

***The Cured*, dir. by David Freyne** (IFC Films, 2017)

The Cured (2017), a zombie horror movie and the first feature film from writer and director David Freyne, premiered at the Toronto Film Festival in September 2017 and was released in Ireland in April of this year. The movie is set in Dublin and was produced by Ellen Page, who also co-stars.¹ *The Cured* is probably best described as an Irish zombie movie that incorporates a political allegory. Freyne's flesh-eaters are clearly not the revivified corpses of the traditional zombie movie. Seventy-five per cent of the film's infected population are, as the film opens, now believed to be cured of the virus, which took over their bodies and left them psychotic and hungry for human flesh. Haunted by flashbacks of their former flesh-eating ways, they are being reintegrated into a society where survivors cannot forgive or forget their deeds.

Freyne has stated in an interview for *Variety* in September 2017 that the idea for *The Cured* came to him seven years ago. It was 'inspired by a lot of politics that was happening in Europe and Ireland at the time, where people were suffering and kind of bailing out banks and being held responsible for things beyond their control, like the cured are'.² The sectarian conflict between Unionists and Nationalists in Northern Ireland during the Troubles is additionally hinted at (at one stage a pipe bomb is thrown and, in an allusion to the Maze Prison, which housed paramilitary prisoners during The Troubles, the virus that caused the zombie outbreak is called the 'Maze'). At the same time, the allegory also works when applied to the recent world-wide discrimination faced by refugees or to the Israeli/Palestine conflict. The cured here are victims, not monsters.

As victims, they are constantly harassed – by probation officers, the army, and the police – and discriminated against by society at large. The cured who have relatives willing to take them back – such as Senan (Sam Keeley) – return to suburbia from rehabilitation, but an unwelcome majority remain in half-way houses where probation officers seek to demean them, particularly those who have held positions of power in their former lives. Accordingly, Senan's friend Conor (Tom Vaughan-Lawlor), who resides in one such building and was a barrister before he became infected, is demoted from advocate to street-sweeper. In a twist on

¹ In an interview with *Den of Geek* in May 2018, Page states that she was drawn to the project because she loved the script and its interesting new take. She refers to it as 'a film where in some scenes you're running from zombies and in the next you feel like you're shooting a small family drama. I just thought it so interesting tonally and a new twist on the genre'. Interview with Matt Edwards, *Den of Geek*, 9 May 2018 <<http://www.denofgeek.com/uk/movies/ellen-page/57550/ellen-page-interview-the-cured-zombies-producing-and-more>> [accessed 30 May 2018].

² See 'Ellen Page on Zombie Movie *The Cured*: "It Blew Me Away"', Toronto Film Festival, *Variety*, 2017 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DKO2SZIGhcE>> [accessed 30 May 2018].

such run-of-the-mill zombie movies as George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002), where the infected are portrayed as mindless monsters, the cured, as they struggle to come to terms with their demoted status and the prejudice they encounter are, initially at least, granted more depth and humanity than their persecutors. The power-crazed police and military that control the city and the often biased and unforgiving citizens of Dublin are the real beasts here. We feel nothing but compassion for the silences and uncertainties of the former zombies as they strive to find ways to deal with both the State and the psychological trauma they endure. We find ourselves moved by Senan's tenderness for his nephew, Cillian (Oscar Nolan) and impressed by Conor's wry wit in the face of continuous harassment. Scorned by their intellectual inferiors, they are the ultimate outsiders.

An analogy could be drawn here with the politically driven science-fiction thriller *District 9* (2009), where the empathy of the audience is likewise with mistreated alien-others – that is, if Freyne's allegory did not become increasingly complex and confused as the line blurs between oppressor and oppressed in the final third of the film. When Conor, as leader of an underground movement of ex-flesh-eaters, convinces the group that freedom lies in wreaking havoc on the State, and the uncured are released from prison onto the streets of Dublin to consume and terrorise the innocent, identification with the outsider is lost. Freyne's intention to mirror the journey from civil-rights movement to violent protest to civil war is evident, but it fails. A movement that was born out of justifiable grievances not only fights back, but is now the enemy of man himself. Only Senan faces up to Conor and remains virtuous. Disappointingly, however, this division of the two male lead characters into 'good' and 'bad' rehabilitated flesh-eater seems clichéd and breaks the allegorical spell.

The problem, in part, lies with the fact that Tom Vaughan-Lawlor's character is less developed than Keeley's: through the use of flashbacks, we are given more insight into Senan's character, and thus more readily relate to his struggle to reintegrate into society. Vaughan-Lawlor's performance as Conor is mesmerising, but his character is simply too wicked as leader of the dissenting and radicalised band of revolutionaries (he recalls Count Orlok in *Nosferatu, A Symphony of Horror* (1922)) to carry the political metaphor. Stripped of all redeeming qualities, it is difficult to feel empathy for Conor or his fellow rebels when they finally take the law into their own hands. Moreover, it is unclear as to whose side, exactly, the audience is meant to be on when the only solution offered to the murder and mayhem caused by the dissidents is a discriminatory and corrupt Irish State.

But if the political analogy flounders, the action does not. The story moves from domestic drama (with the aforementioned release and return of the cured but guilt-ridden Senan to his widowed and grieving sister-in-law's house (Ellen Page)) to zombie horror movie with ease, with the horror element introduced drip by drip. The cannibalistic element is first witnessed in Senan's flashbacks to his flesh-eating past, then intensified with a disturbing portrayal of a feral, yet clearly distressed, uncured female zombie at the hospital where Senan works as a porter. Conor's menacing attempts to intimidate and control Senan's sister-in-law, Abbie, also sends shivers down the spine and anticipates what's to come. It is not until the former barrister's fanaticism and predatory nature are fully revealed, however, that the movie has us grasping our seats – and when the infected escape and create mayhem on the streets of Dublin with a mass zombie attack, true zombie gore is finally seen. An imbalance might have occurred here, between riveting drama – where issues such as post-traumatic stress, and the power of memory to invade the present, are put under the spotlight – and traditional zombie movie, with the infected hunting in packs. It is to Freyne's credit that this does not occur – and this is due not only to the well-paced introduction of the horror element, but also to the continuity provided by the setting and to Sam Keeley's impressive performance.

The Dublin of *The Cured* is a soulless wasteland. The dimly lit city is filled with graffitied walls and vacant and decaying spaces, the red brick of the houses the only warmth on the murky green, brown, and grey palate that migrates from street to house. Recalling Belfast in the 1970s, the streets are filled with army trucks, and strewn with discarded newspapers and rubbish, the khaki green of the soldiers' uniforms mirroring the green walls of Abbie's home and Senan's jacket as he wanders like a lost soul through the streets of Dublin. Just as Senan states that he feels the continued presence of another being trapped inside his body, and cannot escape his memories, so too the city enwraps him in its sombre cocoon. That he is weighed down is evident by his performance – he constantly avoids eye contact and stares at the ground, going so far inside himself that he sometimes appears reluctant to speak. And while Page and Vaughan-Lawlor are utterly convincing as the characters they play, it is Keeley who carries the show, and who ultimately provides continuity, as he crosses the divide from flesh-eater to cured and back again in a superb performance.

All in all, despite its flaws, this is a zombie horror movie for the thinking person and a promising debut from Freyne. *The Cured* not only leaves us aghast as the citizens of Dublin

are hunted and consumed by the infected; it also leads us to question the very society we live in. Everyone who has ever suffered discrimination from the State or its citizens will empathise with the plight of the cured. As Freyne has said, the cured are ‘being held responsible for things beyond their control’.

Wendy Mooney