

A movie poster for "Young Plato". The background is a red-tinted photograph of a brick wall. In the foreground, two young boys are shown from the chest up. They are both wearing blue t-shirts. The boy in the back has his arms raised and is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The boy in front is leaning his head against the first boy's shoulder and is making a playful pouting face. The title "Young Plato" is written in large, bold, white letters across the top half of the poster. Below the title, there is a line of smaller text: "A FILM BY NEASA NÍ CHIANÁIN & DECLAN MCGRATH". At the bottom of the poster, there is a tagline "Dare to Think for Yourself" in white, followed by a dense block of small text listing production credits and funding sources. Various festival logos are visible along the very bottom edge.

**SOILSIÚ FILMS PRESENTS IN COPRODUCTION WITH CLIN D'OEIL FILMS, ZADIG PRODUCTIONS & AISLING PRODUCTIONS**

**A FILM BY NEASA NÍ CHIANÁIN & DECLAN MCGRATH**

# Young Plato

**Dare to Think for Yourself**

SOILSIÚ FILMS in co-production with CLIN D'OEIL FILMS, ZADIG PRODUCTIONS & AISLING PRODUCTIONS presents YOUNG PLATO a film by NEASA NÍ CHIANÁIN AND DECLAN MCGRATH  
screenplay DAVID RANE co-producers HANNE PHLYPO, JACKIE DOYLE, CÉLINE NUSSE, DECLAN MCGRATH cinematographer NEASA NÍ CHIANÁIN editor PHILIPPE RAVOET composer DAVID POLTROCK  
sound design RETO STAMM art director FRÉDÉRIC HAMÉLIN graphic design STUDIO DAOUDI with support from EURIMAGES, SCREEN IRELAND, NORTHERN IRELAND SCREEN,  
FLANDERS AUDIOVISUAL FUND (VAF), SHELTER PROD., TAX SHELTER OF THE BELGIAN FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, CENTRE NATIONAL DU CINÉMA (CNC),  
BBC NI, ARTE, RTE, RTBF, VRT KANVAS,YLE, VRPO, RTS, AL JAZEERA and CREATIVE EUROPE international sales OUTLOOK FILMS





<https://www.facebook.com/YoungPlatoDocumentary/>

## LOGLINE

A Primary School in Belfast's Ardoyne housing estates invokes the wisdom of the ancient Greek philosophers to fight poverty, drug dealers and the IRA – restoring hope in the heart of a battered community.

## SHORT SYNOPSIS

An observational documentary set in post-conflict Belfast's Ardoyne, where a marginalized, working class community has for generations been plagued by poverty, drugs and guns. This film charts the dream of Headmaster Kevin McArevey and his dedicated, visionary team illustrating how critical thinking and pastoral care can empower and encourage children to see beyond the boundaries and limitations of their own community. We see how philosophy can encourage them to question the mythologies of war and of violence, and sometimes challenge the narratives their parents, peers and socio-economic group would dictate.

## LONG SYNOPSIS

Wedge into a cluster of working-class housing units, Holy Cross Boys Primary School bears the scars of the Northern Ireland sectarian struggle, with barbed wire still in place on the high walls surrounding the school, walls decorated with political graffiti and murals – this is the heart of Ardoyne, North Belfast.

Catering for boys from the age of 4 to 11 years, Holy Cross Boys School was caught up in world media reports in 2001 when the children at their sister school, Holy Cross Girls, were threatened on their way to school by local loyalists. Teachers at Holy Cross Boys also received death threats.

The social model of the area is one of chaos and entropy; the political standoff between republicans and unionists means that meaningful community development is slow. Crime and substance abuse have flourished, and the despair of the streets is reflected in the suicide rates for young men and boys – the highest in Europe.

Against this seemingly hopeless background, one inspiring headmaster is changing the narrative, helping the children of Holy Cross School and the wider community to find hope and purpose. It seems inconceivable, but the answer lay in the wisdom of the ancients: the philosophical teachings of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.

Headmaster, Kevin McAreevey, is a tough-looking, bald-headed 50 year-old with a black belt in karate. His office, adorned with an incongruous mixture of pictures of Elvis Presley and Pope Francis, reflects the complexity of the character. Kevin is a big personality in Ardoyne; fearless and committed to having an impact in the community. Everybody knows him, parents and drug dealers, IRA dissidents and the PSNI, have all passed through his office. Kevin deals with everything head on – he’s survived knife attacks, and terror threats, “You can’t give in to bullies or else they’ll keep coming back” he says.

