

# **HAPPY** **ever** **AFTERS**

## **PRODUCTION NOTES**



**Running Time: 103 minutes**

**HAPPY EVER AFTERS**  
**opens in Irish cinemas nationwide on December 26<sup>th</sup> 2009**

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# **Happy Ever Afters**

## **Synopsis**

Sometimes the happiest day of all can be the most heartbreaking. Freddie (Tom Riley) and Maura (Sally Hawkins) are getting married, only not to each other. While Freddie is entering his second marriage with the neurotic Sophie (Jade Yourell), Maura's motives for marrying Wilson (Ariyon Bakare) are more for money than love. Then, when the two wedding parties end up at the same reception venue, the house of cards looks set to collapse on the newly weds, guests and all.

Maura, a feisty single mum, not only has her daughter to contend with - indeed, 8 year-old Molly is increasingly suspicious as to her mother's marital intentions - but she is also threatened with eviction from her home. Meanwhile, the well-intentioned Wilson, an African immigrant in Ireland, is being monitored by two bungling detectives, sceptical as to whether or not this marriage is the real-deal. When Maura clashes with Freddie, she risks blowing her ruse.

Increasingly paranoid about Freddie's commitment to a second marriage, Sophie goes off the rails, leaving the party and drinking herself silly with newfound friends. Freddie, meanwhile, is stuck in the middle of it all. Threatened by a suspicious in-law and forced to deal with the confrontational Maura, he thinks his life depends on his second marriage. Can Freddie claw back his relationship with Sophie, or is he looking for love in all the wrong places? Will Maura and Wilson's cover be blown? And can Sophie find happiness beyond the contract of matrimony? The vows have only just been spoken, but the honeymoon period is over.

Written and directed by Stephen Burke, HAPPY EVER AFTERS gives a modern twist to the classic screwball comedy. With a manic mix of romance, deception, politics, sex and love, it takes the wedding movie genre to newfound heights.

## **Tying the knot: the story behind Happy Ever Afters**

Stephen Burke, the Irish writer and director of HAPPY EVER AFTERS, first envisaged his film while attending a wedding. At the reception, a partition separated his party from another; his brain began whirring. What if two weddings shared the same space? How would they interact, or, more to the point, how would they clash?

Burke told the producer Lesley McKimm his idea. The pair had been firm friends since meeting in 1990 when he was a trainee camera assistant and she worked in continuity. McKimm produced his second short film, 81, in 1996, as well as his series NO TEARS, about the Hepatitis C scandal in Ireland's hospitals.

"Stephen said, 'I think there's something in this idea. I think there's good comedy in it'," McKimm recalls. "That was the start of it. I said, 'Yeah, that sounds great'. After all, I like romantic comedies. So he started writing it from there."

HAPPY EVER AFTERS might have appeared an unusual excursion for the writer/director. His early short films were political in scope - one was about Northern Ireland's civil rights movement in the 1960's, another tackled the IRA hunger strikes of 1981 – and 2002's NO TEARS, was again a serious TV drama based on real events.

But Burke always had a soft spot for classic screwball comedies from the 1930's and 1940's: Billy Wilder's SOME LIKE IT HOT, and other tales in which overblown characters behave in ridiculous ways in ridiculous situations. These stories might have been zany, but they were grounded in reality. Likewise, although the wedding film genre is stereotyped by American rom-coms like MAID OF HONOUR, or the British drama of FOUR WEDDINGS AND A FUNERAL, Burke was drawn to classic relationship dramas like THE PHILADELPHIA STORY (1940), starring Cary Grant, Katharine Hepburn, and James Stewart. Another reference was MOONSTRUCK (1987), the Cher-led drama about the preparation for a wedding.

Weddings, of course, make great fictional fodder. Not only are they universal in context - everyone has been to a wedding - but they are powder kegs of discontent. "Weddings seem designed to cause trouble for everyone," laughs Tom Riley, who plays Freddie in HAPPY EVER AFTERS. "Everyone worries. The bride and groom worry about people that are going to be there. People worry that they haven't been invited; others worry they have been invited. You end up with a lot of people in a room thinking, 'God, who am I going to end up sat with at this table?' Weddings are the subject of so many comedies because people are thrown together that wouldn't be together in any other aspect of life."

Burke's script took time to refine. The story always concerned two weddings colliding on the same day, but it originally featured four very different characters. The writer worked tirelessly to create the classic screwball comedy trope: a nutty leading actress who causes chaos to an uptight, straight leading actor. Burke also wanted to avoid making his story too 'Roddy Doyle'. Doyle's novels have translated to fantastic movies – 'The Commitments' and 'The Van' amongst them - but his tales of bleak working class environs were not what this writer had in mind.

"To accept the whole slapstick farce thing takes work," says McKimm. "You want a balance between the comedy and a human, romantic level you can believe in. Take the mother/daughter relationship [between Maura and Molly], for example. She's such a caring mother at times; you want to believe in her. She has to learn a lesson by the end of the film - there's a little bit of truth in there."

The writer worked on a series of subplots, which weave and intermesh throughout the main story. There is Jacques, the officious hotel manager and his employee subordinates, and Dessie and Niamh, two guests whose relationship is on the rocks. This all took time to perfect, contends Burke. "There was a lot of knitting going on - tying everything together. There was a danger of overcomplicating it. I hope that didn't happen, but I definitely did my best to weave a tangled web," he says.

From conceptualising the script to production took several years, but it was time well spent. Like the Billy Wilder movies of yesteryear, the script has a charm all of its own. For her part, the Golden Globe winning actress Sally Hawkins was smitten.

"Stephen's script is so good, you have to trust the words and the situation," says Hawkins. "It's almost not up to you to provide the humour - the situation does that for you. Different characters with different natures who are very different together: mad situations and how they react to each other. That's what's funny. I think Stephen sets it up really well. I love comedy and I love slapstick. I love that old-school slapstick: Buster Keaton, Laurel and Hardy, all of that."

