seven decades of Irish history have only intensified feelings about the warrior-statesman, who was assassinated at 31 after negotiating the 1921 Anglo-Irish treaty that partitioned his homeland. "The death of Collins has the same resonance in Ireland as the death of John Kennedy did in the United States," says Jordan. "Because he died so young, people imagine all sorts of lost possibilities." A hero to some, Collins is a traitor to others, who see the compromise that left Northern Ireland under British rule as the roots of the civil war that still rages today. Had Jordan not become bankable with the successes of *Interview With the Vampire* and *The Crying Game*, and had he not been able to persuade such stars as Liam Neeson and Julia Roberts to work for scale, his dream project might never have attracted the American studio money it needed to match its epic scope.

Timing remains a problem. Jordan shot the $28 million movie on location in Ireland during a fragile peace with the British that Gerry Adams, president of the Sinn Fein, the political arm of the IRA, had established. In February of this year, the 17-month cease-fire ended when an IRA bomb in London's financial district killed two bystanders. Now, Michael Collins opens just weeks after an alleged IRA agent — the violent sort that touchier Brits view as Michael Collins' spiritual heirs — was killed in a London police raid amid allegations that he and several confederates arrested on the same day had been stashing explosives with the aim of sabotaging the tunnel beneath the English Channel.

As Jordan sees it, the London police "prevented a massive bombing operation, didn't they? Thank goodness. Even someone from an [Irish] Republican background and tradition might say, 'This has got to stop.' But I do think all parties are trying to find a way out of the situation. It's the last groan from a power struggle that's gone on and on. These events are tragic far beyond the scope of a movie." Jordan's conciliatory words haven't stopped Michael Collins, a film about a man Jordan calls "a soldier and a statesman, and, over time, a man of peace" from being pegged as an elegy to a killer and blatant IRA propaganda. Jordan bristles at the suggestion: "The film spares neither the Irish nor the British in its depiction of the savagery of the time. Collins would never be a proponent of terrorism as practiced today. What the film does show is how to disengage from violence."

There is, however, no disengaging Neil Jordan from controversy. He was already a respected author of short stories (*Night in Tunisia*) and novels (most recently, *Nightlines*) when he made his debut film, *Angel* (released as *Danny Boy* in the States), in 1982, followed by *The Company of Wolves*, the tale of Little Red Riding Hood told from the wolf's point of view. His real breakthrough came in 1986 with *Mona Lisa*, in which Bob Hoskins falls in love with a black London prostitute. After two Hollywood-financed setbacks (*High Spirits* and*We're No Angels*, the latter a huge flop despite the star presence of Robert De Niro, Sean Penn and Demi Moore), Jordan returned to Ireland to film *The Miracle*, a drama that tackled the subject of mother-son incest, and *The Crying Game*, a troubling and touching love story about an IRA volunteer (Stephen Rea) in love with a woman (Jaye Davidson) who is really a man. Although no major studio would touch *The Crying Game*'s mix of political and sexual intrigue, the Oscar-winning film (for Jordan's script) became one of the largest-grossing foreign movies in the United States. Jordan followed it up by directing Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt as homoerotic bloodsuckers in*Interview With the Vampire*, a box-office bonanza that grossed more than $100 million nationwide and led producer David Geffen and distributor Warner Bros. to bet on Jordan again.Thus the go-ahead for Michael Collins, a script that Jordan had begun for producer David Puttnam 13 years earlier. Jordan had finally earned the clout to get a full-scale epic produced on his name alone. [. . . .]

Clearly knackered but just as clearly content to stand in the small, smoky pub and enjoy a pint, Jordan, whose warmth and bizarre humor are offset by occasional private broods, bleary glances and restlessness, submits to questions about the glories and dangers of his inevitably politicized project.

**Gerry Adams was often accused of being an IRA man. Now he is the chief negotiator. Are comparisons with your hero inevitable?** I don't think Gerry Adams is the same as Collins at all. I would be very careful to draw parallels or to make this film a kind of a template for anything that is going on at the moment. The movie is about then, you know. It only reflects on the current situation insofar as anything that may happen has already happened — every possible variant of the relationship between Ireland and England, or the use of violence to solve specific problems there, has already happened in the 1916 to 1922 period. [The film's] relevance is as a kind of metaphor. The film shows somebody in Collins who built up a very effective fighting force to achieve a certain objective and, having achieved it, then tried to dismantle it and failed. Michael Collins would never have involved himself in a war that he knew he couldn't win. I don't think any party can win the war of attrition that has been going on in the north of Ireland.

