

FINDING EIRE TIME FOR DOCS

STEVE CLARKE peers through the Gallowglass to discover what it's like to be an Irish indie

"The trouble with being a documentary maker in Ireland," says Eamon McElwee, managing director of Dublin-based Gallowglass Pictures, "is that there's an awful lot of competition, because every single Irish person believes they've got a novel in them."

McElwee may well be right. Ireland's population is well under five million, yet the country is home to around 80 independents specializing in factual films. These outfits range from one-man-and-a-dog combos operating from

commercialism and competition. It involves a lot of hard work. I've had two days off in the last six weeks."

Of the three main Irish television broadcasters, Irish language service TV4 offers the most opportunities for local doc-makers keen to make films with a cultural slant. But budgets are tight (around US\$50,000 an hour), and the subject matter – a recent film portrays the emigration of Irish builders to England in the '50s – is unlikely to set pulses throbbing much beyond the Emerald Isle.



From left: *Paddy Moriyasu* (Gallowglass Pictures) profiles the Japanese musician and his students who have learned to play Irish folk music; Musician Paddy Keenan takes a break from filming *Travelers - The True Bards of Ireland* (Gallowglass Pictures) *Paddy Moriyasu* in the classroom; *Travelers* goes on the road in the U.S.

From left: *Access-All-Areas* @ the *Ennis Trad Festival* profiles the music fest (Gallowglass Pictures); the bar scene in *Paddy Moriyasu*; *Travelers* pays tribute to the Gypsies of Irish music heritage; a scene from *Paddy*

their bedrooms, to large players like Tyrone Productions (of *Riverdance* fame) and Little Bird.

Gallowglass, formed in February 1998 by McElwee and producer Tom Clinch, lies somewhere between the mid-sized companies and the one-person operations. Three people are employed full time, with freelancers taken on as the workload dictates. "The important thing is that we've survived as a company beyond that crucial three-year hurdle," McElwee reckons. "We're making the kind of cultural documentaries that we believe in and are busier than we were a year ago." It also helps that sister company, Fine Line Pictures, is a facilities company providing non-linear editing to third parties and, crucially, vital cash flow as production and rights deals are hammered out.

Gallowglass's objective is simple – to produce quality material for domestic and international audiences. Despite the availability of financial backing from Brussels and the Irish Film Board, establishing the indie has not been easy. McElwee explains: "Making serious documentaries for a living in Ireland is possible, but it's becoming more difficult because of growing

One of Gallowglass's films, *Travelers – the True Bards of Ireland* (an 85-minute documentary focusing on the contribution of Irish travelers to Ireland's musical heritage), was pre-bought by TV4, with top-up funding from the Irish Film Board and Brittany's TV Breizh, due to the Celtic connection. The board, which last year helped fund half a dozen documentaries covering such topics as the 19th century Irish painter Estella Solomons and contemporary Irish eccentric Aidan Walsh, provides loans for development as well as production.

These must be repaid in full; however, in the case of a development grant for a film that fails to be green lit, the money is written off. "We are not here to make money from films," says a spokeswoman for the board. "Our role is to support and encourage Irish filmmaking. Usually, we're the last to receive money when funds are recouped. If a film goes bust, we don't expect to get anything."

Ireland's state broadcaster, RTE, is another important source of work for indies like Gallowglass, especially since it is forced to commission from outside following regulatory changes. But falling advertising revenue, a disappointing recent license fee increase and the strength



Top: Paddy in Tokyo
Below (from left): Paddy at a pub; a Paddy recital; a scene from *Access-All-Areas*

of the U.S. dollar (putting a strain on acquisitions' budgets) are all tightening purse strings.

In common with other broadcasters around the world, a more competitive marketplace has led RTE to put

greater effort into the lighter side of factual. Says McElwee: "RTE does a lot of very good documentary but they are moving towards factual entertainment with more docusoaps and leisure shows."

RTE's two main factual strands, 'True Lives,' a series of one-hour films exploring an individual's experience, and the newer 'Town Lands,' launched one year ago, are open to indies. But with so many filmmakers competing for the same slots, the opportunities are not vast.

Says McElwee, "RTE and TV4's funds are limited, so you've got to think laterally about funding. Ireland's other main terrestrial station, TV3, is not interested in documentary. It took us about two years to get the money together for *Travelers*. The Irish Film Board is very helpful but they'll only commit once the initial money is there."

In the spring, Gallowglass took one of its latest projects, *Paddy Moriyasu*, the story of a Japanese musician and his Japanese students who learned to play Irish folk music, to Hot Docs in Toronto to find backers. RTE had pre-bought the film but fellow investor NVC Arts was forced to do a U-turn following its takeover by AOL.



“There was strong interest after I pitched it at Hot Docs, but nothing has been firmed up yet,” says McElwee. He is nevertheless optimistic that U.K. indie Chrysalis might invest in the program. “You can’t give up. You’ve got to keep chipping away. We’re in production on *Paddy Moriyasu* because we believe the idea is a good one.”

Swingers, developed with Irish Film Board backing, examines how more and more Irish couples are prepared to add some brio to their sex lives by changing partners for a one-off liaison. “I’d say it was a lifestyle film, rather than a sex documentary,” McElwee claims. “Ireland is an increasingly secular and rapidly changing society. Fifteen

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One of Gallowglass’s most successful films to date is *From Clare To Here*, a story of Irish music at home and abroad featuring traditional Irish fiddle player Martin Hayes. Screened two years ago by RTE on St Patrick’s Day as part of the ‘True Lives’ strand, the program captured 30% of the audience. Financed by NVC Arts, MEDIA II (the Brussels-based finance scheme) and RTE, the film has aired in the U.S., the U.K., and China.

While Gallowglass has built its reputation making documentaries on Irish music, there are signs that the company is now broadening out into fresh subject matter.

years ago, a program like *Swingers* would have been impossible to get off the ground, let alone be broadcast, but we’ve already had some interest from RTE.”

The same is true of another Gallowglass project, *Attraction*, which explores the West’s obsession with the female form from an erotic perspective. But it would be wrong, says McElwee, to conclude that the company is selling out by moving down market. “Serious cultural documentaries are getting produced, the outlets for them are there,” he insists, “but the amount of available resources are limited.” ■