

Holy Cross

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Holy Cross looks behind the headlines of one of Belfast's most shocking disputes



Holy Cross is a fictional drama set within real events. It tells the story of two fictional families caught up in the headline events of 2001 on the Ardoyne Road in Belfast. It was there that a dispute arose concerning the rights of schoolgirls from the Catholic Ardoyne area of north Belfast to walk a few hundred yards through the predominantly Protestant area of Glenbryn to the Holy Cross primary school.

BBC Northern Ireland Head of Drama, Robert Cooper says: "This was an important story that attracted world attention. Many of the problems and issues facing these communities reflect issues facing the wider community in Northern Ireland. This story is about fear, identity, community, territory, trust and enmity in a polarised society where politics and community relations have failed. *Holy Cross* sees the dispute through the eyes of two

fictional families and provides an insight into the actions and emotions of those involved on both sides – an insight which goes beyond the blunt images of hatred and anger shown in the news reports of the time."

Some of Northern Ireland's strongest acting talent – Zara Turner, Bronagh Gallagher, Patrick O'Kane and Colum Convey – star in an emotionally gripping film which explores the dispute from both sides. The drama follows the build-up over the summer as tensions rose between the two communities, before exploding into the ugly confrontation that shocked the world.

Controller of Drama Commissioning Jane Tranter says: "*Holy Cross* is part of a growing slate of original, ambitious dramas for BBC One that works alongside our new and established popular dramas.



Introduction

Holy Cross attempts to go behind the anger and the headlines to discover why the people involved in this particular dispute felt they had to see it through, no matter what the consequences. With dramas such as *The Lost Prince*, *Out Of Control* and the forthcoming *In Denial Of Murder*, we aim to offer audiences an opportunity to see new perspectives on historic, social and personal situations that are relevant to the way we live now.”

Holy Cross is produced by Jonathan Curling (*Grafters*, *Amongst Women*) and Robert Cooper, directed by Mark Brozel (*Rap At The Door*, *Mange Tout*) and written by the Northern Irish newcomer Terry Cafolla. The executive producers are Robert Cooper for BBC Northern Ireland and Mary Callery for RTE. It is a BBC Northern Ireland production in association with RTE.

Production notes

Shocking images of distraught and terrified children, surrounded by police with riot shields, with angry crowds hurling abuse at them as they tried to walk up the road to Holy Cross Primary School in Belfast, dominated the news in September 2001. As the story rapidly snowballed, more and more reporters swelled the numbers on the streets and pictures of the appalling scenes were flashed around the world until the events of September 11 knocked them abruptly from the news agenda.

Holy Cross attempts to look behind those headlines and news images to give an insight into the emotions, motivations and actions of those involved.

Executive producer Robert Cooper explains: “Obviously, it’s a very sensitive subject and we were clear from the outset that what we didn’t want to do was make a drama which simply re-enacted the horrors. We felt very strongly that it wasn’t worth doing unless we could provide some insight into why people acted in the way they did and what it was like to be in that situation, faced with those incredibly difficult and extraordinary decisions. We wanted to ask the questions: ‘Why would you go and stand on a line and scream abuse at children?’; and ‘Why would you, as a parent, choose to take your children through that abuse?’”

Reports at the time repeatedly used the phrase “the naked face of sectarian hatred” to describe what was happening. But director Mark Brozel believes that this enabled those outside the conflict to distance themselves from it, because it ignored the fact that many people caught up in the dispute were not sectarian. “News tends to tell stories in a very black and white way. On one level, it’s great because it tells us what is happening but, day-in, day-out, it also desensitises us to the pain and experiences of the individuals involved. What a drama like *Holy Cross* can do is give people a really strong emotional connection with what people actually go through.

“We weren’t in any way trying to justify the abuse that was heaped on those young school-girls,” continues Brozel. “But we wanted to show the

pressures and tensions that spilled out onto the street and get closer to recognising that the people involved are just that – people – and not monsters or demons.

“One of the reasons that people can be frightened of a film like this is because they are worried that the road to understanding leads to condoning what they regard as appalling behaviour but it’s only through understanding that we can make sense of the world we live in. Once you demonise or dehumanise people then it becomes all right to push them aside. And that’s the kind of sentiment that takes you onto a line to scream at five-year-old girls. What this film shows is the cost of demonisation. It’s relevant to any situation in the world where there is acute conflict.”

