

Tanya Doyle about EAT / SLEEP / CHEER / REPEAT

“An Irish person will never get a cup of tea”

If you're hoping for the Dallas Cowboys, rather expect the Galway Gallopers, a cohort of young cheerleaders training to take on the world – and make sure they look good doing it. Tanya Doyle followed them for five years and made EAT / SLEEP / CHEER / REPEAT an uplifting and deeply honest coming-of-age documentary about belonging, self-acceptance and having fun.

The opening scene sets a tone. There is the sea, and there's a very specific neighbourhood. Can you complete the picture of where we are?

Tanya Doyle: In Galway, the most westerly city in Europe; the last port before America. We tend to say that we're closer to Boston than to Berlin, except that we have social health care, social housing and other things that a civilised country offers to its people. Cheerleading is a very accessible sport that fits everyone's budget. Therefore 'working class' is running like a thread throughout the story, unintentionally. I myself come from a working class background and I never

realised how many class references I was making.

To understand the movie, you need to understand what cheer is.

Doyle: When you say cheer, you think of women standing at the sidelines of football pitches in boots and short skirts. That's called sideline cheer. But what we're looking at is cheerleading as a sport in its own right, like a kind of group gymnastics. There's international meetings with countries competing. You train for nine months to perform for two and a half minutes. That is a really intense two and a half minutes! Cheer combines stunting, cheering, tumbling and flying. Some teams are females only, but often you'll have a mix of males and females. Predominantly in America, cheerleading teams have more men than women, allowing them to perform more stunts with throwing and catching athletes.

For you it was a surprise as well that this is what cheer is about?

Doyle: We expected an Irish equiv-

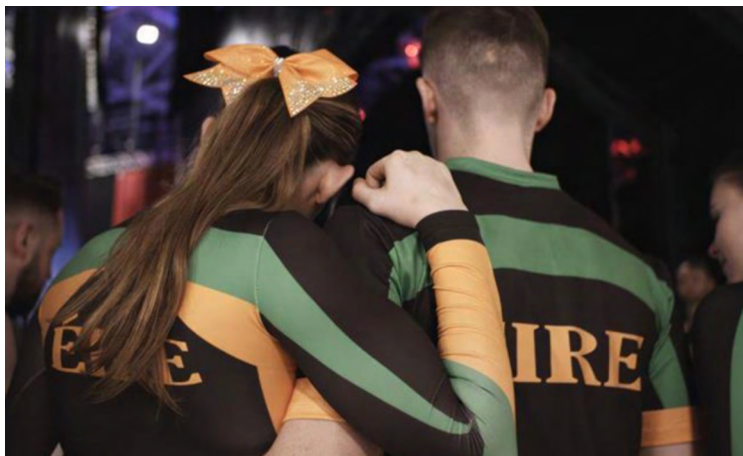


alent of the American high school scenes, the Hollywood cheerleaders. And with 15 girls together in a team, I was sure to come across some jealousy, fights, or bitchiness at some point. Which didn't happen. That in itself was lovely. For these girls, the main reason to do cheerleading is the team. It's about girls being together, since you have to throw and catch people, there is no other option than trusting each other. Hilton, the coach, is very strict about that: we're a team; we're a bunch of oddballs trying to stand out and fit in.

There is this specific scenery with glittery costumes, but you can't deny the scenery around it: the old gym I can almost smell the plastic and sweat.

Doyle: It isn't a pretty place, you can shoot the ugliest pictures there. In the edit, we tried to stay out of the gym as much as possible and focus on the activity, get in the middle of the stunts. We had a rule: If we get hurt, it's our own fault. Why would you be underneath a human pyramid with a camera? If then you get kicked in the head, it's your own fault - I took full responsibility for that. What they do





is dangerous and they need to be safe. Then we got to a point where we were following them everywhere, and they were so open. Although some were shy, as they never told anyone about their cheerleading. Because of the perception that they would be dumb, blonde girls with nothing to say.

That's the perception of cheerleading?

Doyle: I am now an advocate of cheerleading because it's a team sport for strong women and you still get to be feminine. But there is an embarrassing side to cheerleading, there's a bit of shame associated with it. Our

character Taylor has been on the Irish national team for years, but yet none of her friends in school knew about it. Taylor is very outgoing and articulate but she was very cautious about the camera; we couldn't follow her outside the gym because she didn't want anybody to know. There's no more use in hiding it now, obviously. With self-conscious girls doing such a fantastic thing, you wonder why there's such a shame.

