



One of the stills from Alan Cooke's film 'Home'

Home, sweet Home

As an Irish immigrant in New York, film-maker Alan Cooke was drawn to record his experiences and, with the help of a few famous faces, he explores the lure of the Big Apple. **Mark Keane** reports.

"GIVE me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses" is the inscription on the base of the Statue of Liberty that has greeted generations of immigrants from Ireland and beyond who have made the trek to New York.

Alan Cooke, a young Dublin actor and writer, didn't exactly fit that description when he arrived in the city for the first time shortly after 9/11, but he still felt an urge to document his relationship with New York in a way that could define the lure of the Big Apple for millions of people. The result of this three-year-long meditation is a documentary feature called *Home*, a mixture of a poetic exploration of the experience of the immigrant abroad and a love letter to the city itself, delving into the complex relationship between the immigrants' new 'home' and their homeland.

"I, like so many others, went over to visit a friend for a few weeks, and ended up staying for five years," he explains. "So many people get drawn in by the city, by the op-

portunities on offer. Everyone has a familiarity with New York because people have seen it on television all their lives. When they finally go there, there's this sense of recognition that's like nowhere else in the world."

New to the city, but eager to record his blossoming kinship with New York married with the underlying longing for home, Cooke lured in director and camerawoman Dawn Scibila and the pair began to film around the city, initially just tentative, nebulous but poetic vignettes exploring Alan's sense of belonging and dislocation.

Soon the project had gathered steam, and they successfully convinced a number of high-profile immigrants domiciled in New York to contribute to the documentary. Frank and Malachy McCourt, Liam Neeson, Alfred Molina, Mike Myers, Rosie Perez and Susan Sarandon were amongst those eager to lend their time to the project, and suddenly what started off as a modest self-penned visual essay was

becoming something a bit bigger.

"The two McCourts gave me great interviews, and they were so eager to support anybody Irish doing something creative over there," offers Cooke. "Then we bumped into Susan Sarandon at a movie premiere and she wanted to contribute. Odd-est of all was the chance meeting with Liam Neeson in Central Park. I just went up to him, told him what I was doing and he said he'd do an interview. You know you're on the right path when these sort of doors just happen to open for you."

Serendipity may have played its part in wrangling some marquee talent, but of equal importance to Cooke was examining his own journey, both physical and emotional, as a regular Irish immigrant who, like so many others, was captivated by New York. In his monologues that pepper the movie, he tries to come to terms with his new role as a newcomer in the city, his empathy with a place he should barely know, and at the same time his dislocation and, at times, loneliness.

"It's a distillation of all my experiences, and I had some hard times there," he admits. "I don't really romanticise it at all. Dawn, the director, makes the city look incredibly beautiful, but the darker moments come from the narrative and the harshness of my own experiences. When you come from Ireland, you bring all your own history and all your family's history over with you and that's all expressed in the film."

In order to re-enforce the film's timelessness, there is little or no mention of 9/11, an event that Cooke missed by several months. He could feel its aftermath but decided to not let it define his film like others might have done.

"I was exploring something bigger than one event. New York is bigger than one event. My story was that of an immigrant who was trying to adapt, to pay his rent, to figure out what was his place there. A lot of people praised the movie for not going over 9/11 again and reflecting a positive side of the city."

The film has struck a chord with

audiences in New York, and was recently broadcast on PBS to over a million viewers. Critics have praised it for its beautiful, instinctual photography, its lyricism and its evocative attempt at getting under the skin of the Irish immigrant's experience. Cooke is now concentrating on introducing it to audiences over here, and feels that his story, which echoes that of millions of others, will hit home with Irish audiences.

"I think for all the people who've left, who are still there, who want to come home, and relatives of those people back here, I've tried to express the feelings of an Irish immigrant abroad – the feelings of loss, the feelings of 'will I ever return home', the feelings of 'this is my new home now'. It's good for people to see others explain why they have taken this path – why they have taken this long epic journey for generations and generations."

For more information on *Home* or to purchase a DVD of the film, go to www.homethemovie.com.