**You were born in the south, in County Sligo, and Dublin still enjoys relative peace. So it's not like shooting in a war zone — but there have been complications that might have been harder yet for Hollywood types such as Kevin Costner and Michael Cimino, each of whom once proposed doing a Collins story.** We've had to do a huge logistical thing. If this film was to be made in the conventional way that films are made in Hollywood now, it would cost more than — what's that movie that Kevin Costner made [*Waterworld*]? — it would cost as much as that. 'Cause you're talking about a contemporary urban center, the capital of a country, which is alive with traffic, with us having to have the entire city at our disposal and to reproduce it as it was in 1918. We've blown up major buildings; we closed down the entire center of the city many, many times. We've had to reenact major historical events. We could only do it because it's such an important subject to this country and because we've had so much cooperation from both the government and the people of Dublin. Done in a conventional way, the cost would be astronomical. I'm sure the studio could see the project just ballooning out of control. Everybody's done it for scale: All the producers, principal actors and myself, we've all subsidized the movie. You know, we've done it cheaply.

(As the noise level goes up and a couple of pints go down, Jordan is increasingly interrupted by crewmen, former neighbors and his own fatigue, and vows to take up the session the next day on the set in Dublin.)

The location is a sturdy old library on the grounds of Trinity College in the city's downtown, where a skylighted atrium becomes the site of the debate Collins had with members of Parliament over the treaty he and his ragged but steely band of revolutionaries had fought so hard to bring about. The treaty would partition Ireland into north and south (as it, of course, remains today) and require that the citizenry swear an oath of allegiance to England's king. The more radical among Collins' Irish Volunteers would break off, leaving him no longer at war with the Brits but with his own quite coldblooded former comrades in arms. There was his friend Harry Boland (Aidan Quinn), with whom he shared a romantic rivalry for Kitty Kiernan (Julia Roberts) — Collins had been planning to marry Kitty when he was killed. Eamon de Valera, the future prime minister played with canny guile by Alan Rickman, presented an even stickier situation. It was de Valera who set up Collins to negotiate the partitioning with the British. "To Collins, that didn't make any sense," says Jordan. "De Velera was the politician. Collins was the demonized figure, the ruthless force who should have been kept in reserve." Adds Jordan, paraphrasing, "When Collins signed that treaty, he wrote: 'Tonight I signed my own death warrant.' And Collins said, 'It would have been much simpler if a bullet had done it two or three years ago.'"

Jordan had wanted Neeson, born in Northern Ireland, for the role since 1982, when the then-unknown actor, now 44, was closer to Collins' age. But Jordan isn't bothered by the discrepancy. "People back then seemed to become mature so early," he says. "They put on those collars and suits. Marriage was earlier. Death was earlier. Besides, Liam is such a wonderful actor. I think what happens in Hollywood is that the movies don't have the stature that the actors themselves have. Liam was truly great in *Schindler's List*. This character is not Oskar Schindler, but it's a character of equal complexity and contradictions."

Just moments before entering the hall to film the debate, Neeson pauses to talk in the courtyard. The seasoned actor, who stands hulking and humble in his gray period suit, easily has the personal magnetism and the size to fill the role of the man the Irish still call the Big Fella. By the time of the debate scene, Neeson's Collins seems to be inviting, even chasing down, his own tragic destiny. "I know in his soul he was . . ." says Neeson, an unruly hank of hair falling across his eyes, "he had contracted pleurisy, he was at an all-time low physically and spiritually, having gone through these three months of negotiations with the crème de la crème of world politicians, who happened to be English politicians — including Churchill and Lloyd George — and he was 30 years of age, a big country lad, sitting down to negotiate the independence, the freedom of his country, with these superstars."

Propmen hand the actor a few prized accessories, which disappear into pockets, and in a lively simulation of Collins' talking-on-the-run style, Neeson is still speaking as he strides toward the camera: "There's an Irish superstitious way of looking at it, like ... he had his confession heard on the Thursday before he was shot. He was continually saying to his sidekick Joe O'Reilly, 'You know, Joe, how would you like a new boss?'"