John Hand, production designer on the film, recognised a quality in the script often lacking in Irish productions. "I thought it had a nice, fresh lightness to it, as a romantic comedy. There are a lot of Irish films that are a bit too serious, too indigenous or parochial. I thought this film was versatile and universal in its appeal. It could be made anywhere - it happened to be made in Bray, County Wicklow. You could make the same film in any part of England, or wherever: it's about a clash between different classes of people."

Across all the years in development, Leslie McKimm never gave up on the project, although "life has happened in between," she remarks. McKimm would chat with the writer/director about the project every six months, or so, and played an active role in refining drafts and script notes. She was always perfectly poised to produce. She produced the six part award winning series ANY TIME NOW for BBC 1 & RTE and is a co-company director of Newgrange Pictures, (alongside Jackie Larkin who produced 2007's award-winning KINGS, starring Colm Meaney), and she exec produced the medical drama WHISTLEBLOWER, for Ireland's RTE television, which scooped Best Drama Serial at the 2009 Irish Film & Television Awards.

In 2007, the script finally came together with all the main characters in place. "As soon as I had written the first draft with them in it, I said 'I'll eat my hat if this doesn't get made'," says Burke. Sure enough, about 50% of the funding was in place within a matter of months.

At first, the film-makers were stuck in a Catch 22. Some people considered the film mainstream and told them they should seek American finance. Sally Hawkins was attached but this was before her commercial and critical acclaim for her role in HAPPY-GO-LUCKY, so Americans would tell them "there are no stars". On the other hand, European arthouse financiers needed convincing that the project was not an attempt to emulate American comedy: that it was something Irish, and of value.

The ball began rolling when Burke and McKimm contacted Haut et Court, the French distributors behind THE CLASS, winner of Cannes Film Festival's 2008 Palme d'Or. Haut et Court had admired Burke's short film work and felt similarly about HAPPY EVER AFTERS; they subsequently introduced the film-makers to their sales agent. The Irish Film Board signed up as a funder. Then, German production house Tatfilm became a co-producer: the project was the perfect opportunity for the two countries to share film-making duties.

McKimm, who had worked with Tatfilm's Christine Rupert before, explains: "We ended up being the minority co-producer on a Tatfilm project called KILL DADDY GOOD NIGHT and they became the co-producer of HAPPY EVER AFTERS. Irish Film Board funding was made available for KILL DADDY GOOD NIGHT and North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), their regional equivalent of the Film Board, put money into HAPPY EVER AFTERS." As a result, the film's post-production has been undertaken in Cologne, Germany.

Burke and McKimm were delighted. Not only was HAPPY EVER AFTERS up and running, but their funding partners had given them freedom in making the film. McKimm smiles at the memory. "They kind of said 'Cast it whatever way you want'," she says. "So we did."

## **A cordial invitation: casting the film**

The lead actors for HAPPY EVER AFTERS were always going to be hard to find. "I wanted Jack Lemmon and Barbara Streisand in their 20's," says Stephen Burke, of his feature film debut. With this ambitious caveat, the film-makers held lengthy auditions, trying to find the best thespians to recreate an old-fashioned screwball escapade. At the time, late 2007, Sally Hawkins had yet to hit stardom, since her Mike Leigh film HAPPY-GO-LUCKY was still being edited, but she was Burke's first and only choice for the character of Maura.

"We didn't have a second choice for Maura," he says. "If she had said no, we would have had to go back into casting again because we didn't have a second choice. It's quite a hard character to get right. She was the only one who got it."

McKimm continues: "Myself and Stephen had been fans of Sally Hawkins from her television work [ITV's PERSUASION, BBC's FINGERSMITH, etc]. She wanted to do it. That hit at a moment when things were happening for her in relation to HAPPY-GO-LUCKY. We were very lucky because that gathered momentum in terms of bringing the other bits of finance into place. The fact that Sally's star was in ascendance at that moment in time helped. We cast Sally late 2007."

Hawkins says she signed up because of the quality of Burke's writing, as well as the story. "It's got some lovely little moments in it. It's sort of quite old-school. It's like going back to the 1950's old-school rom-coms in a way. It's slightly like WHAT'S UP DOC [Peter Bogdanovich's 1972 film with Barbra Streisand and Ryan O'Neal] or THE PHILADELPHIA STORY. It's just got a lovely, beautiful charm about it. It really won me over. I hadn't read anything else like it. It's good fun: great energy and a great drive. I love the fact that he anchors this crazy mad world in the truth. It's a farce, but one that you can believe in: a farce that mirrors life. Life is a bit farcical at times and he's really captured that."

What was it about the character of Maura that appealed to her? "She's a free spirit: feisty, bright and full of fire," says Hawkins. "She's very protective of her daughter. She just wants to get through the wedding day, get her money, and go. She's going through the motions basically - she thinks it's all a bit of a hassle, but she's getting paid to do it. She's a great character: bright, fast, sarcastic, witty. She's also up for a laugh. She's funny."

Burke says that Hawkins instilled in the character a touch of chaos, while adding vulnerable, tender and motherly qualities. HAPPY EVER AFTERS was certainly a change of pace from HAPPY-GO-LUCKY, in which the actress rehearsed with Mike Leigh for six months before filming. For this film she had a one day rehearsal and was required to hit the ground running. Hawkins has appeared in three Leigh films: ALL OR NOTHING (2002), VERA DRAKE (2004) and HAPPY-GO-LUCKY (2008), for which she collected Best Actress at the Berlin Film Festival, as well as a Golden Globe. She has also honed her comedic chops on features like LAYER CAKE (2004) and television work like LITTLE BRITAIN. How, then, does HAPPY EVER AFTERS fit into her career trajectory?

"You can only trust your instinct with these things," she admits. "As soon as I met Stephen I really liked him. I knew that he was someone I could work with because he's just so amenable and lovely and very bright. He is tapped in and knows what he wants - he has a vision and that's really important. You never know what the right decision is, doing the next thing. You just have to follow your instinct. Some things will work and some things won't. The good thing is to keep working and hopefully doing good work. Mike Leigh had a comparatively small project as well, so this feels kind of familiar."

