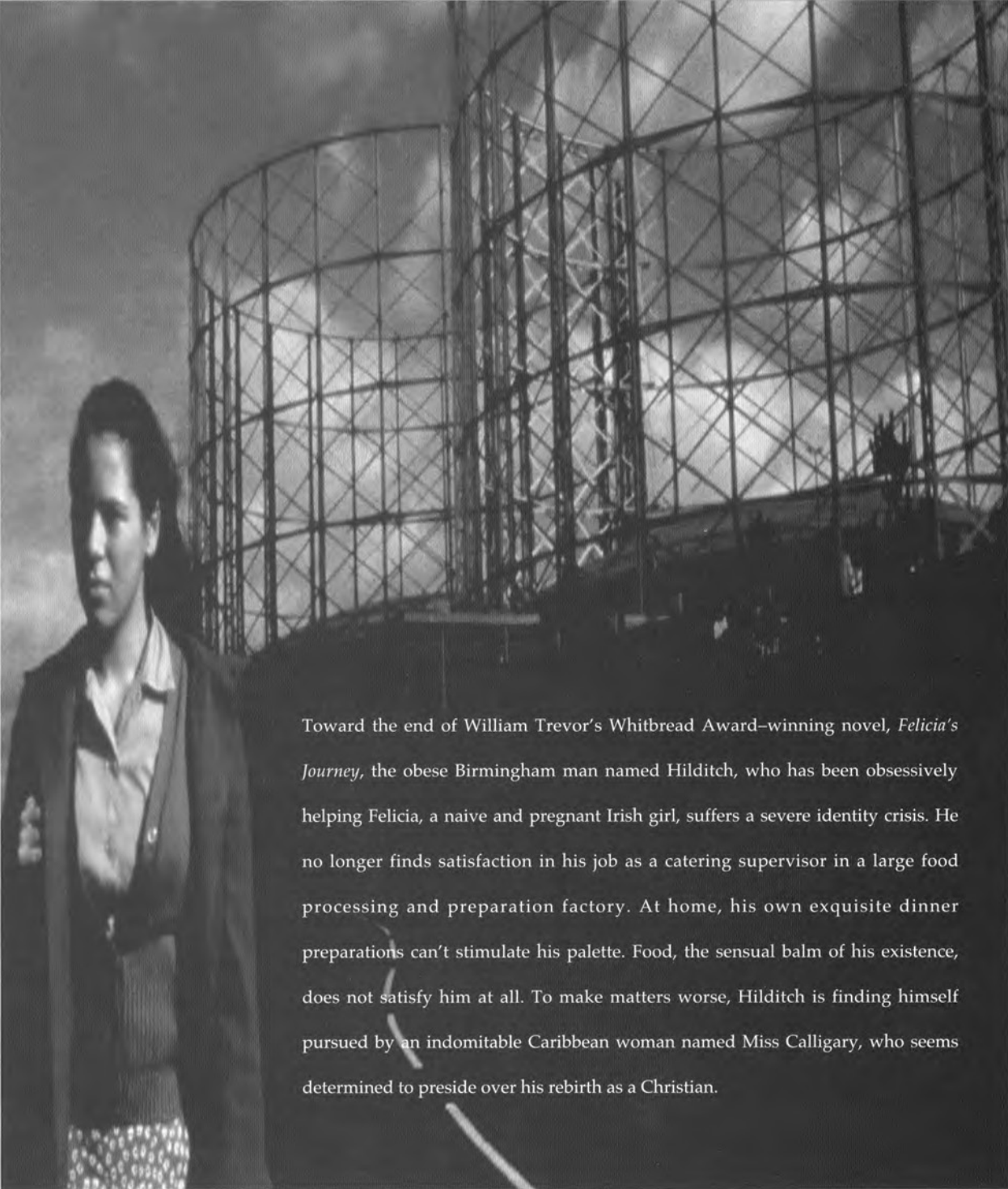


DELUSIONAL

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Toward the end of William Trevor's Whitbread Award-winning novel, *Felicia's Journey*, the obese Birmingham man named Hilditch, who has been obsessively helping Felicia, a naive and pregnant Irish girl, suffers a severe identity crisis. He no longer finds satisfaction in his job as a catering supervisor in a large food processing and preparation factory. At home, his own exquisite dinner preparations can't stimulate his palette. Food, the sensual balm of his existence, does not satisfy him at all. To make matters worse, Hilditch is finding himself pursued by an indomitable Caribbean woman named Miss Calligary, who seems determined to preside over his rebirth as a Christian.