What drives Kevin is his own past, he grew up defending himself and those close to him with the fist, being a hard man was one way to survive in working class Belfast. Years later, although he hides it well, Kevin lives everyday with the shame and remorse of his turbulent past, a past that has become the driving force behind his zeal for philosophy. His quest is to build resilience in his pupils and help them manage their emotions in order to face whatever life throws at them. Using philosophy as his tool, he guides the children through challenging discussions about the past, their lives at present and where they might find a future. He encourages them to question everything, even their parents, and tackles violence amongst young boys head on. Every scrap, fight, altercation in the school, ends up being teased out on the philosophy board outside Kevin’s office. ‘Violence breeds violence, it never stops,’ Kevin insists.

His second in command, Deputy Head Jan Marie Reel, is a perfect foil to Kevin’s expansive character. She’s the heart of the school, the go-to mother figure who, together with a team of dedicated teachers gently but firmly steer the school towards a better future. It’s a rollercoaster ride of triumph and despair as the staff face overwhelming odds in the form of sectarian aggression, a defeatist zeitgeist accumulated over years of neglect, and children who are burdened with serious behavioural problems. One day an 8 year-old may be threatening suicide and the next day a pipe bomb is discovered on the grounds; and even a deadly virus arrives. There’s a limit to what even the most inspired teacher can cope with. But then the magic happens, as if from nowhere; a troubled child suddenly turns a corner and sees a way forward.

Kevin will proudly declare “It’s all about critical thinking. The boys are learning to make the right choices.” His process is transformative and he’s spreading it beyond the walls of the school, in an initiative to get the pupils to teach philosophical thinking to their own parents at home. Driving past a mural in the neighbourhood that has been transformed from dissident propaganda to a picture of one of his Holy Cross pupils, posing as Rodin’s Thinker, Kevin smiles to himself, and turns up the volume on the Elvis’ track *If I Can Dream*.

## **BIOG / FILMOGRAPHY**

### **NEASA NÍ CHIANÁIN, DIRECTOR**



Neasa Ní Chianáin, director, is one of Ireland's most established documentary talents. Neasa trained at the National College of Art & Design in Dublin, and worked as a freelance Art Director on Irish feature film and television projects, before switching to docs in 2001. She has directed 9 single docs (4 feature length) and one tv series.

The docs include 'Frank Ned & Busy Lizzie', which won Best Feature Doc at The Celtic Film Festival 2004, and was sold around the world, including ZDF, ARTE and YLE. 'Fairytale of Kathmandu' world premiered at IDFA 2007, in the Silver Wolf Competition. It was then invited to over 30 more international Festivals including Seattle (North American Premiere) and Edinburgh (UK premiere). 'Fairytale' won 3 Best Documentary/Director awards and screened on YLE and Canvas. 'The Stranger', funded by MEDIA, RTÉ and The Irish Film Board, had it's world premiere at the 67th Locarno Film Festival.

Her last film, 'In Loco Parentis' (aka 'School Life'), has been a world-wide success, premiering in competition at both IDFA 2016 and Sundance 2017. 'School Life' won the Special Jury Prize in the Golden Gate Awards at the San Francisco Film Film, and an Audience Award (Prix du Public) at visions du Reel in Nyon. Neasa was also chosen to take part in the Sydney Film Festival's 'Europe! Voices of Women in Film', which selected 10 of Europe's most promising women directors. Neasa is currently in post-production on a new feature documentary, 'The Alexander Complex', funded by Screen Ireland, Blue Ice and Irish Sec 481 tax credit, and has just completed production on 'Young Plato', a feature documentary funded by Screen Ireland, BBC, ARTE, Eurimages, Northern Ireland Screen and many other funds.

### **Director's Note (Neasa Ní Chianáin)**

Ever since my children started attending school, I really began to appreciate how education can influence the development of a child and shape their path into adulthood. While making the documentary *In Loco Parentis* (School Life), I witnessed first-hand the transformative effect inspirational teachers could have on their young wards' lives. The headmaster of Headfort was an avid proponent of critical thinking and the Socratic method of teaching. Watching him give children the space to discuss and argue different points of view, on a variety of subjects, was riveting. But if there was a fly in the ointment, it was that this was a private school with children from wealthy backgrounds, and there was the danger that this approach to education was a privilege for a selected few.

When Declan introduced me to Holy Cross Boys school, and told me that philosophy was being taught there, I was hooked. Holy Cross Boys School was everything Headfort wasn't: a state school, in one of Belfast's toughest neighbourhoods, an area still scarred by sectarian struggle. Everywhere was walled, fenced and gated, amplifying the notion of 'turf, dividing and containing people with opposing political loyalties and perceptions.

Nationalist Ardoyne did not benefit from any significant 'peace money' that poured into Belfast after the Good Friday agreement in 1998. As a community they were largely left to fend for themselves. Poverty, drugs, suicide and dissident paramilitarism continued to gnaw at the families in Ardoyne, posing a serious threat to the future of their young children.