The film-makers struggled to find an actor to play Freddie. However, Hawkins' agent recommended Tom Riley. Riley had performed in TV fare like ITV's *LOST IN AUSTEN* and had a starring role, alongside Carmen Elektra and Michelle Ryan, in *I WANT CANDY* (2007). According to McKimm, the moment Riley entered the room he was "lovely and charming and the right balance of humour and attractiveness that the character has to possess. That was that. We were happy."

Burke adds: "It's a romantic comedy, so it was required that he be handsome, which I think he is. Or so I'm told. The character has to have good comic timing and has to be able to do that uptight thing and be attractive at the same time. I think he can do all of that."

Riley recalls reading the script in December 2007. He knew that wedding comedies are plentiful, and while some work – *MY BIG FAT GREEK WEDDING*, for example - others are woefully inadequate. But he was utterly charmed by the screenplay for *HAPPY EVER AFTERS*, considering it different to the usual rom-com set ups. When he was told that Sally Hawkins had signed up, he was raring to go.

Some years before, Hawkins and Riley had participated in a workshop with the British theatre director Peter Gill. Then, in 2005, they collaborated on *FLIGHT 5065* - a series of 17 one-minute plays held on the London Eye, for the Make Poverty History campaign. They have remained friends ever since.

What is Hawkins like to work with? Riley ponders a moment. "You know those boring actor things where it's like 'She's great, she's wonderful', then behind the scenes they're going 'She's a shit. She drinks my coffee and stands in my light'. It's not like that. Sally is the most open, generous and kind member of a crew. She instantly knows everyone's name on set - probably before she has met them... She is so good to work with. So smiley. She makes people feel a million dollars: a real gift."

Hawkins, too, has her own thoughts as to working with Riley. "It's a nightmare. It's really difficult." She holds a deadpan face, then cracks up laughing. "No, it's great. He's really funny. It kind of helps if you have a rapport - you don't have to pretend. You can make it up and you don't have to act all the time. It just adds to the richness and the layers. It makes it slightly easier - I can't imagine doing this with someone I didn't get on with or didn't find funny or don't really respect."

In order to hone the role of Freddie, Burke pointed the actor toward films like Bogdanovich's *WHAT'S UP DOC* as well as Jack Lemmon films. Before filming commenced, Riley settled into his homework with a selection of DVD's.

"Stephen mentioned Lemmon in passing - particularly 'The Odd Couple'," he says. "Freddie's a real dick. He experiences real extremes of emotion. To try and pull that off in a comedy, yet at the same time make him believable and someone that people want to care about is a tough job. In films like 'The Apartment', Jack Lemmon simultaneously creates this character that is so high-strung and annoying and difficult and can't see how he appears to everyone around him. And yet you feel for him. You don't hate him. If anything, you're impressed by him. If I can achieve 50 per cent, 40 or 30 per cent, of what Jack Lemmon did, then that's a winner."

Both Riley and Hawkins were required to master the Irish accent for the film. Prolific dialect coach Brendan Gunn, who has worked on films like SNATCH and KINGDOM OF HEAVEN, spent time with the actors in England. On set in Bray, County Wicklow, the pair were helped and encouraged by people around them. "I'm sure there are a few little things that might jar in someone's ear, but you can only do what you can do in the time you're given," says Hawkins. "You have to trust yourself and give it up to the gods in a way. Nobody has seemed too hung up about it, so maybe I'm doing okay."

Early on in the casting process, Burke and McKimm met Ariyon Bakare, who plays Wilson in the movie. Bakare has played leading roles alongside Paul Bettany in AFTER THE RAIN (1999), and Colin Firth in THE SECRET LAUGHTER OF WOMEN. He also played a lead in the 1998 television mini-series RESPECTABLE TRADE. More recently, Bakare has appeared in big-budget fare like 2008's THE DARK KNIGHT. He is also a writer and director in his own right, having helmed episodes of the BBC series DOCTORS, as well as his own show, 2004's STEALING LIVES.

The story and the character of Wilson made an impression on him. "Wilson is a guy who has the best intentions in the world and is constantly trying to do what's right for everyone, mainly for himself because he wants to stay in the country. But he always gets it wrong. He thinks he's done a really good job by getting this wedding together, and he thinks immigration won't get him. But he does it all so haphazardly."

Another casting addition was Sinead Maguire. Aged 11, at the time of the production, Maguire proved grounded and reliable. The actress may be young, but she is accustomed to the rigmaroles of a production, having appeared in the RTE television series LEGEND (2006). What does she think about her character? "Molly's cheeky. She's a bit of a tomboy. She likes getting up to mischief and telling her mam what to do," she says. What was Sally Hawkins like to work with? "A pleasure. Such a great actress." And Tom Riley? "He's great. Always messin'."

Dashing the old cliché about troublesome child actors, Maguire's fellow cast queue up to praise the young thespian.

"I've worked with children quite a few times and this young girl is a real talent," says Bakare. "She's just so unaffected. You work with her and she's teaching you. She knows what to do. She has the right amount of sensibility for the film. It comes from her family - I've met her mum and her gran and they're really grounded, really supportive. They remind her that she's just a child. She never gets precocious and she's really respectful. I feel like a surrogate dad."

Hawkins adds: "She's quite special and incredibly professional. Very bright. She just takes it in her stride. She's quite an inspiration for everyone. She's a lovely, lovely kid, and very good. She's a great little actress and really gets into it: she's focused and keyed in."

Rounding off the core cast was Jade Yourell, who plays Sophie. Tom Riley recalls a day spent in Dublin, during pre-production, in which he ran through the script with Hawkins, Burke, and Yourell. He was hugely impressed with Yourell's acting chops, and continued to feel this way throughout the shoot. For Burke, Yourell was ideal for the role of a neurotic, semi-innocent character, who loses all her inhibitions after a few drinks.

