

DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2024/25 SEASON



KNEECAP

(Language: English, Irish Gaelic)

Director: Rich Peppiatt

UK Release: 2024

Running time: 105 minutes

Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 12 March 2025

“Look, either you think it’s hilarious that a man shouts a well-known terrorist slogan at the point of orgasm, or you’re not going to enjoy *Kneecap*. But not enjoying this movie would be a big mistake. It is simply the best movie ever made about being young in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and a strong new addition to the canon of movies about disaffected youths finding their voices through rapping about sex and drugs. The fact their language is Irish means the movie, and the real-life band of the same name this is about, is a fresh new take on language preservation and so-called minority culture rights. It is the first ever Irish-language movie shown at the Sundance Film Festival, and made with a screaming sense of humor that is, from start to finish, a joy.

Liam Óg Ó hAinmáidh and Naoise Ó Cairealláin (Naoise is pronounced Nisha, by the way) play versions of themselves, like Eminem did in *8 Mile*. They’re childhood best friends raised up rough in West Belfast, where Naoise’s dad, Arlo (Michael Fassbender, in his first Irish movie in a decade, and looking happier here than he has onscreen in a while), believes that every word of Irish spoken is a bullet fired for Irish freedom. Arlo learned his Irish in prison*; and his political activism causes so much drama it’s eventually easier for him to fake his own death. Liam Óg and Naoise grow up to pass the time scrounging for drugs and partying, where at a rave in the woods Liam Óg is arrested. He exercises his hard-won right to refuse to speak to the cops in any language but Irish, so Detective Ellis (Josie Walker) grits her teeth and calls Caitlin (Fionnuala Flaherty) to translate. Only Caitlin, who’s a high-profile Irish-language activist working to ensure some new language rights laws are passed, has had a drink and can’t drive to the station. Her equally fluent husband J.J. (J.J. Ó Dochartaigh, also playing a version of himself) agrees to go instead.

J.J. is a music teacher at an Irish-language school, depressed at how unrelatable and boring the texts the kids have to learn from are. (As someone who moved to Belfast to study the Irish language during university, I am probably one of the only film critics in the world who can testify from personal experience that this is the case. Reciting lists of outdated vocabulary is no way to make learning a new language fun.) But in the interrogation room J.J. sees a book of rhymes

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Liam Óg's been working on. He pockets the book – and the tabs Liam Óg was holding – but returns it later to the lads with an idea. If they record some of these raps in his little personal studio they might be able to make the Irish language appealing to his students. And considering how little Naoise and Liam Óg have going on and how large Arlo's influence was over both of them, of course they leap at the offer.

Writer-director Rich Peppiatt (who grew up in Britain but married someone from Northern Ireland) here has managed to entirely capture four important things about Northern Irish culture (the part of the culture that's cool, that is).

Its absolute contempt for authority. The movie's main opening shot is of Arlo, holding Naoise at his christening, raising a middle finger to a police helicopter overhead. This is one of approximately a million examples.

Its unbelievable talent for living in the moment. The frankly gargantuan amount of drugs everyone takes is a understandable when you consider how few opportunities for decent work there are, how much PTSD is still ongoing and how this gleeful hedonism is encouraged by a culture which still profoundly remembers how badly the Troubles tore the city apart.

Its sense of humor. There is absolutely nothing that people in Belfast can't laugh about and very little that's seen as off-limits or in bad taste, mainly because the humor is not usually mean-spirited. Jokes are to include people; and when someone is ridiculed – like a humorless police officer, perhaps – they're either being encouraged to drop their pretenses and join in the fun, or being mocked for their refusal to do so. (This is not always appreciated, of course.)

Its total respect for hard work. When a pub gig gets rowdily out of hand, Naoise and Liam Óg show up the next morning to clean up the mess without being asked. When J.J. refuses to show his face on stage because he can't risk his teaching job, Liam Óg rolls his eyes but immediately throws over an Irish-flag balaclava for him to wear instead. J.J. tries it on, they all laugh and call him D.J. Próvai (a terrorist joke), and go onstage to blow the roof off. In a manner of speaking.

Gentle readers might wonder why Liam Óg (which means Little Liam) has a balaclava with a fiddle-dee-dee tourist theme. Why, he wears it during sex with his Protestant lady friend Georgia (a wonderful Jessica Reynolds) of course. They get off by screaming sectarian insults at each other, before discovering, somewhat to their surprise, what they have might be the real thing. It's in their scenes together that cinematographer Ryan Kernaghan makes best use of his

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taste for unusual camera angles, allowing the humor of their relationship to be emphasized over the hotness. So-called mixed marriages are still somewhat unusual in Northern Ireland, where the schools are still almost wholly segregated by religion, meaning that the frisson both Georgia and Liam Óg are getting from each other does require more personal bravery than you'd think.

