

(c) Tony Tracy

from Flynn & Tracy, *Historical Dictionary of Irish Cinema*, 2nd Ed. (Rowan and Littlefield, 2019)

STAPLETON, FRANK (1962–). It is easy to forget just how difficult it was for the first wave of Irish directors who attempted to launch a career in the 1980s. Frank Stapleton was part of that vanguard. Like others from the period, his work is defined by daring and determination: balanced between an ambition to create a personal cinema and the need to make a living. At first glance, his oeuvre seems characterized by an eclecticism of topics and formats, but on closer consideration, continuities can be traced through a portfolio of creative documentaries, TV drama, short-film and feature film output, and a TV documentary series. Across these works, we encounter an intellect that is both limpid and ludic, a visual sense that is ambitious and original, and a commitment to exploring the condition of Irishness that is imaginative, engaged, and wide ranging.

A native of Churchtown in Dublin's southern suburbs, he attended the distinguished Belvedere College, where, like the impressionable James Joyce before him, he came under the spell of the Jesuitical mind-set. However, unlike Stephen Daedalus, he did not initially choose an artistic vocation over a priestly calling and spent several years studying within the Society of Jesus. While still appending an "SJ" to his director credit, Frank commenced a career in film, directing the subversive and inventive *A Second of June* (1984), a contemporary drama-documentary inspired by Ulysses focusing on a day in the life of two ordinary Dubliners against the backdrop of Ronald Reagan's 1984 visit to Ireland. Two years later, Frank finally uttered "non servium" and left the Jesuits. After a few years in London (where he developed an interest in R. D. Laing's psychoanalytical techniques), he returned to Dublin and formed Ocean Films with producer Catherine Tiernan in 1989.

The absence at that point of either a film board or state funding structures for independently produced television saw Ocean Films apply for funding wherever it could. Its first success was a prestigious but controversial commission—*The Whole World in His Hands*—a documentary about what Ireland had become in the 10 years since the visit of Pope John Paul II made for U.K. broadcaster Channel 4. Several similarly polemic documentaries followed, including two with Noel Browne (*Requiem for a Civilisation* [1991] and *Dr. Browne Also Spoke* [1992]) and two in collaboration with Michael D. Higgins just before he became Ireland's first minister for arts, culture, and the Gaeltacht.

Moving away from documentary and able to secure funding from Radio Telefís Éireann, Frank directed the short film *Poorhouse* (1996), an evocative adaptation of a Michael Harding story set during the Famine that featured strong central performances and memorable visuals. Its success paved the way for what proved to be the creative high point of Frank's career as a filmmaker, *The Fifth Province* (1997), an artfully realized, unclassifiable feature from a script that Frank cowrote with the late Pat Sheeran and Nina Witoszek (aka Nina FitzPatrick). Attracted by its startling originality, it was British Screen (Simon Perry) that first offered funding to the project, with the Irish Film Board subsequently contributing to its production. Evocatively shot by celebrated French cinematographer Bruno de Keyzer (who contributed a European sensibility to the film's quirky

tone), the film is set in the Irish Midlands and is a worthy cinematic successor to the surrealistic perspective of that liminal zone inaugurated by Flann O'Brien. Once again, it offered an alternative view of Ireland and its culture, challenging official or sanctioned narratives (notably in an amusing but pointed scene about what makes a successful Irish screenplay), and centers on a maverick and dreamer in the figure of Timmy Sugrue (Brian F. O'Byrne).

The Fifth Province was well received at film festivals (winning Best First Feature at the Galway Film Fleadh [Festival] and the Audience Prize at the Fantasporto Festival) but didn't manage to find a distributor outside of the United Kingdom and Ireland, perhaps because it was not perceived as "Irish" enough. In its aftermath, Frank worked on a range of documentary series before the onset of multiple sclerosis prematurely ended his career. These included Irish Dreamtime (2000), an ambitious six-part series exploring concepts of Irish heritage at the turn of the millennium. Each, in different ways, continued the work of his fiction and nonfiction films in seeking to interrogate and articulate the distinctive qualities of the Irish condition at a specific moment in time with a bias toward the marginal, the excluded, and the unorthodox.