"How would I describe Sophie? Under the thumb," she says. "Misunderstood. Intelligent but very nervous. During the course of this movie, something clicks and her independent streak finally comes out - probably ten years too late. What we go through at 13 happens on her wedding day. She's made neurotic by her circumstances - i.e. her mother. She's got a lot of mother issues going on. When they're coming out of the church she's quite happy, then her mother sidles up beside her and says, 'Suck your stomach in'. That sums up the sort of relationship they have."

For Yourell, who acted in the recently released *WAITING FOR DUBLIN*, the role was a catharsis, of sorts. "To be able to get on screen and be that mad - running down O'Connell Street and getting pissed. When she does go mad and goes on the trail of destruction in Dublin City: that's years of pent-up frustration coming out. She's a snob essentially and that's her way of going against the grain, and her mum. I think we all have things that frustrate us in our lives, so I kind of used those and just went for it. It was great craic. Coming off set, I'd be knackered, but I'd also be really sated. That's my therapy."

Once the various ancillary cast had been signed on, the film-makers recruited a legion of extras: weddings, after all, consist of big guest lists. On some days of the shoot, as many as 50 extras would be loitering around the set. For Stephen Burke, setting forth on his feature film debut, corralling this lot would test his skills, knowledge, and innate talent.

## **Big day out: shooting the film**

Choosing the right location for the production of *HAPPY EVER AFTERS* was of crucial importance. After all, 75% of the film was set in one venue - the wedding reception - and the film-makers were working off a budget of under €2m, so cost considerations were important. Eventually, they settled on a hotel next to the Irish Sea in Bray, County Wicklow. Bray Head Hotel, as it is known, has housed countless Irish movies - from 'The Commitments' to 'Michael Collins'.

The hotel's manager gave the crew free run of the building for the five week shoot, with rooms set aside for wardrobe, make-up, and hair departments, as well as rooms for location shooting. Other Irish films may have shot here in the past, but few productions have used the hotel quite as extensively. "It's been great," says Burke. "God help us all when it's not available for films in the future. Long may it continue. I think the guests find it quite interesting to watch a film shoot while they're having their breakfast."

Setting the bulk of the film indoors was advantageous - at least, the fickle Irish weather did not hamper proceedings. The director was faced with a large ensemble piece - with some 20 actors in the cast, and many more extras - as well as the time restrictions associated with low budget film-making. Nevertheless, he settled into his debut feature in confident fashion, assisted by his experience in the time-sensitive world of television production.

"In a way, it's great I have that TV experience," he says. "A feature film shoots three minutes a day, or less. We're shooting five minutes a day, often with 100 extras. It was frustrating that I didn't have more time, but having the TV experience, it was a lot easier to manage."

The English actors quickly settled in, impressed with the efficiency and congenial nature of the Irish crew. "I love it," says Hawkins. "Everyone is getting on with it. My parents live in Cork, so it feels like a bit of a homecoming. I think this venue, the hotel, is amazing. Everyone's just up for a laugh. Nothing is too serious; nothing's a problem. The crew are gorgeous - they've all got a bit of a spark in their eyes. A bit of impishness."

Tom Riley chimes in. "We don't tend to overrun schedules, which is unusual. In these jobs, it's low budget and you pack a lot into the day, so it's the kind of film where you think, 'Oh my God, it's going to go over 20 minutes or half an hour. Everyone is going to have to be paid more. It's not going to work'. In England, everyone would be running around, terrified that was going to happen and shouting at each other. Not here."

"You don't feel stressed," continues Ariyon Bakare. "It means you just get on with your job. You don't feel as though you have to tip-toe around anyone's emotions."

Much of this atmosphere emanated from the director. According to Bakare, Burke does not say much on set, but when he does people listen. "You kind of believe and trust it. You think, 'Actually he knows what he's doing'. On other films, when the director is that quiet you start thinking, 'Oh my God. I must be terrible'. I start beating myself up. But for some reason I never felt like that on HAPPY EVER AFTERS. He has made me go further."

Jade Yourell agrees: "Stephen is a man of few words, so any words at all you know are absolute truth. I'd work with him again in a heartbeat."

The film began shooting in July 2008, with five weeks set aside for the production. Two weeks into filming, however, disaster struck when Sally Hawkins broke her collarbone. Upon doctor's orders, the actress was told to stop working, so the film-makers shot another two weeks without the actress, then reconvened in February 2009, to finish off the movie. McKimm and Burke, however, used the intervening time period to their advantage.

"We had the opportunity to edit and look at what we had shot - which most people don't have the opportunity to do," says the director. "In fact, we had a 90 minute cut. We had the chance to change things, if they weren't working, but we were generally very happy with it."

Notably, not all the film is set within the confines of Bray Head Hotel. Two local churches were incorporated for the marriage ceremony scenes; some scenes were shot on the beach, in a nearby housing estate, and in the heart of Dublin City. "What's nice about this film is while most of it happens within the hotel, there are a few scenes that set up Dublin," says John Hand, production designer. "There are iconic shots of the city: O'Connell Bridge, Stephen's Green. That has added another dimension to the film."

If anyone has a story to tell about filming in Dublin's city centre, it is the actress Jade Yourell. During the film, the character of Sophie leaves the wedding reception, suspecting Freddie of having a fling with Maura, and stomps down the high street in her wedding dress. Burke was faced with the painstaking challenge of shooting in a public environment: dozens of pedestrians stopping to stare into the camera. "It didn't help that we had a gorgeous redhead in a low-cut wedding dress," he adds.

Yourell says the day was quite bizarre. She was wearing a meringue-shaped wedding dress that took 20 minutes to get in and out of, prancing through the heartland of working class Dublin. "You're in the fake tan and people are staring," she recalls. "The cameras are there and it all looked very official. So you're going, 'Yes I'm an actress. We're filming something'. I think it went to my head a little bit. Then these two knackers walked up beside me and they said, 'Get your tits out'. That's Dublin all over."

