

Port Pictures and Portobello Films and Television  
present



# FOUR MOTHERS

A film by  
DARREN THORNTON

2024 – IRELAND, UK – DRAMA, COMEDY – ENGLISH – 89'

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# SYNOPSIS

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Edward, a novelist saddled with caring for his elderly mother, finally finds himself on the brink of literary success. With pressure to go on a US book tour mounting, the last thing Edward needs is his friends jetting off to Spain for an impromptu Pride holiday, leaving their mothers on his doorstep! Over a chaotic weekend, he has to juggle his burgeoning career with the care of four eccentric, combative, and wildly different ladies.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

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In 2016, just as our first film, *A Date for Mad Mary*, was going on release in Ireland and the UK, our mother, Trish, was diagnosed with a degenerative disease that would soon lead to her needing full-time care. My brother Colin and I had decided to move back home. At around the same time, producer Jack Sidey from Portobello sent us a DVD of a beautiful Italian comedy, *Mid-August Lunch* by Gianni Di Gregorio, with a view to adapt. One of the most beautiful films about the eccentricities of older women, Pranzo immediately resonated with the moment Colin and I found ourselves: back in the family home with our Mum, but also her sisters, friends, and neighbours, who all wanted to help, but could rarely agree on how to. Like *Mid-August Lunch*, we would frequently find ourselves in the middle of the most absurd conflicts between all these older women, as we tried, often unsuccessfully, to keep the peace.

Trish passed away in 2017, and in the years that followed, Colin and I would revisit our memories of her as we started thinking about how we might adapt *Mid-August Lunch*. Mum had lost her voice before she passed away and was forced to use an iPad to communicate. The iPad would come to symbolise everything we hated about her condition; you see, our Mum was one of the great talkers and being reliant on a device to be heard stripped her of her greatest asset, her beautiful voice. And so perhaps as some measure of revenge on the device that came to represent so much frustration, we decided to use it as the starting point for our adaptation. Our story would be about a mother and son who had both lost their voices, one literally and one figuratively. It would be a celebration of our mother and Irish mothers more generally, it couldn't be maudlin, and it would have to be funny. We grew up watching comedies with Trish; films like *Private Benjamin*, *Working Girl*, and *Big Business* were played on a loop in our house, and I can still hear my mother cackling happily as we'd watch them for the millionth time.

In 2019 we finished the screenplay for *Four Mothers*, an adaptation of Gianni's gorgeous film, but with our own uniquely Irish mothers and some of our personal experiences and perspectives peppered in. Covid arrived in 2020, and we were put on hold like everyone else. The one silver lining was that the downtime allowed us a longer casting process and the opportunity to meet with a lot of great actors and find our cast. This would turn out to be crucial because the casting of the mothers needed to be very specific. We needed great actors, but not only that, we needed them to buy into the way we wanted to design the film. These were working class women who felt invisible, and so their environment and their look would reflect this, as would the way we lit and photographed them.

We would finalise a formidable cast in 2021 that included James McArdle, Fionnula Flanagan, Dearbhla Molloy, Paddy Glynn and Stella McCusker. Tom Comerford would be our director of photography, and Lucy Von Lonkhuyzen our production designer. As we started to design the film and establish a tone, we talked a lot about the photography of Martin Parr, in particular the middle-class English families he photographed in the 80's & 90's in his book *Sign of the Times*. We talked about the poetry of Paul Durcan and his book *The Laughter of Mothers*. We talked about combining the absurdity of an 80's high concept comedy with the deadpan humour and character drama of other American films that Colin and I liked, in particular Tamara Jenkin's *The Savages* and Alexander Payne's *Nebraska*.

The film's emotional truth and the truth of the characters were always paramount, and so we

approached even the most absurd moment in as truthful a way as possible while filming.

We shot mostly with a shallow depth of field so we could really isolate the characters and accentuate their loneliness. Even though it was a comedy (of sorts), we wanted the audience to feel like they were watching characters struggling to connect and wanting to be seen as they are by others. We also kept the colour palette muted in terms of costume and sets, so the viewers' attention would always be drawn to the actors' expressions.

The edit was challenging; it always is on our films; we edit and re-edit the minutiae of the performances again and again until everyone in the cutting room is snow-blind. We wrestle with the tone – is it a comedy with drama or a drama with comedy? Is it lifeless? Is there anything at stake? Is the premise too arch? Will anyone care?

Obviously, no one has seen it yet, so I don't know the answer to these questions. But as we watched the finished film play out some weeks ago, I began to imagine the places where Trish might laugh, and while I don't know that we'd get those *Private Benjamin* belly laughs, I think she'd approve.

