

# Dream days

Andrew Thompson talks to Michael Doorley about how his book recalling a cinema in his home town of Borrisokane inspired a movie

THE LIGHTS GO DOWN and the main feature begins. The tale that unfolds is a gentle one – of how a priest brought the glamour of Hollywood to a small Tipperary town in the drab 1950s, simply by opening a cinema.

For one man in the audience, the film *Stella Days* is very special indeed, personal even. That's because AIB manager Michael Doorley wrote the book on which the film is based.

Now when he watches actors Martin Sheen, Stephen Rea and Amy Huberman on the big screen he's experiencing something he never dreamed would happen.

The story starts back in the late 1990s when movie fan Michael, who has worked in Lower Baggot Street

branch in Dublin for more than 12 years, decided to write a book about the Stella Cinema in his home town of Borrisokane, Co Tipperary.

"I'd written the book in 1998 and managed to publish it myself in 2001 and get it into local bookshops and Easons. It was just a small run but it was well received. I got letters from all over the world from people who liked it," says Michael.

A year later on a wet autumn afternoon in Dublin, film producer Maggie Pope found the book in Greene's bookshop. She was fascinated by the curious story of a priest who fought to establish a cinema in a town at a time when the Catholic Church was critical, even censorious, of the medium.



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"Maggie bought the film rights under an option agreement and introduced co-producer Jackie Larkin," says Michael. "It was the beginning of a very slow process. Most books take as long as eight and nine years to make it to screen if it ever happens at all."

The Irish Film Board expressed an interest in funding the feature and a screenwriter came on board to create a story based on Michael's memoirs.

"Getting Martin Sheen attached to the project to play the lead character, Father Daniel Barry, was a milestone," says Michael. "But that in itself didn't mean the film would get made."

In fact, on the set Michael joked with the Hollywood star about the number of times the film was just about to be made – and then wasn't.

"There was German money as part of co-funding at one point but then they opted out. In the end, the film was funded by a Norwegian company along with the IFB and RTE. It also benefited from the sponsorship of the ESB, as the film and the book touched on the impact of electrification on rural Ireland."

It was a special project for the revered Hollywood actor Sheen.

"He's 72 now and makes about two films a year," explains Michael. "2010 was quite a year for him. He made *The Way in Spain* and France with his son Emilio Estevez in honour of his father who is from the Galicia region. And then he came to Ireland to make *Stella Days* which was a tribute to his mother who came from Borrisokane."

Even when the money was in place and shooting began, the project remained touch and go. There was sunshine for the filming in Tipperary but when the shoot moved to Wicklow a few weeks later, disaster struck.

"The shooting days were scheduled right in the middle of the really bad winter weather at the end of 2010," says Michael. "The snow meant they lost three days filming – if they'd lost six the whole project could have gone, the budget was that tight. In the end, with a lot of hard work and rewriting, they got it done. The unscripted snow scenes in the film are quite magical."

After premieres in Galway and Dublin, *Stella Days* went on general release in Ireland in March. The film will be also released on DVD in the summer while the television rights belong to RTE.

*Stella Days* is now set to go international. A distribution deal has been agreed with Robert De Niro's Tribeca Film Company which will see the movie go on general



Michael Doorley at the special screening of *Stella Days* in Bankcentre.

release in the US in June. The film has already been screened in New York and Boston.

One special and unusual screening took place in Bankcentre, Dublin in March.

"I thought it might make the basis of a good customer evening to show the film to my customers after I had talked about it so many times over the years," says Michael.

"After advice from John Kelly, Branch Manager, Lower Baggot Street, I contacted Fiona Mahon on PBB's Marketing & Communications team. She suggested we use the Forum in Bankcentre for a special screening and thanks to her we had a very enjoyable and successful night."

But what does Michael think of the film? "When I saw it the first time, it was hard to be objective as I was too close to it. But now that I've seen it four times, I love it. The music, especially, is gorgeous."

Michael is confident the film will be translated and subtitled or dubbed into other languages. "France is one market and nowadays there is also China to think about. You just don't know where it might win an audience. Norman Wisdom was huge in Albania," he laughs, adding that he has no plans for more books.

"I did it once and got it out of my system. I never expected a film to be made of my book. It really has been the dream I never had."

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The book, *Stella Days: The Life and Times of a Rural Irish Cinema*, is currently being reprinted and will be available at Easons, Book Republic and on Amazon. *Stella Days* (USA) the film will be shown at 8pm on Saturday 2 June at the Mermaid Arts Centre in Bray and afterwards Michael Doorley will host a question and answer session.