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Let's face the music

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TV REVIEW

A Song for Dad RTÉ1, Tuesday
The Trouble With Girls BBC2, Monday
The Rutland RTÉ1, Tuesday
Coast BBC2, Tuesday

'DARLING NIALL, I do not want to prolong this agony any longer." So began the suicide note of the mother of writer and film-maker Niall McKay, whose tender, deeply personal film, **A Song for Dad**, was aired this week, illuminating the somewhat arid summertime television schedules.

McKay's exploration of his fractured childhood played out as a gentle road movie, as the film-maker travelled from his home in San Francisco to Zurich to help his father, jazz musician Jim McKay, move back home to Ireland after the death of his second wife. Examining the ties that bind and exploring his own potential as a parent, Niall McKay, a sympathetic and collected man, allowed the viewer just a handful of snapshots, a provocative glimpse, of his troubled mother, but largely focused his handheld camera on his surviving parent, his father, who had, with the help of extended family, brought up his two sons alone after his wife's violent rages, apparently fuelled by alcoholism, became unlivable with.

McKay portrayed his musician father (the "go-to jazz bass player" of the jazz greats visiting Ireland) as an essentially passive man, a calm presence to whom a turbulent and passionate life somehow just happened. This view was borne out by Jim's advice to his son to take "the jazz approach, not the classical" on matters of life and love, to be prepared to "busk it".

Underscored by Jim's recordings and including recent footage of him in concert with guitarist Louis Stewart, the film riffed through his life with the lightness and musicality inherent in his playing. We heard about the night he packed his young son into the family car and left his wife after she had taken a hatchet to his beloved double bass (her suicide came many years later), and how, in more recent times, a serendipitous aircraft encounter introduced him to "the love of his life", resulting in a marriage cruelly truncated by the death of his Swiss wife, which then precipitated his return to Ireland.

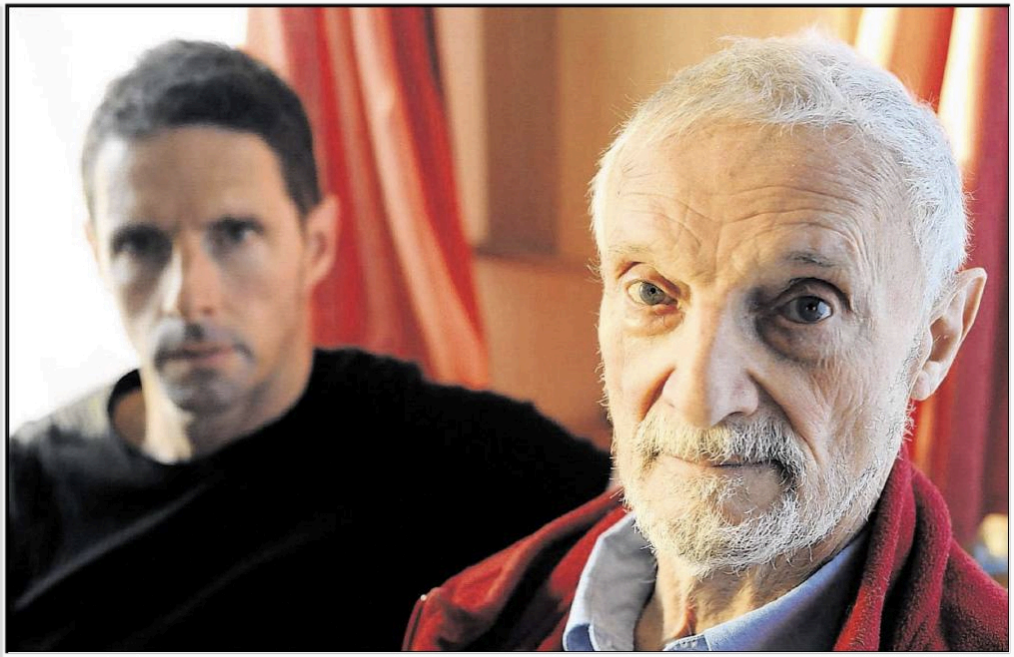
I imagine autobiographical film-making is an emotionally fraught arena, and I suspect that there is always collateral damage when memories are hewn into art. Making such a personal film is, one senses, a process requiring both arrogance and confidence, but the work can, as in Dubliner Tanya Doyle's recent autobiographical film, *The House*, be absolutely compelling. Underneath Niall McKay's studiously bespectacled exterior is a judicious man, a storyteller quietly determined to impose a narrative on an uneasy past. Ultimately, he bestowed a happy ending on his moving and gracefully shot film with his marriage to his partner and his new openness to the idea of having children, emotional territory he had previously avoided. "Play a note and make it last," said his father, which is probably sound advice for all of us.