The experience was not entirely humiliating. At one point the crew set up a small base in the middle of the street where they piled their equipment. Yourell was here, getting her make-up done. "The next thing my dress was pulled. I looked down and there was a little kid looking up. She had left her parents and came over to me, her mouth agog. 'Are you a princess?' I said, 'Yes, yes, I am. Make a wish'. Then I saw her parents and handed her back. It was one of those moments I will always remember. She thought I was from that Disney film [Enchanted]."

The actors relished their moments of slapstick comedy. On the first day of filming, Bakare's character was punched around by "three really aggressive women". Unsurprisingly, child actor Sinead Maguire looked forward to her bit of physical comedy the most. "I'll be climbing up a tree and then my mam will come looking for me," she says. "I slip and fall and Tom catches me. I can't wait to do that!"

Sally Hawkins ponders on the art behind great comedy. "I got into acting through comedy and I love the slapstick stuff," she says. "When you're playing the lead, you're straddling both worlds: you're straddling reality and trying to ground it in an inner reality and in the emotion as well. You can't be too slapstick and too mad and too crazy because people have to believe in you: you're the emotional crux of the film."

Riley agrees that on-camera tomfoolery requires studious planning and consideration, but believes an actor should not worry about looking ridiculous. "It's better to commit 100% than be tentative about it. You have to throw yourself 110% into rolling around, falling over, being slapped about. Hopefully, and this is testament to the script, the slapstick is tempered by moments of stillness and calm and emotion, the more heartfelt elements. These are the moments that highlight the best elements of slapstick."

When it came to wrapping the film shoot, in February 2009, McKimm and Burke were exhausted, but happy. They had lived with the film for years but it was worth the wait. Although the production was low-budget, they had total freedom in delivering their product: a luxury that most film-makers are rarely afforded.

## Grand designs: the look of the film

In shaping the look of the film, Jonathan Kovel, director of photography, did not set out to capture a specific visual aesthetic. HAPPY EVER AFTERS is a romantic comedy, so he wanted to avoid shots that were dark, moody, or distracting. Instead, he employed principles that he applies to all his work: the pursuit of three-dimensionality, contrast, and visual storytelling. "Often big budget romantic comedies are very flat, very over-lit, so I tried to strike a balance," says Kovel, who shot in HD on the Sony F900 CineAlta. "It's mostly classically framed," he says. "It's more about letting the comedy play. You can't let the camerawork be too obtrusive or overbearing."

The cinematographer comes from a unique perspective. Hailing from South Africa, he met Stephen Burke in Cape Town, where the director was working on ANNER HOUSE (2007), an adaptation of a Maeve Binchy novel for Irish television. The pair hit it off and Kovel told the director to keep him in mind should his feature project get off the ground. Kovel had already shot in Ireland, on the television drama UNCLE MAX (2006), so knew what to expect.

"In Ireland, the light is vastly different," he says. "The distance from the equator determines the quality of light. The light in South Africa can be very harsh and high in the sky, especially around midday, which can make it almost impossible to shoot. In Ireland, light is always a nice low angle in the sky, when there is direct sun. Shooting exteriors are easier, in a sense."

Kovel faced a challenge in lighting the two churches in the opening scenes of the film: one was a classic, neo-Gothic style Church of Ireland; the other, a smaller Catholic Church in the hills above Bray. At first, Kovel tried lighting through the stained glass windows, but they proved too dense, so he used lighting within the church instead. As part of the story's conceit, audiences are initially led to believe that Freddie and Maura are marrying each other, so the cinematographer had to find a way to make the two churches appear alike. "It worked really well in the cut. I was happy with the way it turned out," he says.

Of course, the Bray Head Hotel determined much of the film's look. "It's bizarre," says the actress Jade Yourell. "You'd be in one room in the 1970's and go to another room and be in the 1920's." Although there were no studio sets, production designer John Hand had his work cut out for him. Hand - whose resume includes SONG FOR A RAGGY BOY (2003), RTE drama DAMAGE (2007), EDEN (2008), and the upcoming return of Hammer Horror, WAKEWOOD - had to make adjustments to the location.

"This place has a faded grandeur," he says. "It's hard to bring it up a tone or two to current day. We had to make it appealing enough that the so-called 'well-off' family were happy to have their big day here. It was easy to do the second wedding, Maura's wedding, which was supposed to be downbeat. It seemed like it was going to be difficult, but once you bring in tables, flower arrangements, crockery and so on, it's amazing how you can lift even the duller of environments."

"We did a small amount of painting. Our budget was tight, so everything had to be necessary as opposed to fanciful. We changed all the furniture in the foyer area and masked as much as we could with props. A lot of basic hotel reception material came from catering hire companies."

Kovel also faced challenges in the confines of the hotel. Oftentimes, the cinematographer had to capture scenes with 30 to 40 people in a room, all in the same shot, and there was the occasional 360° steadycam shot. "The main location, the hotel, determines the look and feel of the whole piece, for better or worse," says Kovel. "It's a funny old place, but it offers a lot in terms of a location for a cinematographer. It gives you lots of interesting, quirky angles and backgrounds. It was a good choice for a location."

Of course, weddings are framed by guest attire, not least the costumes of the bride and groom, so costume designer Aisling Byrne played a massive role in the look of HAPPY EVER AFTERS. Having worked on television dramas like RTE'S SINGLE-HANDED (2007) and KILLINASKULLY (2005), and having honed her skills with iconic low-budget producer Roger Corman, Byrne knows how to source costumes that suit characters, story and budget. The fact that Stephen Burke wrote, as well as directed, HAPPY EVER AFTERS helped, since she likes to know the characters inside out before clothing them.