But inside Holy Cross Boys school, there was hope. Kevin McArevey, the maverick headmaster, fearless and steadfast in his belief in philosophy and critical thinking, was a philosopher and a clown all at the same time. His passion was infectious and his charisma persuasive. Kevin didn't like waiting around for Educational Boards to sanction his ideas. He went full steam ahead and showed what making philosophy a core subject in his school could do. Around him the school staff had created an oasis, where the children, and often their parents, were supported by an incredibly dedicated team who were also determined to make a difference. From the caretaker to the kitchen staff, the classroom assistants to the teachers, all were genuinely doing everything possible to improve the lives of their students and ultimately their community.

This film is a testimony to that journey.

As an observational filmmaker, my process is always to try and join the circle, become part of the community, live in the world I'm trying to understand and not position myself as a voyeur but as one of the group. Luckily Kevin and his team afforded Declan and I that privilege and allowed us to completely immerse ourselves in the world of the school. We were really touched by how welcome the staff made us feel, regardless of how difficult life became, there was always a strong spirit of generosity served up with big dollops of humour. This openness to let a film crew in, even in the most challenging of times, (post

Brexit and during the Covid pandemic), came, I believe from the team's great sense of pride in what Holy Cross Boys School had achieved, both with and for its students.

Academically the school enjoys phenomenal success, but my interest lay with the children who were not so academically gifted. The head of Special Needs, Jan Marie Reel explained to me that often the kids who struggled with academia were the very kids who were targeted by the dissidents, the drug dealers and organised crime. In a community where unemployment is high and opportunities scarce, kids who can't use education as a route to a better future are often targeted by the unscrupulous. Making the right choices can easily become a matter of life and death in a community like Ardoyne. Learning to think for oneself, to reflect, analyse and plan, quickly becomes an essential life skill.

Watching Kevin taking the lofty ideas of philosophy and distilling them down into accessible lessons for 4 to 11 year olds was so inspiring. Giving children, especially young boys, the tools to recognise and cope with anxiety, anger, aggression, despair now seems incredibly obvious.

In western society indiscriminate violence amongst boys has become disturbingly prevalent, so by creating empathy for different points of view, maybe there could be less polarization amongst communities and more tolerance of 'the other'. The importance of critical thinking in the age of fake news has become essential. We've seen first-hand how huge numbers of people can easily be manipulated to act against their own interests, how they can be persuaded to put the wrong people in power.

If teaching philosophy and critical thinking to children from a young age became the norm and not the exception, then maybe the next generations would be well equipped to navigate through life and make better choices.

With all the challenges the human race is now faced with, if we are to have any chance of survival, Kevin's mantra 'Think, think, Respond!' seems like a pretty good first lesson to me.

Neasa Ní Chianáin

## **BIOG / FILMOGRAPHY**

### **DECLAN MCGRATH, DIRECTOR**



Produced and directed Lomax in Éirinn (2018, TG4) It premiered at the Galway Film Fleadh in July 2018 and screened at the IFI as part of its Ireland on Screen series. To date, it has also had public and festival screenings in New York, Washington, Alberta, Montreal, Clones, Liverpool, Wurzburg (Germany), Huston and Seattle. Nominated for Best Arts Documentary in the 2019 Celtic Media Festival awards.

Directed Stephen: My Fight For Life (2019, BBC NI). Documentary pick of the month on BBC network website.

Produced The Occupation (2018, RTE Radio One). Nominated for a New York Festival award in 2018.

Directed Tír Eoghain: The Unbreakable Bond (2018, TG4) Nominated for Best Sports Documentary in the 2019 Celtic Media Festival awards.

Directed A Womans Place, (2018, Oireachtas TV/RTE). It premiered at the Irish Film Institute in June 2018 and screened on RTE in November 2018.

Produced Léigh Linn (2016) winner of Best App in the 2016 Celtic Media Awards.

Produced Mary McAleese & The Man Who Saved Europe (2015, RTE & BBC). It premiered at the Galway Film Fleadh and won Best Historical Documentary in the 2016 Radharc Awards. Bought by Canal Plus in France, DR2 in Denmark and an academic distributor in the USA. In November 2017, the film was invited to be screened for the Economic and Social Committee of the European Union in Brussels.

Declan also directed the series *Seinn Liom* (2014) and *Cad É An Scéal* (2013) for BBCNI. He has worked as an editor for over twenty –five years, cutting numerous award-winning dramas and documentaries.

He has taught film in Queens University Belfast, Dundalk Institute of Technology and University College Dublin and has written two books on the craft of cinema (*Screencraft: Editing & Post-Production* and *Screencraft: Scriptwriting*) for Focal Press/Butterworth Heinman (each book was translated into five languages). Declan also regularly contributes to the American film journal *Cineaste*.

