

BOSTON IRISH FILM FESTIVAL PRESENTS:

Blazing the Trail

The Story of the Kalem Film Company in Ireland

Return with us to the early days of the cinema as we recreate the Nickelodeon experience with music, song, and film to celebrate the first ever fiction films made in Ireland.

The Boston Irish Film Festival is proud to present this unique multimedia event that takes you back to the early 1910s when pioneering screenwriter/actress Gene Gauntier and director Sidney Olcott of the Kalem Film Company blazed a trail from New York to Killarney—and into history!

Affectionately known as the “O’Kalems,” Gauntier, Olcott, and their crew became the first American filmmakers to shoot overseas and the first to produce films that reflected the realities of the Irish experience. A sentimental mix of rebel dramas, folk romances, and tales of exile and emigration, their films proved tremendously popular with the Irish in America and helped ease the pangs of being so far from home.

Blazing the Trail presents a selection of these rarely-seen films with live musical accompaniment and interspersed with popular Irish parlor songs from the period. All films have been digitally restored, with some receiving their first public screening in almost a century! The event will also feature a series of originally produced short films, which draw upon the autobiography of Gene Gauntier’s to recount the adventures of the “O’Kalems” in Ireland.

Featuring the music of pianist Peter Freisinger and vocalists Victoria Hayes & Liz Hayes, *Blazing the Trail* is directed by Peter Flynn and produced by Dawn Morrissey.

**7pm Monday, November 23 | The Coolidge Corner
Theatre, Brookline Tickets: \$9.75**

ABOUT THE “O’KALEMS”:

1895-1909. The American film industry is based in New York. Films are short—rarely more than a couple of minutes in length. Vaudeville acts and comic strip gags provide the main inspiration. When the Irish appear they are portrayed as buffoons—dimwitted maids and incompetent laborers.

1910. All this changes when the Kalem Motion Picture Company sends its leading actor and screenwriter Gene Gauntier and its best director Sidney Olcott to Ireland. The film they make there, *The Lad from Old Ireland*, is the first American fiction film

to be shot overseas—and the first to be shot in Ireland. A simple drama about a young man who immigrates to the United States in search of a better life only to return home to save his sweetheart from eviction, *The Lad from Old Ireland* is one of the first American films to treat its Irish characters sympathetically and is among the first to make exciting use of on-location cinematography.

The film is a tremendous success and Olcott and Gauntier will return to Ireland again and again over the next four years, making close to two-dozen films, including rebel dramas, folk romances, and stories of immigration to America. While filming in Ireland, Olcott and Gauntier will raise the misgivings of the British government (who suspects them of smuggling in arm to aid Irish rebels!) as well as a local parish priest who is outraged at their shameless playacting—which often features scenes of scandalous lovemaking! But the results of their efforts is a unique collection of films—charming and beautiful films—depicting a people and a way of life that will all but vanish from the face of the earth.

Known affectionately as “the O’Kalems,” Olcott and his company would help usher in a new age of filmmaking marked by dramatic storylines, fully realized characters, and exotic locales—the same heady mix of excitement and sentimentality, visual spectacle and melodrama, that will soon come to characterize the Hollywood dream factory.

ABOUT *BLAZING THE TRAIL*:

In 1929, Gene Gauntier recounted the adventures of “the O’Kalems” in Ireland in her autobiography, *Blazing the Trail*. *BLAZING THE TRAIL* uses Gauntier’s autobiography as a springboard to tell the story of the Kalem Film Company in Ireland.

The event will recreate the style and ambience of a 1910s Nickelodeon film show, which not only presented films with live musical accompaniment but also, on occasion, singers performing popular songs from the period. *Blazing the Trail* will feature four of the surviving Kalem films, accompanied live on the piano by acclaimed pianist and composer Peter Freisinger, and interspersed with turn of the century Irish parlor songs performed by Victoria Hayes and Liz Hayes.

Also featured will be a series of short films (shot exclusively for this event and directed by Boston Irish Festival co-founder and co-director Peter Flynn) that bring Gauntier’s words to life, taking us back to the actual locations in Killarney (many largely unchanged, despite the century’s passage) to celebrate this important—yet largely forgotten—chapter in early film history.

Films screened:

- The groundbreaking *Lad from Old Ireland* (1910)
- The 1798 rebel drama *Rory O’More* (1911)
- *You Remember Ellen* (1912), based on the popular poem by Thomas Moore

- The charming emigration drama *His Mother* (1912), long believed lost, and here receiving its first public screening in almost a century!

Blazing the Trail is directed by Peter Flynn and produced by Dawn Morrissey, co-director of the Boston Irish Film Festival. It is supported in part by Culture Ireland, the Irish Arts Council, and the Reel Ireland Program.

ABOUT THE BOSTON IRISH FILM FESTIVAL:

For ten years, the Boston Irish Film Festival has introduced American audiences to the very best of Ireland and the Irish on screen. The largest event of its kind outside Ireland, the festival has premiered such films as *In America*, *Intermission*, and *Bloody Sunday*, and it was the first American festival to recognize the 2007 Oscar-winner, *Once*. Over the years, it has played host to some of the greatest names in Irish cinema, including Jim Sheridan, Gabriel Byrne, Brendan Gleeson, Colm Meaney, Fionnula Flannagan, John Boorman, and Aidan Quinn.

Collectively, these films and filmmakers celebrate the richness and vitality of today's global Irish culture. They acknowledge its past, savor its present, and look ahead to its future. More importantly, however, they exemplify storytelling at its best, blending humor and tragedy, irreverence and gravitas, to capture and explore the complexities of the human experience—Irish or otherwise.

Now, with a newly expanded Board of Advisors—comprised of many of Boston's business and civic leaders—the festival looks forward to the next ten years, building on past successes with expanded resources, a wider array of venues, and an even greater selection of films and filmmakers. More than ever before, the Boston Irish Film Festival is poised to engage and excite people all across Boston—and beyond.