"Sally's character obviously doesn't have a lot of money, so you wouldn't be giving her a big extravagant gown - you'd be going with something simple. Her character was kooky, quirky, so I didn't give her the traditional long ballgown. I didn't want to make Sinead a normal little kid. I was thinking more of a Dennis the Menace, Minnie the Minx, type of feel, so gave her stripes and a little denim dress and pigtails. I really like to get into my characters. I think every designer is different but I genuinely lie in bed at night and really think about them. I visualise them as a person."

The fact that the story is set over the course of one day added to the challenge, since Byrne needed to keep continuity in consideration. Many of the actors had a single costume - the two brides, for example - so she was required to clean and iron the clothing on a regular basis, noting their degradation as the fictional story progressed.

Byrne's task was abetted by the inclusion of African extras, playing the friends and family of Ariyon Bakare's Wilson. The extras were asked to bring their own costumes, and many turned up with magnificent, colourful, garments. These bright and ethnic designs offered a notable contrast to the clothes worn by Sophie's guests: peaches and pastels, typical attire for the average Irish wedding.

## **Marriage and movies: does anyone object?**

In recent times, the market has been flooded with a deluge of wedding movies: from MAID OF HONOUR, to BRIDE WARS, to 27 DRESSES. Most of them, however, depict women whose lives are not complete until they walk up the aisle: the notion of personal contentment in matrimony. Ironically, classic films about marriage, like THE PHILADELPHIA STORY, featured strong women and ditzy men. If anything, these archaic pictures were more forward-thinking, and more realistic, than the new breed of marital rom-coms.

HAPPY EVER AFTERS, however, frames the story around female characters who learn that inner strength and independence should take preference over pledging allegiance to a man. "That's what I liked about the character of Sophie," explains Jade Yourell. "That independent streak comes out - she gets to a point of self-discovery. She goes from A to B: it's an upward struggle but she reaches the top of the mountain. It's independence but not on a man's terms."

The film is not exactly anti-marriage, though. In one subplot, the marriage of two ancillary characters is in jeopardy, but it is crucial that they save it. Has the film made Sally Hawkins cynical about the institution of marriage? "Never, never, never! Because it all turns out very nicely in the end. It's a fairy-tale. It's romantic," she exclaims. The film, however, does hit on one pertinent point: people sometimes get married for the wrong reasons.

Unlike many contemporary marriage rom-coms, Burke has also managed to add a political dimension to his story. In a plot thread reminiscent to the Gérard Depardieu movie GREEN CARD, the character of Wilson seeks Irish citizenship through marriage. "I was interested in having some sort of wider perspective of modern day Ireland in there," says Burke. "Immigration was obviously a big topic when I wrote it in 2006, when Ireland had a massive influx from all over the world. I definitely felt I was on home territory on the socio-political angle. Funnily enough, there was a little storyline that Maura is in danger of losing her house and it might get repossessed. Everyone said to me, 'Nobody's going to believe that. No one's house gets repossessed!' Now even rich people are getting their houses repossessed!"

Actor Ariyon Bakare, whose father is from Nigeria, found Wilson's story hugely satisfying. "The character represents the immigration model and whether or not it's working and how many people want to stay in Ireland and how hard it is to stay," he says. "Stephen told me, initially, he did not want to make this a black story but just thought it worked."

In another writer's hands, Wilson's actions could be translated into villainy, or a scam, but, audiences will root for all the characters in HAPPY EVER AFTERS. It turns a page, perhaps, for Irish drama.

"This story is really relevant to what's happening in Ireland," says Bakare. "In Britain there are a lot more films about black communities and Asian communities, and we're seeing films like SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE because of the influx of immigrants. The new films coming out of London, like SOMERS TOWN, are about the Polish. This is a beginning for Ireland. It feels like the country is on the edge of something quite exciting."

Despite its serious undertones, HAPPY EVER AFTERS remains a madcap screwball comedy, distilled through the classic capers of Billy Wilder and with a 21<sup>st</sup> century twist. "I'm very happy with it and the cast," says Stephen Burke. "I'm happy with the way my script has stood up to shooting."

"Ultimately," concludes Lesley McKimm. "I hope it will make people laugh."

## **CAST & CREW BIOGRAPHIES**

### **Sally Hawkins – Maura**

Sally Hawkins is a British actress. She attended RADA and graduated from there in 1998.

Hawkins made her first notable screen performance as Samantha in the 2002 Mike Leigh film ALL OR NOTHING. Their working relationship continued as she also starred in VERA DRAKE and HAPPY-GO-LUCKY also directed by Leigh. She won numerous awards for her role in the latter including The Silver Bear Award for Best Actress in the Berlin Film Festival, Best Actress for the Boston Critics Awards and the Golden Globe for Best Actress in a Comedy or Musical.

She has many other film roles under her belt in titles such as LAYER CAKE, THE PAINTED VEIL and CASSANDRA'S DREAM. Sally's up and coming movies include DESERT FLOWER, HAPPY EVER AFTERS and NEVER LET ME GO.

In terms of TV credits, Sally has starred in PERSUASION, which earned her a Golden Nymph for Best Performance by an Actress for her role as Anne Elliot, SHINY SHINY BRIGHT NEW HOLE IN MY HEART, 20,000 STEETS UNDER THE SKY and FINGERSMITH. She has also appeared in three episodes of the hit comedy series LITTLE BRITAIN.

Hawkins' theatre appearances include THE WINTERLING(2006), David Hare's adaptation of Federico García Lorca's THE HOUSE OF BERNADA ALBA(2005), COUNTRY MUSIC (2004), MISCONCEPTIONS (2001) MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING (2000) and A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM (2000)

### **TOM RILEY – FREDDIE**

Tom is a British film, television, and theatre actor. He studied English Literature and Drama at Birmingham University, before going on to study at LAMDA (the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art), where he graduated in 2005.

Riley's film credits include A FEW DAYS IN SEPTEMBER and I WANT CANDY. He can soon be seen on our cinema screens in Stephen Burke's HAPPY EVER AFTERS.