Atom Egoyan's *Felicia's Journey*

By Marc Glassman

It's all too much for Hilditch, an apparently conventional man given to speaking in clichéd statements like: "We all have to do terrible things, Felicia. We all have to find the courage sometimes." He's become so unhinged that he can no longer imagine where Felicia is—she has apparently disappeared. In desperation, Hilditch seeks satisfaction in a library, a place he has never gone to before in his life. There, in a dictionary, he finds this definition: "delusional insanity is not preceded by either maniacal or melancholic symptoms, and is not necessarily accompanied by any failure of the reasoning capacity. In the early stage the patient is introspective and uncommunicative, rarely telling his thoughts but brooding and worrying over them in secret. After this stage has lasted for a longer or shorter time the delusions become fixed and are generally of a disagreeable kind."

There must have been a frisson for the Canadian, and now internationally acclaimed, arthouse director Atom Egoyan when he read those words. Trevor's character Hilditch had stumbled on a definition for not only his own mental state but for that of a slew of Egoyan creations ranging from David Hemblen's portrait of a preternaturally cold father in *Family Viewing* through the emotionally stunted tax auditor played by Bruce Greenwood in *Exotica* to Ian Holm's expert portrayal of a vengeful lawyer in *The Sweet Hereafter*. William Trevor's powerful delineation of an apparently conventional man who barely realizes that he is also a serial killer clearly fits into the pattern of works made for the cinema by Egoyan.

Look at Mitchell Stephens, the attorney played so well by Holm in Egoyan's incisive adaptation of Russell Banks's *The Sweet Hereafter*. Stephens is a veritable catalogue of delusional affects. His *raison d'être* is deliberately misguided. Arriving in a town torn asunder by the loss of its children due to a school bus accident, Holm's lawyer goes about signing up bereaved parents in order to launch a class-action suit. He isn't sure who is to blame: the bus driver, her company, its mechanics or the city administration. What is clear to him, if to no one else at first, is that "someone has to pay." In the film's key scene, he engages in a fierce discussion with one of the grieving parents, Billy Ansell, an antagonistic ex-athlete. Though the wide-eyed Billy leaves during the argument, Holm continues his soliloquy about "lost children" long after he has gone.

It doesn't seem like much of a distance to travel from Holm's Stephens to Bob Hoskins's Hilditch in Egoyan's marvellous

filmic reworking of Trevor's *Felicia's Journey*. Here again is a figure of tragic delusions. On first glance, Hilditch appears to be the type of man who was the bulwark of imperial England. A hard worker, he is unfailingly kind to his staff, deferential to others and kind to women, especially Felicia. With a conversational aptitude placed squarely on the tried and true, Hilditch would seem to be the embodiment of the British working class: a solid citizen, unquestioningly patient and loyal. You could imagine him as what he is, a factory manager or what he would have liked to have been, a sergeant in the British Army.

But, of course, Hilditch is more than what he seems to be. Hoskins has observed of him that "if he wasn't a serial killer, no one would look twice at Hilditch. He's the most boring man in the world. His only redeeming feature is that he kills people." Egoyan would beg to differ with Hoskins concerning his character's conventional qualities and so, undoubtedly would Trevor, but the blunt point is pellucidly clear: only a demented Hilditch is worthy of true dramatic consideration.

It is a fully wrought psychopath that Hoskins delivers to the screen. Ostensibly pleasant and kind to a fault, Hoskins' Hilditch is a seething mass of contradictions moving implacably toward a final explosion. Audiences that were struck by Hannibal "the cannibal" Lecter will be delighted by this new psycho killer with gourmand affectations. Hilditch is indeed a gifted chef but his culinary passion is less outrageous than Lecter's. In a brilliant move, Egoyan has established a back story for Hilditch, one that ties his love of eating and his job to his childhood. Every evening, Hilditch goes home to No. 3 Duke of Wellington Rd., a distinguished address and an elaborate edifice that he would normally never be able to afford. Ensnared there, he prepares gourmet meals by dutifully following the televised instructions of a female cooking show host whose program would have aired back in BBC-TV's infancy in the 1950s. Hilditch has videotapes of these old kinescopes, we eventually discover, because the star of the show is his mother, Gala.