Vivan las Madres!

**Darren Thornton**

# INTERVIEW WITH WRITER-DIRECTOR DARREN THORNTON AND CO-WRITER COLIN THORNTON

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## **What was it that drew you both to adapting *Mid-August Lunch* ?**

*Darren:* A dvd of the original film was sent to us by Jack & Eric at Portobello Productions, they had optioned the film with a view to re-making it and, I think, a few other people had taken a crack at it before us. And we just happened to be going through something very similar at the time, just in terms of being back at home with our Mum and her sisters and friends in this very small house where everyone was tense and tripping over one another.

*Colin:* It really resonated with us in that moment. And we loved the Italian film, we just laughed all the way through. It was so specific.

*Darren:* We thought it'd be really interesting to explore similar relationships within an Irish context and like immediately we were buzzing off how that might work and what these Irish older women would like and so on..

## **Tell us about the choice you made with Alma's voice?**

*Darren:* That was very specific to our own experience with our Mum who at the time had been diagnosed with MND and was losing her own capacity and the loss of her voice was heart-breaking, but also absurd in that we'd all be trying to figure out how to work this device and sometimes the accent would change or she'd hit the wrong button and suddenly she'd be talking to us in Spanish or German or something.

*Colin:* And Mam left school when she was twelve to raise her younger sisters because that's how it went in rural households in Ireland back in the 50s and 60s, so she was always self-conscious about her spelling. So then having to use this device and struggling to spell certain things, like we'd end up in the most bizarre situations where all of us might be standing around trying to decipher what she had typed and playing this weird game of charades where we're trying to work out what she wants to eat for breakfast.

*Darren:* We hated that thing and yet it probably made us all laugh at times when we needed it. We'd also programme in all these swear words that she could then deploy easily to my Dad when he was annoying her or whatever and that was always funny, she got a kick out of that. Anyway, it was such a big part of the period of life with Mam we knew we wanted to use it some way with Alma. We spent a good bit of time trying to get the exact same digital voice that Mam had on her voice bank too. It's just horribly lifeless and there's something about the sensitivity and warmth of the human, but then having this automated voice, like the sound of your final draft reader or Siri or whatever... The combination felt like something we hadn't seen before and also we knew that Edward's journey was going to be about finding his voice too, so it made sense to include it.

*Colin:* The voice banking has come on a lot more since then, like now with AI, the capacity to emulate the person's voice from old voice messages and so on is impressive, but at the end of the day, it still sounds like a computer. We did talk at early stages about whether Alma's digital voice should be composed from Fionnula's real voice, but we decided against it.

*Darren:* I think the more alien it sounded the more interesting it was dramatically.

## **How did Fionnula find playing a character who had to rely on this?**

*Darren:* I think she found it tough, I mean your voice is your main tool as an actor and to be stripped of that? But, it made it all the more interesting because she also hated that device, hated not being able to speak in a film that is very talky. So it all fed into the story in a very useful way

### **How did you find the four mothers?**

*Darren:* It was during covid so most of the meetings were on zoom and we met people, then if we clicked we would have a chemistry read and see how that went. Fionnula was so lovely. We met her in the Burlington hotel in Dublin and she had her dog Betty with her and we just spent a few hours chatting. And I was so surprised because there was no vanity at all with Fionnula, she was totally open to everything we wanted to do. Like we spent a lot of time telling the actors that it was a working class Dublin story in small houses with very lived in wardrobe choices that probably would not be flattering, and that that was the point and so on, but she got it immediately and embraced it and that's no small thing for an actor (and a movie star) to commit to, because we're all conscious about how we look at the best of times. So for a star of her calibre to be open to that, was very gratifying.

*Colin:* It was actually Maude that's played by Stella McCusker that was the hardest to land, surprisingly.

*Darren:* Yeah, that was a long search.

### **One of the other elements that's really interesting about the film is that all of the women are mothers to gay sons, was that the idea from the beginning?**

*Darren:* Yeah that was pretty much there from the get go.

*Colin:* There's just not enough middle-aged gays in cinema!

*Darren:* It was just funny to us, you know, we were trying to figure out how to have the mothers end up with Edward and we thought – oh it would be funny if all the sons were gay and wanted to go to a pride festival, although originally it was going to be the circuit festival, which is sort of elite?...

*Colin:* Sort of, but then we realised they wouldn't actually be that cool..

