

Film Ireland Magazine

A Song for Dad

Niall McKay

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Niall and Jimmy McKay in *A Song for Dad*

DIR/WRI Niall McKay **PRO** Seamus Duggan, Niall McKay, Marissa Aroy McKay **DOP** Niall McKay, Marissa Aroy McKay **ED** Tony Cranstoun, Carlo Tatu Kamin **CAST** Jim McKay, Niall McKay, Jimmy McKay, Marissa Aroy McKay

Recently screened on RTÉ, *A Song for Dad* is a well-crafted and loving portrait of a son's tender affection for his father and the life that he has lived. Writer and director Niall McKay is the son of Jim McKay, who is moving back to Ireland after having lived in Switzerland. The film charts Jim's problematic relationship with Niall's mother (Pauline) in Greystones in the 1970s and their subsequent split, followed by Jim's relationship with Anna, with whom he lived in Zurich until her death from cancer in 2004.

The documentary begins with Niall, who is living in San Francisco, preparing to help his father relocate back home in Ireland. The move brings with it the eruptions of memories that allow the narrative to take its direction.

Jim plays the double bass (his playing providing an apt soundtrack to the film) and his love of jazz reflects his fundamental philosophy of life: he believes that life is structured somewhat like jazz – a free-form journey driven by a spontaneity that should not be controlled. For Jim, life is something that happens to you. Rather than it being something you shape, it shapes you.

The film proves itself to be more than a document of fact and the storytelling never fails to create a desire to know the information being given. The film engages the audience with the immediate story of the father, while at the same time engaging with themes that resonate beyond the particularities of the story being told – dealing as they do with the

universal themes of identity, belonging, family and mortality.

McKay's genuine, amiable nature and love for his father, coupled with an inquisitive admiration allows for a calmly gripping film, whose story is built on a sound structural foundation with a firm narrative spine. It's obvious that McKay has absorbed the structure and grammar of fiction and has brought it to bear upon fact. He builds the documentary skillfully to take on the structure of classic dramatic storytelling.

The film, which is meticulously edited, contains a number of powerful scenes – distilling reality into a meaningful subset of itself, and includes many telling moments and telling gestures that stand out as microcosms of a father and son's relationship; not least such scenes as on the boat back to Ireland, when Niall speaks to Jim about his mother; and at Niall's wedding, when he addresses his father.

It is fitting that, at the end of the film, Niall finishes reciting the W.B. Yeats' poem, 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', which his father had begun to recite throughout the film, but could never remember the end. Niall's personal catharsis and subsequent marriage and tips he gets from Jim about fatherhood are stages of his own life's journey. In this way, the film reveals as much about Niall as it does about his father. An affectionate, poignant and heartfelt piece of work, *A Song for Dad*, to use the last line of that Yeats' poem, echoes 'in the deep heart's core'.

Steven Galvin