Slipping seamlessly between Hilditch watching these artificially constructed artifacts of a bygone era and flashbacks to the shooting of the shows, Egoyan is able to construct profiles of Gala and her little boy, Joey. Gala is a sensual woman from the Continent who will do anything to make her show appealing to the British public. Joey, the young Hilditch,



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is repeatedly pressed into service as the cute foil to his mother's European charms. He is alternately smothered with affection or ignored (for better camera angles) by his glamorous mother. The effect, as we soon see, has been devastating on the child who has never been able to perform sexually as a man. The creation of Gala is Egoyan's signal contribution to the narrative constructed by Trevor. By developing Gala in a more thorough way than was the mother in the novel, Egoyan has allowed the viewer a way into understanding the dilemmas that Hilditch must face. Adding scenes with Gala underlines Egoyan's willingness to provide the psychological and structural elements necessary to make his characters and story line work for a large audience.

Of course, a sincere desire to communicate doesn't preclude the use of hermetic jokes—the real Gala was Dalí's wife and Eluard's muse—but Egoyan clearly wants Joey's scenes with his matriarchal Gala to be read sympathetically. He is greatly aided in that quest by his partner's (Arsinée Khanjian) performance as Gala. Khanjian plays her like a long-lost addition to the Gabor sisters. Wonderfully comic and sexy, this Gala is clearly too much for a little boy to understand, although one can see how a repressed English society in the 1950s might have embraced her as a bit of Gallic sophistication and excitement sent to awaken their "bangers and mash or bubble and squeak" sensibilities.

So what else does Hilditch do? Rather like Trevor or Egoyan, one wants to deflect the question. The character is so cozy, so normal, so much like a bachelor uncle, that the answer is difficult to face. In fact, Hilditch himself can't come to terms with it—he kills people. Not just anybody. Young women, prostitutes, "lost girls," much like the ones Mitchell Stephens railed about, are Hilditch's vulnerable prey. He doesn't want to kill them. In every case, Hilditch sets out to help the girls find their way back into society. It is only when they appear cured that Hilditch attacks them, because, inevitably, the "rescued" girls want to leave him and return to the social intercourse of daily life.

Hilditch is a collector. (And wouldn't a remake of John Fowles' *The Collector* be a perfect Egoyan project?) He collects old records and toy soldiers and, via videotape, young women. They tell him the most intimate details of their lives because he is different from the rest of the men they meet. Hilditch listens like a psychiatrist or a priest and offers them advice. All the while, he surreptitiously videos them and collects the tapes in the same room where he keeps his mother's televised mementos.

Hilditch's "memory" room is another Egoyan innovation as are the videos of the "lost girls." The use of video as a mnemonic device goes back to early Egoyan film festival hits such as *Family Viewing* and *Speaking Parts*. What is different here is that videos are used dramatically and not as the sole tool available for an exploration of the past. Egoyan is now far more comfortable with the language of cinema than he was a decade ago. One of the joys in watching this film is realizing how Egoyan's storytelling has progressed. The inward journeys of both Hilditch and Felicia are presented with a confidence and facility that

recalls such literary greats as Faulkner and, more recently, Cormac McCarthy.

Hilditch's encounters with his "girls" are near the terrifying heart of *Felicia's Journey*. They suggest what might occur to his latest protégée, the one he dubs "Irish Eyes" on his videocassettes. Astonishingly, the scenes in Hilditch's car were shot with Egoyan playing Bob Hoskins' part. "We found these extraordinary young actresses from Nottingham," recalls Egoyan. "They were really good at improvising. I wanted the conversations to be them explaining why they had to leave. But that day Bob became violently ill. We were faced with the prospect of cancelling. Finally, I decided to become Hilditch and put on his coat and gloves because we wouldn't see him anyway. It was a very weird day for me. I was getting more and more into Hilditch and the pain of these young women saying they had to leave. With the last one, when you see a hand lunge at her, that's actually my arm."

Being Hilditch for a day might have helped Egoyan with a key task, directing Hoskins as the mild-mannered serial killer. It is a role that the British actor, well-known for his performances in *Mona Lisa*, *Who Killed Roger Rabbit* and the British television production of *Pennies From Heaven*, handles brilliantly. Not only does Hoskins look the part, he exhibits a range that allows viewers to see Hilditch as everything from charming through depressive to malevolent. Egoyan worked carefully with the veteran actor to achieve this tour de force of a performance. Hoskins has come to be known for his rowdy, comical turns. As a director, Egoyan needed to rein in Hoskins' crowd-pleasing nature and get him to produce something more off-putting and tragic.

"The first couple of days," Egoyan admits, "were devoted, as usual, to testing. Bob would do something and the people on the set would laugh and Bob would feel very confident about what he was doing. At that point you have to be really clear that that's not what you want. When someone has been so rewarded for playing a certain type of role, they have to learn to trust that you know what you want by taking them down another path. It's the most cherished thing about directing a film performance and also the most frightening. You are the only audience. No one else in the crew gets what the two of you are doing."