*Darren:* And it was funnier if they were too old for that festival. Maspalomas pride felt right, more their tempo. And it's an amazing festival actually and the time we spent shooting stuff over there was a lot of fun. It was just me and Colin and Gordon and Gearoid who play Colm and Billy and two iPhones. Then the Dermot pieces were shot by Rory himself when he was on his actual holidays in Spain.

### **When did you meet James McArdle who plays Edward?**

*Darren:* We met him in 2021, I think. Jack had seen him in Angels in America and mentioned how great he was in it and then I remember doing this deep dive and watching everything he had done and he was in this concert tour movie that Michael Winterbottom had made with the band Wolf Alice and he was great in it, just really subtle and specific. So we met him and clicked straight away.

*Colin:* He was really great to work with. Brilliant collaborator..

*Darren:* James always gives it 150%. He's just chomping at the bit in the best way. He gives you loads of options, loads of levels, loves shooting takes. Which is great 'cos.. so do we. Fionnula and James got on great too, there was a lovely easiness to the way they were onscreen together.

# ABOUT DIRECTOR DARREN THORNTON

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## DARREN THORNTON, WRITER-DIRECTOR

Darren Thornton established the award-winning Calipo Theatre Company in 1995. Directing numerous stage productions during his tenure as Artistic Director. He made his television debut directing the IFTA award-winning *Love is the drug* in 2004, a six part comedy-drama series for RTE. His first short film *Frankie* won the Prix UIP award at the Berlin film festival in 2008 and the European Academy Award for best short film in the same year. His second short film *Two Hearts* also won the Prix UIP award and was nominated for a European Academy Award in 2011.

In 2003, Darren established the Sharp Focus film project; a teenage film initiative that runs annually, Sharp Focus enables young people from the North and South of Ireland to work with established filmmakers on the production of original short films that explores the legacy of conflict within their communities.

His first feature film *A Date for Mad Mary* was produced by Element Pictures and won Best Irish film at the Galway Film Fleadh and Best film at the Irish Film and Television Awards (IFTA's) in 2017.

## PREVIOUS FILMOGRAPHY

- *A Date for Mad Mary* (2016)
- *Two Hearts* (SHORT, 2011)
- *Frankie* (SHORT, 2007)
- *Love is the Drug* (TV, 2004)

# ABOUT THE CAST

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## JAMES MCARDLE - EDWARD

James McArdle will next be seen on screen starring as Gal Dove in the Paramount + series *Sexy Beast*, a prequel to Jonathan Glazer's seminal 2000 film, due for tx in Q1 2024. The Scottish actor is probably best known for starring opposite Kate Winslett in Brad Inglesby & Craig Zobel's multi award winning HBO limited series, *Mare of East Town*. He was named a 2019 SCREEN STAR OF TOMORROW following his performances in Working Title's *Mary*, *Queen of Scots* and Francis Lee's second feature, *Ammonite*. Other screen credits include John Crowley's BBC drama *Life After Life*, the hit Disney+ SciFi series *Andor*, Michael Winterbottom's *On The Road* & the Emmy Award winning *Man in an Orange Shirt*. James is also recognised for his multi award winning & nominated stage performances. McArdle also starred in Marianne Elliot's critically acclaimed production of *Angels in America*, which was staged both in the UK and on Broadway. He also starred in the title lead role of the Almeida Theatre's critically acclaimed production of *The Tragedy of Macbeth* opposite Saoirse Ronan and was the original James I in Rona Munro's critically lauded *James I* (part of The James Plays saga). James won the US Theatre World Award for his performance as Louis, as well as Olivier Award, Drama Desk Award & Drama League Award nominations. He won exceptional reviews for *Platonov* at the National, with the critic Paul Taylor citing James as "the most stunningly gifted performer to have emerged since the advent of Eddie Redmayne in the Rylance era." His performance as Chekhov's infamous Iothario saw him nominated alongside Kenneth Branagh, Ralph Fiennes and Ian McKellen in The ES Theatre Award Lead Actor category, and secured him the prestigious Ian Charleson Award.