After Rickman's de Valera stalks out alongside Quinn's Harry Boland, Jordan pauses for further reflection on the film that's complete except for a few scenes, one of which he calls the "mystery" of Collins' assassination, in August 1922.

**You've referred to your staging of Collins' last moments as "an extrapolation" of what remains a murky event in the civil war the treaty engendered.** We decided to structure those end scenes around an attempted meeting with de Valera. I wanted to show a portrait of de Valera as somebody who was powerless to prevent Collins' death even if he had known about it; he was ineffectual toward the end of the civil war. It's the young go-between, played by Jonathan Rhys-Myers, who on his own initiative tells Collins a lie: "De Valera will meet you tomorrow at this place." And Collins, on his way there, is ambushed. What I wanted to show was a new, harder, more brutal generation of Republicans actually taking the initiative and ambushing and killing Collins.

**This go-between is no simple zealot — he's cagey, with a trace of hero worship when he looks at Collins.**  An extraordinary actor. I think the assassin of somebody as interesting as Collins needs to be kind of interesting in himself. I just wanted somebody about whose face you'd ask questions. [They’re discussing Jonathan Rhys Meyers, whom you might know as the coach in *Bend it Like Beckham,* or as young Henry VIII in *The Tudors*.]

**Whatever his fatigue and recklessness, Collins doesn't go meekly.**  Because I don't think it was in his personality, any suicidal urges. I decided that Michael went down still fighting.

(Neeson himself, on reflection, says he played the scene from the leonine side of Collins' character: "The artistic side of my brain wants to think, 'OK, he offered himself as a sacrifice just to finish it, thinking that with his death it might stun the country, which it did, and get them to come to their senses.' But the other side of what I know of the man, and I know him very, very closely now, is that when he was driving through those roads in his own back yard, and shots started ringing out, I think he went, 'Fuck them, how fucking dare they?' I think he just went ape shit, 'You're not going to fucking do this in my own country . . . . Fucking stop the car, I'll teach them a lesson.' 'Cause he had a temper that was ferocious.")

**I understand that Julia Roberts came to her meeting with you already able to sing the song Kitty does in the movie. Did she come out the other end happy with the job?**
Julia was very proud of the movie, you know. She said to me, for the first time she feels like she's been in a real movie.

**Filmgoers have come to expect a challenging, often sexually driven twist in your pictures. Yet the love triangle among Collins, Kitty and Harry Boland is fairly conventional.**
It's very simple — in a way, noble. We're talking about people that didn't live with this kind of sexual self-awareness that we have nowadays. Their word was their word, courtesy meant courtesy, honor meant honor. These people actually spoke from the heart; they meant what they said. Even while you can see the complexity of their emotional triangle playing out, they still insist on the courtesies of life being paramount. It's been very refreshing to deal with those relationships because there's none of this awful kind of self-knowingness that you get these days. When you read the letters, you realize Harry Boland was the far more eloquent character, far more poetic and sensitive than Collins himself, in terms of his verbal expression. So you wonder why Kitty went with the killer, in a way, but I suppose women always do.

**For better or worse, people may see that theme of betrayal that's often invoked in and about your work, and read this film as a meditation not only on the impossibility of revolution succeeding, but of love as well.**  One of the problems in getting this film mounted, actually, was that the central character dies. In fact, most of the characters you care about die. At the end, everybody's dead. So it is Shakespearean in that way. But I'm only interested in making films that stretch the language of the thing, that have the complexity that I think there is in life.

Looking as weary as directors who are engaged in principal photography always do, Jordan indulges the interruption of an assistant with one of his slightly sad smiles. The production is moving south to Cork to shoot the killing of Collins. "On the very spot he died, there is now a monument and a cross," says Jordan. "You couldn't do it there. So we found a valley, and we built a road into it. It was a little valley in West Cork called Beal mBlagh, which means 'mouth of the flower.' " There is another slight smile as he rises. After a shoot that's seen many an explosion, beating and gunshot, does the auteur of the psyche's tangled interior have the will for yet another bloody action scene? He nods, not eagerly, and pulls on his coat with a parting shake of the head and says: "Sadly, I'm good at violence."

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