In terms of television, Tom has featured in LOST IN AUSTEN, POIROT: AN APPOINTMENT WITH DEATH, historical drama CASUALTY 1906, LEWIS: AND THE MOONBEAMS KISS THE SEA, MARPLE: ORDEAL BY INNOCENCE and both series of FREEZING. He can also be seen in NO HEROICS, an upcoming US pilot for ABC.

Riley's theatre credits at London's Royal Court and elsewhere include PARADISE REGAINED, THE VERTICAL HOUR, CENSORSHIP, VICTORY, THE WOMAN BEFORE, LIGHT SHINING OVER BUCKINGHAMSHIRE and THE ENTERTAINER.

## **JADE YOURELL - SOPHIE**

Jade Yourell was spotted by Gabriel Byrne while performing in a fringe play in Galway in 1999. Through her meeting with Gabriel she was auditioned and cast as Thomasina in Tom Stoppards ARCADIA at the Gate Theatre, Dublin, directed by Ben Barnes. She received wonderful reviews and went on to play the role of Mabel Chiltern in The Gate's next production of AN IDEAL HUSBAND directed by Alan Stanford. That was followed by THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST in which she played Cecily, THE CONSTANT WIFE, directed by Alan Stanford, which went on to tour in Charleston, USA, FESTEN, directed by Selina Cartmell, and more recently, SALOME, directed by Alan Stanford, also at The Gate Theatre. Jade also performed as Cecily in another production of the IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST at The Town Hall, Galway, directed by Michael Hunt.

She was then offered a leading role in RTE's television series FAIR CITY, which she accepted until Christmas 2002, when she decided to leave in order to pursue other types of acting work. Jade next appeared as April in THAT WAS THEN, written and directed by Gerry Stembridge, and performed at The Abbey Theatre.

Her film work includes the feature film WAITING FOR DUBLIN, directed by Roger Tucker, in which she played the female lead.

Jade's training includes a full time course with drama coach Ann Kavanagh, incorporating movement, mime, improvisation, theatre skills and a range of accents and dialects. For their showcase she played Golde in FIDDLER ON THE ROOF. Jade then secured a place on the prestigious Speech and Drama Course at D.I.T. Rathmines.

## **ARIYON BAKARE – WILSON**

Ariyon is a British actor, a London native.

His TV credits include WAKING THE DEAD, A TOUCH OF FROST, SPOOKS, SHOOT THE MESSENGER, STEALING LIVES, FAMILY AFFAIRS AND CASUALTY. He starred in DOCTORS on BBC from 2001 – 2005, for his role in this he was nominated for a Royal Television Society Award for Best Actor. Ariyon is currently shooting the new US FOX TV series MASTERWORK, which is directed by Jeffrey Nachmanoff.

He has featured in many films including THE DARK KNIGHT, DEAD BOLT DEAD, AFTER THE RAIN and SECRET LAUGHTER OF WOMEN. He will soon be seen on our cinema screens in HAPPY EVER AFTERS.

Theatre performances to his credit include roles in THE RESISTIBLE RISE OF ARTURO UI, JULIUS CAESAR, ANTHONY AND CLEOPATRA, TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD, MERCHANT OF VENICE and the THE SERVANT OF TWO MASTERS for which he received an Ian Charleson Award Commendation.

Ariyon also writes and directs for the BBC, he is due to direct his first feature film that he co-wrote called KODAK COWBOY.

## **SINEAD MAGUIRE – MOLLY**

11 year old Sinead Maguire has been a student of the Billie Barry Stage School since 2001. She made her debut on the Gaiety stage in 2002 in ALL I WANNA DO IS DANCE. At the age of eight Sinead was cast as Saoirse in LEGENDS a six part drama for RTE 2 starring Ruth Bradley and Padraic Delaney. Her first film role was as Hazel O'Hara in Steph Green's short film NEW BOY based on the story by Roddy Doyle which won an IFTA in 2008 and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Live Action Short Film category 2009. She features as "Molly" in Stephen Burke's debut feature film HAPPY EVER AFTERS with Sally Hawkins and Tom Riley which is currently in post production. Theatre work includes MOTHER GOOSE, BEAUTY AND THE BEAST and CINDERELLA at the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin and numerous performances at the Point Theatre and the National Concert Hall with the Billie Barry Kids.

## **STEPHEN BURKE – WRITER & DIRECTOR**

Born in Dublin. Graduated from the Dublin Institute of Technology, specialising in film. He began film work as a camera assistant before switching to writing and directing.

His short films After '68 and '81', were international successes winning many awards across the world including Best Short Film at the Melbourne Film Festival; the Prix Europa Berlin; Best Short Film, Valencia Film Festival, as well as both films winning prizes at home at the Cork Film Festival. Both films were set in Northern Ireland against the backdrop of the 60s Civil Rights movement in Derry (AFTER '68) and the 1981 hunger strike at the Maze prison ('81').

His work for television includes directing the award winning drama series NO TEARS, starring Brenda Fricker, based on true events surrounding Ireland's Hepatitis C medical scandal. And the Capetown set TV movie, ANNER HOUSE, starring Liam Cunningham and based on a Maeve Binchy short story. He has also written for several TV drama series and TV movies.

HAPPY EVER AFTERS which he wrote and directed, is his first feature film for cinema and continues a collaboration with producer Lesley McKimm, who also produced his short film '81' and the NO TEARS TV series.

## **LESLEY MCKIMM – PRODUCER**

Lesley McKimm has been working in film and television since 1991 and initially worked for many of the main Irish production companies including Temple Films (now Element), Treasure Films and Little Bird. With these companies she worked in a variety of roles including, producer, line producer, production manager, post-production supervisor and script development.

She became a producer in 1995 when she produced the award winning short film 81, written and directed by Stephen Burke, which won numerous international awards. Other work in the late 1990's included RELATIVE STRANGERS - 4 x 50 TV drama series starring Brenda Fricker for RTÉ and WDR (for Little Bird), IN SEARCH OF ANCIENT IRELAND – 3 x 1 hour documentary series for PBS and RTÉ (for Little Bird & Café), HOME - a series of six

half-hour documentaries for RTÉ (for Treasure Films) and SOUTHPAW – feature length documentary which was released theatrically in Ireland, the U.K. and screened at Sundance (for Treasure Films as Line Producer).