## FIONNULA FLANAGAN - ALMA

Fionnula Flanagan's many film and television credits include: *The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes*, *Sing Me Back Home* (Dir: Sandrine Dumas), *Birthmarked* (Dir: Emanuel Hoss-Desmarais), *Life's A Breeze*, (Dir: Lance Daly), *Tasting Menu* (Dir: Roger Gual), John Michael McDonough's *The Guard*, *The Others* (Saturn Award for Best Supporting Actress), *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (Dir: Callie Khouri), *Transamerica* dir *Duncan Tucker* (Irish Film and Television Award (IFTA) for Best Supporting Actress), *A Christmas Carol* (Dir: Robert Zemeckis), *Yes Man* (Dir: Peyton Reed), *The Invention of Lying* (Dir: Ricky Gervais), the Academy Award winning *In The Region Of Ice*, *Some Mother's Son* (Dir: Jim Sheridan), *Waking Ned Divine* (Dir: Kirk Jones), *With Or Without You* (Dir: Michael Winterbottom), RTE's *Smother*, Amazon's *The Man from Rome*, *How The West Was Won* (Emmy Nomination Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series), *Rich Man, Poor Man* (Won the Emmy for Outstanding Single Performance by a Supporting Actor in a Comedy or Drama Series), and ABC's *Lost*. While recent stage credits include *The Ferryman* on Broadway (for which, she received a Tony nomination for her performance). She originated the role of Maggie in Brian Friel's *Lovers* at Dublin's Gate Theatre and for her performance as Molly Bloom in *Ulysses of Nighttown* (directed by Burgess Meredith) she was nominated for a Tony Award. Fionnula was the recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award at the 2012 Irish Film and Television Awards (IFTA's).



## **DEARBHLA MOLLOY – JEAN**

Dearbhla was nominated for an Olivier Award for Best Actress in a Supporting Role for her role in *The Ferryman* in 2018. Nominee, HELEN HAYES AWARD for *Moment*, Nominee, DRAMA DESK AWARD for *Give Me Your Hand*. Winner Drama Desk Award, Winner Theatre World Special Award and Tony Award Nomination for *Dancing at Lughnasa* on Broadway.

Winner of London Critics` Award for Best Supporting Actress in *Juno and the Paycock* (RSC production). Winner Best Supporting Actress Irish Theatre Awards for *A Life*. IFTA Best Actress Nomination for *Home for Christmas*. US Audi Award, Grammy Award nominee for reading of *My Dream of You* by Nuala O`Faolaon. Winner Drama Desk Award, Winner Best Supporting Actress Irish Theatre Award for *The Cripple Of Inishmaan*.

## **PADDY GLYNN – ROSEY**

Paddy was raised on the family farm in Co.Wicklow, riding out with the morning milk and taking harvest lunches to the fields, where eager eyes awaited her arrival. Was this what began her wish to be looked out for, what drove her into performing on a stage? Paddy trained in England and began her career as a dancer at the London Palladium, swiftly followed by a cabaret stint in Las Vegas and a summer season in Blackpool. Eight west-end Musicals later, she was offered a tour back in Ireland with Martin McDonagh`'s *Beauty Queen of Leenane* and a season as principal boy in *Panto* at the Belfast Opera House. It was hard to beat being back in Ireland ! Paddy was later cast in *Four Mothers* - her first feature film! Let`s hope there are more in the pipeline before she retires.

## **STELLA MCCUSKER – MAUD**

Born in the Republic of Ireland and having grown up in Lurgan, Stella has appeared in plays, television and films all over the world and performed Shakespeare, Yeats, Brian Friel, Seamus Heaney to name but a few. Perhaps best know for the 2009 film *Five Minutes of Heaven* and Nineties movie *You, Me and Marley* which revolved around a gang of Protestant and Catholic youths in which she played Mrs Hagan, Stella has also appeared in the TV series *Lovejoy* and more recently on *Game of Thrones*.

# CAST

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JAMES MCARDLE	Edward
FIONNULA FLANAGAN	Alma
DEARBHLA MOLLOY	Jean
PADDY GLYNN	Rosey
STELLA MCCUSKER	Maude
NIAMH CUSACK	Maura the Medium
GAETAN GARCIA	Raf
RORY O'NEILL	Dermot
GEAROID FARRELLY	Colm
GORDON HICKEY	Billy

# CREW

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DIRECTOR, WRITER	Darren Thornton
CO-WRITER	Colin Thornton
DOP	Tom Comerford ISC
MAKE-UP	Barbara Conway
COSTUMES	Joan O'Clery
PRODUCTION DESIGNER	Lucy van Lonkhuyzen
EDITOR	Gary Dollner ACE Gretta Ohle
COMPOSER	Stephen Rennicks & Hugh Drumm
CASTING	Louise Kiely
LINE PRODUCER	Ailish Bracken
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS	Celine Haddad Niamh Fagan Philip Prettejohn
ASSOCIATE PRODUCER	Colin Thornton
PRODUCERS	Eric Abraham Jack Sidey Martina Niland
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