Holy Cross paints a picture of two ordinary families who live back-to-back but whose lives are led on opposite sides of an insurmountable divide. The story is told through the eyes of two young girls who, in any other town, could be good friends. But because of the situation in Ardoyne and Glenbryn they don’t even know each other’s names.

On one side of the interface lives Siobhan (Emma Whyte), a pupil at Holy Cross, with her younger sister Aoife (Lauren McDonald), mother Ann (Zara Turner), father Gerry (Colum Convey) and older brother Tony (Henry Deazley). On the other side is Karen (Louise Doran) who attends the Protestant Wheatfield Primary School, opposite Holy Cross. She lives with her mother, Sarah (Bronagh Gallagher), and uncle Peter (Patrick O’Kane).

Holy Cross takes as its starting point an incident over a flagpole outside the Holy Cross school in June 2001 which is acknowledged by both sides as the spark for the dispute. The drama includes actual news footage from the time and shows the effects of the ensuing violence on both families as tension builds over the summer and a crisis is reached when the children go back to school. Siobhan and Aoife face the terror of walking through the lines of angry Glenbryn residents, and see their father’s life threatened. At home, they witness the collapse



of their parents' marriage, and of the relationship between their father and older brother. Karen, for her part, watches in horror and shame as first her uncle then her mother are drawn into the protest.

The script was based on exhaustive research. Writer Terry Cafolla suggests: "There are almost always two truths where this dispute is concerned, as people from either side of the community are so embedded in their beliefs that their version of events becomes the truth. Many incidents are claim and counterclaim with no other witnesses. The events happened because there are two communities with very different points of view and each side is unwilling to acknowledge the other's viewpoint. Feelings run so deeply on both sides, it was inevitable that, when the trigger point was reached, the results would be explosive, and that is what we have tried to show."

Many residents on both sides of the divide had been left with a lasting suspicion of the media and were initially reluctant to talk to the programme-makers. "The main difficulty was to try and convince the people involved that we were trying to be true to the stories and not coming to it with an agenda, and in Northern Ireland that's very hard," explains producer Jonathan Curling. "Many people are still bitter about how they were represented at the time and, in many ways, the media became part of the problem during the dispute." Notwithstanding, the team spoke to many individuals and groups on both sides of the divide

and all research was undertaken in the strictest of confidence.

Spending time with families from both sides of the interface, Brozel gained more understanding of how people can become locked into their own version of events. "I found my sympathies being turned on and off like a light – spending time with one family you see the world from their point of view and then when you go to the other side you feel it from their perspective. So, if I find it difficult to rationalise what's going on, how much more difficult must it be for people who are caught up in it?"

Cooper was profoundly affected by the level of fear in which people on both sides live their lives. He explains: "We wanted to put across to a wide audience what it is like to live your life in fear: fear that events outside could threaten you in your own home; that your windows could be broken; that your house could be targeted; that a riot outside could spill over into your sitting room. What does that do to your head if it happens, night after night? How does that make you feel about the people across the other side of the divide? Does it help us understand why people end up doing things that are beyond the comprehension of outsiders?"

Curling concludes: "*Holy Cross* takes the child's view of parents caught up in a terrible cycle of hatred and violence. It's about the tragedy of young kids born into sectarianism and what they suffer as a consequence. They are innocent enough still to see it for what it really is."

Holy Cross is the latest in a line of powerful dramas from BBC Northern Ireland's drama department which reflect life in Northern Ireland. From *Pulling Moves*, Pearse Elliott's 10-part series set in West Belfast which will be screened on BBC Three early next year and Gary Mitchell's recently screened *As The Beast Sleeps*, through popular series work by acclaimed Northern Irish and Irish writers such as Stewart Parker, William Trevor, Anne Devlin, Frank McGuinness, Ali White, Colin Bateman and Ronan Bennett, to the *Billy* plays by Graham Reid in the late Seventies. Other recent highlights from BBCNI include *Messiah*, *Sinners*, *Murphy's Law* (with Tiger Aspect) and the soon-to-be screened *Gunpowder, Treason And Plot* (with Box TV) by Jimmy McGovern.