But a lot of normal things require personal bravery in Northern Ireland, such as getting up onstage and talking about your dumb day in your own language. When they rap the lyrics are scrawled onscreen in the style of liner notes, allowing those of us who aren't fluent speakers to keep up. Kneecap's music has a propulsive energy to it, the lads are good rappers; and the band is clearly having such a great time onstage that the vibe is one of surprise and delight from the go. But being such an immediate big hit brings some very real danger, and not always from the places where people from gentler towns might expect. Naoise in particular has to juggle risky occasional contact with Arlo and keeping that knowledge from his mother, Arlo's widow, Dolores (an excellent Simone Kirby, who also stars in Kneecap's newest music video). She's been too depressed to leave the house for years, but while Naoise complains about the responsibilities that fall to him as a result, he also fulfills them, and worries about her. And while J.J.'s balaclava might keep his face covered; enough substances are consumed that he sometimes uncovers other parts of him.

It all builds to a completely satisfying climax, which is followed by footage of real and raucous "Kneecap" gigs from the past few years. This movie is so much fun, it's going to propel both itself and the band into the stratosphere – although perhaps not in England, where the right-wing press is having a stereotypically marvelous time denouncing the fact the movie was partially funded with British money. But it's also a fact that Kneecap the band has kickstarted a sea change in the Irish language across the island of Ireland, making it more fun for the kids and forcing the pursed-lip old guard to reconsider what it takes to keep a language alive. "Kneecap" is going to take the world by storm, and it's good enough the world is going to enjoy it.

And I'm embarrassed I had to get Google Translate's help to repeat that last sentence: "Ta Kneecap chun an domhan a thógáil le stoirm, agus tá sé maith go leor go mbainfidh an domhan taitneamh as."

* The most memorable Irish lesson I ever had was a day course deep in west Belfast, where the teacher had had a lengthy enough prison stay he'd earned a Ph.D. I was the youngest student and the only American, and the other attendees

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were primarily teetotalers and housewives, none of whom were welcoming. In an attempt to liven things up, the teacher acted out for us, in Irish and English both, the seven different stages of drunkenness. I regret to say that not only did the mood get even more judgmental after that, but also that my notes from that day are long lost.”

Sarah Manvel, *Critic's Notebook*, February, 2. 2024.

“The first Irish-language film to premiere at Sundance Film Festival unveiled to raucous reception, taking home an Audience Award in its category—and it’s easy to see why. *Kneecap*, like the band it’s named after, fizzles with infectious energy, thanks to snappy editing, playful camera work, and entertaining performances. This semi-biographical story explores how the hip-hop trio from West Belfast, who began rapping in their native tongue in 2017, rose in popularity and became a symbol of rebellion and community.

Although main characters use fictionalized names, each member of “Kneecap” essentially plays themselves, adding an authenticity to the story and making us fall in love with their cheeky but endearing natures as they aspire to preserve the Irish language through politically charged rap songs. You’ll root for these working-class lads as they face opposition from different social groups and the government, all in the name of cultural freedom.

Every frame bursts with life, with abstract camera angles and hand-drawn graphics accentuating lyrics and dialogue. The editing hurtles from one high-octane scene to the next, but writer-director Rich Peppiatt makes sure we understand Belfast and its citizens amongst all the chaos, albeit through dark and absurdist humor. *Kneecap* members record songs and bond together in a makeshift music studio on wild acid trips, and passionate sex between a Protestant and a Catholic is fuelled by talk of revolution. Straight-faced scenes bring to light more serious real-world issues, particularly around tensions between Republicans and Unionists, and show the tough lives led by working-class youth. While this is great to see, there are a multitude of subplots that slow down *Kneecap*’s otherwise terrific pacing, seemingly an attempt to inject more drama by raising the stakes for the band members and their loved ones. But ultimately, editing and narrative issues aren’t enough to derail this entertaining ride. After the credits roll, you’ll want to take up Irish lessons yourself.

The film offers supporting roles for women who orbit “Kneecap”’s band members: Naoise’s (Móglai Bap) mother Dolores (Simone Kirby), Liam’s (Mo

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Chara) lover Georgia (Jessica Reynolds), and J.J.'s (DJ Próvai) wife Caitlin (Fionnuala Flaherty). But they're all here to serve a man's story. Whenever two women have a conversation, it's only ever in relation to "Kneecap" or one of their members. The actors deliver great performances, such as Kirby's compelling take on a mother processing grief, and Reynolds' spirited scenes elicit some big laughs. But in the end, *Kneecap* is very much about the members of an all-male hip-hop trio.