THE VAST WORLD of television has eluded me for the past few weeks. Umbilically detached from my trusty satellite dish, the most potent questions troubling my scattered consciousness have been "what exactly is a bullock?" and "when will it stop raining?" A quick dust of the remote control, however, and the floodgates reopen: documentary after documentary categorising and dissecting identity, wall-to-wall video diaries, cookery and weight-loss programmes beyond number, and, of course, repeats of repeats of repeats (some of them, such as the *Livin' With Lucy* episode in which Lucy moves in with Twink and her doggy sextuplets – a morsel I missed first time around – giving me a worrying frisson of excitement).

Anyway, where were we? Ah yes, pain and addiction. Marching right back into the mouth of the analogue-and-digital beast, then, **The Trouble With Girls** was a gripping example of what patient film-making can achieve. The documentary, filmed over six months, charted the fate of two recidivist and impoverished young women, aged 17 and 20, as they revolved around the British criminal justice system like broken dolls on a rusting roundabout.

As with similar recent films underscoring the desperation and hopelessness of the binge-drinking and addicted young, this record of dashed hopes and failed intentions made a bleakly touching portrait. One was left with the overwhelming feeling that while our economy is choking on its own excesses, it will be the most vulnerable – the sweat-panted, grey-hooded, tattooed and under-educated children of derelict sink estates, be they here or in the UK – who will mop up the spillage of the collective gut, even as they are robbing the supermarkets (often on demand, some of their neighbours giving them lists) of economy packs of nappies and diamante neckties to wrap around their throats on nights out. This was a deeply depressing film, the details of which are all too familiar: inadequate parenting, some intangible sense of loss and self-despair, a dearth of opportunity, poverty, and then, by 13 or 14, the not-so-innocent teenage mouths wrapped around the necks of litre bottles of Lambrusco, the crack pipes scattered around high-heeled feet.

The film did not pretend to offer solutions, merely picked up on some startlingly obvious points. Both of its featured young women, tagged and Asbo-heavy, expressed their desire, while waiting for various of their many court hearings, to go back into prison just for a while, to get a break from the pressures of the outside world, from homelessness, erratic friendships and volatile relationships, and to have, along with a roof over their heads and regular meals, some time for thought and reflection.



In tune: Niall McKay and Jim McKay in *A Song for Dad*

IT IS PROBABLY a little unfair to drag RTÉ over the familiar coals of prickling irritation with its summer scheduling as, alongside the evocative *A Song for Dad*, this week also saw the second and final part of **The Rutland**. The opener in the two-part documentary was reviewed here last week, but this week's concluding programme also made riveting viewing as it followed the attempts of participants to negotiate life outside the rehabilitation environment.

The facts were as chilling as a summer day on an Irish beach, as those who had successfully negotiated a year clean of addiction stood to receive their symbolic medals at a ceremony in the Rutland Centre. We were told that for every nine people who walk through the door of the Rutland seeking recovery, three will relapse completely, three will relapse and seek further treatment, and three will achieve their goals.

The Rutland was a provocative piece of work, and while doubtless there are some who feel that the institution's privacy has been compromised, personally I believe it to be a timely and tremendously instructive piece of television. Back on the mean streets of the metropolis, having left those vacant bullocks and blood-red fuschia behind for the clatter of platform heels over cobbled streets and the pale yellow faces of the morning methadone queue, there can be no doubt that we need our eyes opened wide. I hope that the people who so bravely opened up to the cameras about their addiction achieve the peace they seek. The words of one past Rutland resident resonate: "If I go back, I die – and that's enough to keep me alive."

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Summer sensation A magnificent meander around the Irish and UK coastlines

From golfing on the Old Head of Kinsale to naval manoeuvres off Haulbowline, from deciphering Ogham (the ancient linear script etched on great hulking stones) to hunkering down and firling up sand to make glass on a crisp Co Waterford beach, and to watching the inky, pre-dawn sky lighten behind the silhouetted squadrons of white-fronted geese dropping like rain on to the Wexford Slobs at the end of their epic journey from Greenland, the team of **Coast** truly have the best gig on television.

Coast, which this week travelled from Kinsale to Dublin Bay, is a fantastic and fascinating programme whose remit is to meander along sections of the shoreline of Britain and Ireland excavating the history and culture of the coastline. As our damp summer evaporates, this beautifully shot, serene and enlightening programme should blow crisp air into overwintering brains.