Cast list

Ann McClure Zara Turner
Sarah Norton Bronagh Gallagher
Gerry McClure Colum Convey
Peter Norton Patrick O' Kane
Karen Norton Louise Doran
Siobhan McClure Emma Whyte
Aoife McClure Lauren McDonald
Tony McClure Henry Deazley
Roy Fergal McElherron

Production credits

Producer Robert Cooper and Jonathan Curling
Director Mark Brozel
Writer Terry Cafolla
Executive Producer Robert Cooper
Executive Producer for RTE Mary Callery
Director of Photography Kevin Rowley
Production Designer Jon Henson
Costume Designer Inez Nordell and Andrew Cox
Make-Up Designer Nadia El-Saffar
Editor Colin Goudie
Script Editor Amanda Verlaque
Composer Dominic Muldowny
Casting Director – Adults Gary Davy and Danielle Roffe
Casting Director – Children Dorothy MacGabhann
Production Executive Jennifer McAufield
Associate Producer Colin McKeown
Line Producer Susan Dunn
Researcher Una Murphy
Development Executive Stephen Wright

Zara Turner is Ann McClure



As a mother herself, Zara Turner found it easy to relate to her character, Ann McClure, and her struggle to do the right thing by her children in the nightmare scenario in which she finds herself. “I feel for her immensely,” she says. “The situation is so much bigger than anything she can control.”

In *Holy Cross*, Turner plays Ann, a Catholic mother who is struggling with the day-to-day life of living in the Ardoyne. She is desperate to protect her two young daughters from the horrors of the protest and, at the same time, to try and steer her teenage son away from trouble.

For the Belfast-born actress, *Holy Cross* was a subject that she felt needed to be talked about and there was no question about taking the part. “Things that strike you so deeply don’t come along very often, so it was great to do this,” she says. “I hope it will give people outside these communities more of an insight than they had before. I just felt it was a really important drama and important to do it as truthfully as possible.

“I missed my daughter very much during the days I was away filming but it was brilliant to have Emma

and Lauren playing my daughters, Siobhan and Aoife. Both of them were outstanding, and Henry, who plays my son, was great.”

Ann is married to Gerry, played by Colum Convey. When the dispute starts, Gerry is adamant that his children must not be forced to go to school via the back entrance. Ann, however, is faced with a dilemma as she has to choose between her principles and her instinct to protect her girls from the violence and trauma that walking down the Ardoyne Road will bring.

“Ann is just a mum who’s under the usual ‘mum stress’, with the added pressure of where they live,” says Turner. “They live right on the peace divide, but this situation brings a whole new level of fear and horror. It brings a terrible dilemma for her. She knows, morally, ethically and politically, what she would like to do: not to give in to people who are trying to bully her children. But that would mean making her children go through something that she worries is seriously damaging to them.

“She’s caught between a rock and a hard place and it obviously brings up conflict with her husband



Cast interviews

because he feels very strongly that they must walk up the Road. Ann's not a very political person. She's more concerned with bringing up her family and trying to steer them through very difficult times."

Turner acknowledges that the subject matter is still sensitive and events are fresh in people's minds. But she points out that it offers audiences an opportunity to consider a new perspective on the social and personal situations that people in Ardoyne and Glenbryn have had to deal with.

"I think it's a very delicate thing to deal with because you're talking about people who are still living in those situations," she says. "When it was actually happening, you saw two or three minutes of the horror on the news and this film tries to look at what was going on behind those pictures."

Bronagh Gallagher is Sarah Norton



Bronagh Gallagher is one of Ireland's most high-profile actresses, best known for her starring role as Bernie in Alan Parker's *The Commitments*. Gallagher has appeared in Hollywood hits such as *Pulp Fiction* and *Thunderpants* but she admits the projects she is really drawn to are the ones about issues closer to home. Last year, she starred in BBC Northern Ireland's production for BBC One, *Sinners*, which looked at the plight of young girls with illegitimate babies who were sent to the infamous laundries run by the Catholic Church. In *Holy Cross*, she plays Sarah, a Protestant mother living back-to-back with her Catholic neighbours, who joins the protestors on the Ardoyne Road.