She produced the 6 part drama series ANY TIME NOW in 2002, for BBC 1, RTÉ 1 & The Irish Film Board, and NO TEARS (4x 1hour) for RTÉ 1, in association with Little Bird, and the 35mm short film NO NO NO (directed by Stephen Bradley). She also produced the Arts Lives documentary TO BE OR NOT TO BE for RTÉ, the Arts Council of Ireland and the Irish Film Board and the theatre show A HEART OF CORK for Cork 2005.

NO TEARS starred Brenda Fricker, Maria Doyle Kennedy and Tina Kellegher & was one of the most watched dramas on RTÉ, it won the Golden Nymph for best drama at Monte Carlo in 2002 and was selected as one of three Irish projects at INPUT in 2003. ANY TIME NOW has sold to Australia (ABC), New Zealand (TVNZ), Finland (Channel 4) and Sweden (SVT) and won IFTA's for Susan Lynch, Angeline Ball and Ruth McCabe.

She joined Newgrange Pictures in late 2006 and is now working alongside fellow producer Jackie Larkin. Newgrange Pictures was one of 10 Irish production companies to receive MPD (company slate) funding from the Irish Film Board in December 2006.

Newgrange's most recent films include KINGS (produced by Jackie Larkin, directed by Tom Collins and starring Colm Meaney), which was the first ever Irish film to be selected for the foreign language category of the Academy Awards. It had its' world premiere at the Taormina Film Festival and was selected for the Contemporary World Cinema Section of the Toronto International Film Festival 2007. They also co-produced the German-Austrian film KILL DADDY, GOODNIGHT which had it's world premier at the Berlin Film Festival this year.

Lesley also executive produced the 2 part TV drama WHISTLEBLOWER (with Saffron Pictures) for RTE 1, which won the best drama IFTA 2009. She is currently in post production on HAPPY EVER AFTERS.

She is a graduate of EAVE 1998 and the Media Business School 2002 and sits on the board of the Irish Film Board and Pan Pan Theatre Company.

### **JONATHAN KOVEL – DOP**

Jonathan Kovel has been living and working in Johannesburg for ten years. Having started in film in New York, where he graduated from Columbia University Film School, he is now firmly ensconced in the South African film and television industry.

Fluent in French, as well as semi-fluent in Spanish, he has shot all over the world, including: Canada, Mexico, Peru, Curacao, Ireland, France, Namibia, Botswana, Swaziland, and Indonesia. In South Africa he has shot commercials for Freshwater, Picture Tree, and Velocity among others. He has done numerous local and international documentaries, including KEEP THE RIVER ON YOUR RIGHT, winner of best film at Amsterdam's IDFA film festival.

His narrative work ranges from television dramas for Curious Pictures, Ochre Media, Bomb Shelter, and Penguin Films, to feature films for Tom Pictures, Roguestar Films and Little Bird Productions.

Most recently he completed a feature film in Dublin, Ireland for Newgrange Pictures, HAPPY EVER AFTERS, starring Golden Globe winning actress Sally Hawkins.

## **JOHN HAND – PRODUCTION DESIGNER**

John Hand took an interesting route to production design. After college in RTC Galway and The National college of Art and Design Dublin, where he studied Fine Art Sculpture, he spent years working as a street artist/muralist, taking him on a rambling jaunt through Ireland, Italy, Paris, London and many other cities and towns in Europe, also to Boston and Harvard in the U.S. He worked at other jobs, gradually getting involved in film making with students from the National Film and Television School at Beaconsfield, London.

John's design credits include a list of short films in England and Ireland in both English and Irish language. Feature film credits include the multi-award winning SONG FOR A RAGGY BOY, starring Aidan Quinn and directed by Aisling Walsh, WATERMELON starring Anna Friel and Brenda Fricker. The feature film TRUE NORTH starring Gary Lewis, Peter Mullan and Martin Compston, The made for TV DAMAGE by Aisling Walsh starring David O'Hara and Nathalie Press. The feature film EDEN starring Eileen Walsh and in post production at the moment THE WAKE WOOD starring Aidan Gillan, Eva Birthistle and Timothy Spall, in conjunction with Hammer Horror.

Most popularly, his work has been seen in the video output for John Kenny and Pat Shortt of the D'UNBELIEVEABLES in D'TELLY and D'MOTHER, both the highest selling videos in Ireland in their day. He later worked with Pat Shortt on his solo projects, also designing the pilot, and the first series of the ever popular KILLINASCULLY for RTE.

TV work includes design for the acclaimed TV series PURE MULE from the pen of Eugene O'Brien, which was highly regarded for its unflinching integrity and reflection of contemporary Midlands Ireland.

He took his first serious foray into theatre design, working with Jo Mangan of the 'Performance Corporation' and 'Park films' to create a surreal environment to stage a Flann O'Brian tribute night televised and broadcast on TV3 as THE POLICEMAN'S BALL

## **AISLING WALLACE BYRNE– COSTUME DESIGNER**

Aisling Wallace Byrne graduated with an honours degree in Fashion Design from Limerick College of Art & Design, having completed a foundation course in Art & Design.

Aisling was the overall winner of the Irish Trade Board fashion awards, specializing in designing leather. Her collections have featured on the Late Late Show fashion awards.

For over a decade Aisling has worked as a costume designer for Film & Television, both domestically & internationally, whilst continuing to design commissioned pieces. In terms of TV she has worked on shows such as GEORGE GENTLY, KILLINASCULLY, 'WHISTBLOWER and MURPHY'S LAW. Film credits include TRISTAN AND ISOLDE and the feature HAPPY EVER AFTERS.

Aisling also works as a personal stylist to various Irish celebrities.