"Great actors have to chart where they need to get to," adds Egoyan. "You have to be clear about setting up a series of references. That's what it's about: talking about a number of different things that might have happened to this character, finding a code that you can refer to in moments when the actor is suddenly lost, that you're able to refer to and they will be able to grasp on to. We had that code. In our case, it was the notion of good Joey and bad Joey; it was something we talked about in terms of his mother, that there were times that Joey was a bad boy and other times when he was a good boy and the play between these two became our secret language."

While Hilditch attempts to conceal his vulnerability behind a veil of lies, Felicia is nothing if not straightforward. Her

delusion is her innocence which prevents her from seeing who Hilditch is and what has happened to her boyfriend, Johnny. Elaine Cassidy, the young Irish actress who plays Felicia, is well cast in the role. She was so interested in her own role that after an initial reading of the script, she admits that "if someone had said, 'describe Hilditch,' I'd just say, 'Well, he's really a nice man....'"

Felicia's story is the stuff of melodrama. The tender country lass falls for the first man who pays attention to her. Soon, she is seduced, pregnant and abandoned. When Felicia turns to her father for help, he abuses her, claiming that she has slept with the enemy, that her Johnny is now a member of the English army. Desperate, she heads for England, searching for the lawn-mower factory where Johnny claims he is working. It never occurs to Felicia to check into her father's



Felicia's Journey: One of the joys in watching the film is realizing how Egoyan's storytelling has progressed.



Bob Hoskins with Elaine Cassidy

ideas about Johnny. Nor does she question Hilditch's claims to having an ailing and then deceased "wife." She has to be secure in her delusions and the viewer must understand her point of view for the story to work. "Felicia takes everything at face value," allows Cassidy. "You don't find too many girls like that anymore." "What I like about Elaine is," Egoyan pauses, "her innocence isn't irritating. I could believe that she could swoon."

What binds the characters of Felicia and Hilditch together are their difficult upbringings. Both were raised by single parents who, as Egoyan has noted, "are incredibly strong and live by a dogma. For one, it is the dogma of Irish Republicanism; for the other, the dogma of glamour and celebrityhood. Both these lifestyles have infiltrated the children's consciousness in a way that is harmful. Both have to escape their parents. One's means of escape is quite direct and simple. The other is shrouded and mysterious and very troubling."

Sensing the link between the two of them, Hilditch treats Felicia differently than he did the other girls. She is invited into his house and treated like a member of his family. Unlike her father, Hilditch knows that Felicia isn't a whore. Prostitutes,

Hilditch seems to say, can be dealt with—but what about mothers? Felicia's pregnancy protects her from Hilditch. "If what he's done with the other women, the taping and the conversations, is a residual attempt to deal with his mother," observes Egoyan, "he still has never had to kill a mother. And he can't. That's why he talks her into having an abortion."

The abortion issue is so fraught with emotions that it is likely to cloud any discussion of *Felicia's Journey* for years. "Hilditch is the monster of pro-choice, isn't he?" observes Egoyan. "He gave her all the reasons why you shouldn't bring a child into the world, and they're logical, except they're coming from the mouth of a psychopath." Intriguingly, Hilditch comes apart when confronted by the evangelical Christianity of Miss Calligary, a woman who had aided and then abandoned Felicia. For Trevor and perhaps for Egoyan, the force of the Church is still powerful. Ironically, the messages that Hilditch and Calligary deliver do not provide salvation for their listeners: Felicia immediately regrets having an abortion and Hilditch suffers a breakdown after hearing Calligary's prayers.

Egoyan's films often deal with dysfunctional families and children who feel abandoned. *Family Viewing*, *Speaking Parts*, *Next of Kin* and *Exotica* deal in various ways with these rubrics of the director's consciousness. In *The Sweet Hereafter* and *Felicia's Journey*, the stakes have been raised further. The most painful things that can happen to parents and to children are the subjects of these dramas. Adolescents murdered by a serial killer, a whole town losing its children through an accident, abortion—everything dealing with parentage and mortality is on the table in these films.

What is reassuring is the way Egoyan concludes *Felicia's Journey*. The camera moves in a continual 360-degree pan as Felicia recalls the names of the "lost girls." Like Sarah Polley in *The Sweet Hereafter*, she has survived and bears the responsibility of keeping alive the ones who died before her. Felicia is now a gardener; she is planting bulbs in the earth as a child walks past her, protected by her mother. The camera moves gradually upward into the trees and the sky. Like a moment from Tarkovsky or Bresson, Egoyan offers an image of transcendence, a promise of hope that Felicia's journey has not been in vain. ●