Although Gallagher grew up a Catholic in what she describes as "a very aggressive, army-controlled environment," the Derry-born actress has no qualms about playing a Protestant mother in *Holy Cross*. "It's not an issue for me that I'm playing a Loyalist," she says, "it is as important to tell another story as my own."

Like most people, Gallagher was shocked by the images broadcast from Belfast at the time. "There was no lower to go," she says. "I think it's very hard to understand if you don't know the history of the

political situation. But sectarianism is about fear – fear of the unknown, fear of what is different – and that can very quickly turn to hatred.

"The sectarianism between these communities has existed for centuries with each religion fighting for their territory and right to the land. But, when it comes to the physical and mental abuse of children, that surely has to come to an end. People have to recognise that they need to move forward and let the healing begin. If there is to be peace in Northern Ireland, it has to be for everybody and every part of the community."

For Gallagher, *Holy Cross* is a reflection of the wider problems affecting Northern Ireland. "This film is about the fear of lack of identity. Because of the system and the political infrastructure of Northern Ireland, people's identity has been challenged – what we stand for, what we represent.

"In Northern Ireland, the Nationalist population has grown a lot in the last few years and the structure of Northern Ireland has changed. What was once a predominantly Protestant state has changed. Nationalists have power. In the past, the Protestant community was favoured as regards work, as



Cast interviews

regards votes, as regards housing – it’s not that way anymore and people are scared.”

Sarah is a single mother living with her daughter on the front line of the divide and, like many, she lives her life in fear. Although she wants to get a ‘peace wall’ she’s not a sectarian and has tried to bring up her daughter, Karen, to respect her Catholic neighbours.

Before filming began, Gallagher visited Glenbryn and Ardoyne with a friend who knew the area well, and she was shocked to see the number of houses that were abandoned.

She says of Sarah: “Not everybody who lives within the Ardoyne is political and not everybody is sectarian. But certain groups cause trouble which, a lot of the time, affects the entire community. Unlike her neighbour, Dawn, Sarah’s not a bigot but she is an activist in the sense that she wants to get a wall so she can feel safe within her home. All around her, people are moving out and, when Dawn leaves too, it’s a terrible blow for Sarah. Initially, she’s against the protest and is keen to try and resolve things through community meetings. But when her child, who is the complete focus of her life, is caught up in the violence, she joins her brother on the protest lines. However, she’s ashamed because she knows everything she’s taught her daughter has been symbolically crushed.”

Background

The protest at Holy Cross Primary School appeared at first to be a minor impasse in June 2001. However, when a solution couldn't be found by the end of the summer, the situation gained national significance and symbolism from September when the new school term started. The protest became a *cause celebre*, with scenes of little children going to school past a gauntlet of bitter protest providing a grim picture of Northern Ireland throughout the world.

Holy Cross is a Catholic primary school situated in a Protestant Loyalist area. This area, Glenbryn, is itself an enclave within the much larger sprawling Catholic Nationalist Ardoyne. Sectarian interfaces are prevalent in Belfast, nowhere more so than here in North Belfast, where during over 30 years of the Northern Ireland Troubles almost a quarter of the 3,500 murders occurred.

Interface landmarks often come in the shape of 'peace' walls, physically dominating structures that divide territory and are erected as a preventative measure against violent attacks on people and property. In some areas, people believe the walls need to be extended because attacks on homes on both sides of the divide are a regular occurrence. Such was the case on the Ardoyne road in 2001.

The Protestant Glenbryn residents see their community dying: poor employment prospects, inadequate housing and security measures, paramilitaries moving in, people moving out. They see the Catholic's numbers rising, bursting at the seams. They fear that the Nationalists want to drive them out of – and take over – their homes.

For the Catholic's part, they too claim they are constantly attacked, people and property abused on an almost daily basis. Since the loyalist feud of 2000, they say the numbers of attacks have increased in hand with a UDA paramilitary presence. The Catholics claim that they have never wanted to take over the Glenbryn houses.

Claim, counterclaim, arguments, attacks, resentment and rioting. There is very little sense of a functioning peace process at work in this part of North Belfast.

Tensions have always simmered and erupted between Catholics and Protestants on this interface. The slightest provocation can be the touch paper that ignites more violence. On a June afternoon in 2001, it was an argument about a flag.