### **Director's Note (Declan McGrath)**

I was brought up in North Belfast, just over a kilometer from Ardoyne, during the Northern Ireland conflict in the 1970s and 1980s. North Belfast is a patchwork quilt of unionist districts rubbing up against nationalist areas. The resultant frictions have made the area the location of brutal sectarian division and attacks. I remember myself and schoolmates in the 1980s, matter-of-factly chatting about what we would do if we ended up in a 'bogus' taxi driven by a paramilitary from loyalist murder gang who would have picked us up in order to kill us. Because we had grown up in a war situation such concerns were accepted as normal. That is what children do. They adapt to the situation around. The normalization of conflict and division in children, the acceptance of hatred of the 'other' as a fact of life, is a problem that has preoccupied me since.

Later, in the 1990s and beyond, an unsteady peace settled on North Belfast. Sectarian attacks continued but with less frequency. However the area became blighted by another plague – high rates of suicides by young teenage males. There was a period when the local priest in Ardoyne would have only finished the funeral of one young suicide victim when he got a call to visit the family home of another teenager who had taken his own life. People felt powerless in the face of such a senseless loss of life coming in the wake of a viscous war.

Ardoyne, and Northern Ireland in general, continues to have an unusually high suicide rate. Psychologists tell us that this is probably due to having lived through a conflict. Yet one of the most startling facts is that suicide is particularly high among young people born after the official end of the Northern Ireland conflict – the ceasefire declared in 1998. Scientists now believe that not only can post-conflict trauma adversely affect a society but also that such trauma can be passed on through generations. The affects of conflict can cruelly afflict children who have had no direct experience of a war that was waged before they were born by their parents and grandparents.. It is a viscious and unjust cycle of suffering that becomes hard to break.

As a filmmaker from North Belfast, I frequently felt the obligation to highlight the suicide problem in the area through film in the hope that I could help. Believing that a film can help anyone is perhaps naïve and maybe even hubristic. In any case, I never found



a satisfactory way to do so. A few years ago I heard about about the mission of a local primary school headmaster, Kevin McAreevey of Holy Cross Boys in Ardoyne, to introduce philosophical thinking to the 400+ four to eleven year-old boys in his care as well as to his staff. Through philosophy he was giving children (and their educators) the tools to challenge their own ways-of-thinking and to become open to the thinking of others. Using the methodology of Socrates, he let the kids run their own classes and express their own opinions in an atmosphere where everyone respected and listened to each others' point-of-view. The boys are encouraged to change their own opinions after listening to, and considering, the thinking of others. In a conflicted and divided society such freethinking is revolutionary. It perhaps can even save lives.

Furthermore, the teaching method had a more practical aim. It potentially helped the boys become more confident and mentally resilient. That it did so was clear when I first heard eleven year-olds from Holy Cross Boys speak. They seemed articulate and confident beyond their years.

This was more than just supposition on my part. In Northern Ireland a test at the end of primary school, at age 11, determines whether a child will go to a more academically orientated secondary school or one that is more practically orientated. It can be a cruel and unfair system and Holy Cross Boys emphasise to the boys that they are valuable whatever school they go to. Yet while less than a third of the population pass the exam to get into the academically inclined school, in Holy Cross Boys almost two-thirds of their boys pass. That is twice the average. It is an even more impressive statistic when you consider that statistically Ardoyne is considered an area of 'social deprivation' where a much lower than average percentage of children would be expected to pass the exam.

In any case, I decided that I wanted to make a film about Kevin's mission to bring philosophy to Ardoyne. Luckily I was able to convince Ireland pre-eminent documentary feature filmmakers, Neasa Ní Chianáin and David Rane, to collaborate on the project. Neasa and myself were privileged to be allowed by Kevin and the staff and pupils of Holy Cross Boys to spend almost two years among them observing and recording the life of the school and community. I hope that the resulting film is a heartwarming and uplifting testament to the power of education and to the hope that a post-conflict society can shake off the shackles of the past as younger generation make their own future by using the ideas of the ancients.

Declan McGarth

## KEY CREW LIST

NAME	JOB DESCRIPTION
Neasa Ní Chianáin	Director / Cinematography
Declan McGrath	Director / Co-producer
David Rane	Producer
Hanne Phlypo	Co-Producer
Jackie Doyle	Co-Producer
Céline Nusse	Co-Producer
Philippe Ravoet	Editor
Reto Stamm	Sound Designer / Editor
Frédéric Hamelin	Sound Designer / Mixer
David Poltrock	Composer
Etienne Essery	Story Consultant
Mark Carroll	Post-production Supervisor

## KEY CAST LIST

Kevin McArevey	School Principal / Headmaster
Jan-Marie Reel	School Teacher / Head of Pastoral Care