Every team needs a coach. How to find one for a cheerleading team in Ireland?

Doyle: Hilton used to work in market-

ing, he had done some gymnastics and did a cheerleading course, just for the craic and found out he was good at it. By the time we were filming, Hilton and his husband were the only people in the country who had a dedicated gym. He is very laid back, constantly making jokes, but by the time we were getting close to competition he couldn't sleep at night, he was so stressed. Hilton is like a parental figure to these athletes and he really sees their potential, but he is also militant and strict. Taking Rickie off the team was a shock for everyone - he had been on the team for three years during two COVID crises, but when he started skipping training, he just took him off.

It's Hilton who speaks about the Irish being humble and playing down talent.

Doyle: If you ask someone Irish if they want a cup of tea, they'll be like *"no, I'm fine"*. You expect to be asked three or four times before you can say yes. In places where people are direct, an Irish person will probably never get a cup of tea. Those young girls have been socially conditioned to stand back - I've heard things like *"she could fly for any team in the world but she doesn't think that she is exceptional because she's Irish"*. Hilton genuinely

believes in their talent and ability.

It all makes a very lo-fi and down-to-earth impression.

Doyle: Three thousand cheerleaders in Ireland is a very decent number, but every American high school has a cheer team. We're tiny! We don't have any sponsorship, there is no financial support other than what the girls collect themselves.

I suppose COVID was a bummer?

Doyle: It was also a blessing in disguise. When COVID struck we'd been filming for two years. At the very beginning of the project, we were following two teams: Junior and Senior Team Ireland. The Junior team (7-13 years) was based in Dublin in a rather disadvantaged working class area, but the team folded because they had nowhere to train during the lockdowns. Senior Team Ireland, in Galway had its own dedicated gym. COVID proved that they were elite athletes - the government had to let them train during that period. That somehow proved our point that they should be taken seriously. After COVID lots of the cheerleaders had left. But the ones that remained became the team, they were our core characters. It was like catching up with old friends.



Can you explain the climax they're working towards - the championship?

Doyle: The American teams compete in the premier league, performing Level 6 stunts. We don't have the athletes, the resources, the experience nor the history to operate at that level. But we're at the elite level, which is very respectable. They had gone a couple of times to the championship before to get experience, but this time they were going to compete. There was little chance of them winning, but the aim was top 10.

It's not an obvious sport to get on camera.

Doyle: I shot it as if it was a fiction film. There were many potential characters but ultimately all those different characters together made up the team. It's all about synergy. We needed stories that were representative for a general sense of who these people are. It always comes back to the team!

There's people watching beach volleyball for the wrong reasons. Probably that also goes for cheerleading. Yet, your images are never, not at a single moment sexualised.

Doyle: We cannot make it unsexy - it is what it is - but we are not going to



Eirik Sæter Stordahl at the Zlin Red Carpet

interpret it that way. These girls are a bit naïve - in the gym they're wearing bras and short knickers, and they would leave the gym like this for the shop next door, hardly aware of the reactions this might provoke.

Your approach always remains respectful.

Doyle: There's one shot of Blathnaid having her spray tan done, turning her back to the camera, and that is the closest we got to crossing any lines. The objective there was to show her muscular physique, her strength. We showed every scene to the protagonists and their parents and discussed

anything that was potentially confrontational or contentious. In their heads, cheering is not sexual at all, for them it is about sweating and kicking each other in the face. In their moment of transition from being a child into an adult, they're not aware of it.

What was the thing about counting?

Doyle: It's a rhythmic thing, so you don't drop somebody, but as an outsider you might miss some of the mathematical finesse. It starts on 'one' or 'two', and then goes in different directions. After leaving the place to drive back to Dublin - a two hour ride across the country - in the car

we'd hear it inside our heads all the time: three, five, seven, nine,...

The film already played in the theatres?

Doyle: On the 17th of May EAT / SLEEP / CHEER / REPEAT was released in Irish cinemas. Whereas documentaries usually tend to end up in independent art house cinemas, we went into the multiplexes! With a specific distribution strategy: there's 3.5 thousand cheerleaders in Ireland, and together with their friends and families, they are our core audience. The areas where there would be clubs, are exactly the areas where the multiplexes are located. Young people went to see a documentary on a cinema screen and posted about it on Instagram or TikTok. There were posts with cheerleaders performing stunts in the corridors of the cinema. We got amazing messages from coaches, saying that we captured exactly what it is like to be in the world of cheer. That was brilliant.

-
Gert Hermans