This film centers around a white perspective, but we rarely see an authentic Irish story focused on its people. We follow Kneecap's real-life objective of getting Northern Ireland's youth to learn their native language and not let it die out. The film blends Irish with English throughout the runtime and makes a solid argument for the importance of language to a country's culture and society. Naoise's dad, Irish Republican Army member Arlo (Michael Fassbender), remarks how "every word of Irish spoken is a bullet fired for Irish freedom." *Kneecap* lyrics on the surface talk about sex, drugs, and rebelling against the authorities, but they're actually exploring life as a young person growing up in Belfast after The Troubles, and of political activism against British rule. These lyrics inform the major themes running through the movie and we also see on a personal level the power of language: how it's used as a tool for rebelling and bringing people together.

While it's wonderful to see genuine Irish representation, the fact remains that there is only a single person of color (Matthew Sharpe, who's multiracial) in a very minor speaking role. True, Belfast has a large white population, making up over 90% of the population in 2021. But for a film that hammers home the importance of culture and community, it's a shame that the sole non-white character is nothing more than a goofy henchman.

Kneecap makes for a joyous time thanks to a charming cast and heartfelt story. Furthermore, the film explores a language and group of people—working-class Irish from Belfast in their 20s and 30s—that we don't see much of in media. But in the end, it's still told through a typical straight, white, and male perspective."

Gavin Spoons, *Mediaversity Reviews*, February 20, 2024

"Every word of Irish spoken is a bullet fired for Irish freedom," says Arlo (Michael Fassbender), a member of the Irish Republican Army who learned Irish Gaelic during a stint in prison, to his son Naoise and the youngster's best friend, Liam. It's a phrase that would stick with the pair—who'd go on to become two-thirds of the rap group Kneecap—far more than any of the warnings they'd get from the police, or "peelers" as they unaffectionately call

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them, as well as members of the paramilitary group Radical Republicans Against Drugs.

Rich Peppiatt's *Kneecap* follows cheeky youths from North Ireland whose passion for rapping nearly matches their unabashed hatred of the Brits and their powerful lackeys for oppressing the Irish people and suppressing the use of Irish Gaelic. Despite the verisimilitude the film garners from its risky and ultimately brilliant decision to have Naoise, Liam, and their initially square beatmaster, DJ Provaí, play themselves, Peppiatt's highly fictionalized origin story of the raucous, transgressive trio thumbs its nose at the conventions of the music biopic. And through its highly kinetic style and relentlessly brash sense of humor, *Kneecap* brims with a vitality and cheekiness that's very much in lockstep with the bellicose group's work and ethos.

Central to "*Kneecap*"'s output is their near-exclusive use of Irish Gaelic in their lyrics, which had the unintended side effect of getting them caught up in the growing movement to preserve the language that was banned by the British for years and was only recognized as a language in the U.K. in 2022. An ordinary biopic might use this as an opportunity for its characters to get on their soapboxes and preach about the issue, but Peppiatt isn't nearly as interested in the moral righteousness of the cause as he is in the unrepentant rage it induced in *Kneecap*.

Indeed, most of Peppiatt's film isn't about respectability, but rather debasement, and sugar-coating *Kneecap*'s widespread antics isn't on the menu. From their extensive drug use and run-ins with the peelers to their wild stage antics and various sexual escapades, *Kneecap* embodies the abrasive resilience commonly associated with Irish and Scottish people.

In one scene, DJ Provaí bends over, exposing an anti-British slogan—"Brits Out"—on his buttocks, while in another scene Naoise draws a connection between the oppression of Blacks in America and the birth of hip-hop and how that drew *Kneecap* to rap. There's also an amusingly kinky relationship between Liam and a young, upper-class Protestant girl, Georgia (Jessica Reynolds), in which she peppers him with cultural epithets to make the sex more exciting.

These and other scenes all speak to the clever manner in which Peppiatt infuses his film with a rebellious spirit of cultural pride and class awareness without ever allowing it to become a dominant or suffocating presence. One can even glimpse a Palestinian flag hanging outside one apartment in *Kneecap*, but all these indications of revolutionary spirit never interfere with the propulsive energy and dynamic sense of fun it seeks to provoke, through both the central performances and a visual style that's restless and, at times, quite inventive.

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In the end, *Kneecap* stays true to the m.o. of the titular trio, foregrounding their debauchery and cultural resentment, and doing so without preachiness or devolving self-importance. *Kneecap* isn't looking to become international arbiters for Irish pride, but they're a persistent thorn in the side of the British imperialist apparatus and the trio's tendency to push the boundaries of good taste—and indulge their hedonistic impulses—are part and parcel of their confrontational attitudes toward oppression in whatever form it may manifest itself.

Kneecap bracingly captures the revolutionary spirit of Belfast and a public whose protests aren't relegated to marches and meetings, but are embodied in the combative, defiant manner in which people conduct themselves in all facets of life. As such, *Kneecap* is a film that gleefully has its coke and snorts it too, reveling in the ribald exploits of its central trio while slyly presenting that ribaldry as a distinctive form of resistance and rebellion.

Derek Smith, *Slant Magazine*, January 28, 2024