

Sing Street (2016)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour 46 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 1; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 3.

Our star rating (1-5): 4

Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold..

Romans 12:2a (J.B. Phillips)

Filmmaker John Carney, whose low-budget Irish musical romance *Once* charmed audiences in 2007 and *Begin Again* in 2014, is back with another music-themed film. Set in Dublin, this time his protagonist is the down in the dumps 15 year-old Conor (Ferdia Walsh-Peelo), strumming a guitar in his room to shut out the noise of an argument between his parents. He even sets some of their shouted phrases to music.

The time is during the economic downturn of the mid-1980s when Ireland's economy, like the world's, is in dire straits. His parents Robert and Penny (Aidan Gillen and Maria Doyle Kennedy) are forced to cut back on their expenses. Their oldest son Brendan (Jack Reynor) is a college dropout, so no drain on finances there. They do not want to disrupt daughter Ann's (Kelly Thornton) architectural studies, so it is Conor who must bear the brunt of their cutback. He is transferred from an expensive Jesuit school to a cheaper one run by the strict Christian Brothers on Synge Street.

At the new school Connor is beaten up by a skin head and harassed by the tyrannical Principal Brother Baxter (Don Wycherley) because his family cannot afford to buy him the black shoes required for male students. All of this fades into

the background when Conor spies across the street the sophisticated looking Raphina (Lucy Boynton) standing on a stoop and smoking a cigarette. He screws up his courage and approaches her, striking up a conversation. She tells him that she is a model who will soon be leaving for London. His pick up line is an invitation to appear in the new video his band is producing. Impressed, she agrees.

Conor's problem now is that he does not have a band, and knows just the rudiments of guitar playing. Fortunately the one friend he has met, carrot-topped Darren (Ben Carolan), has connections. He links Conor up with Eamon (Mark McKenna) who owns a room-full of musical instruments, all of which he plays. Eamon also has a sympathetic mother, plus a talent for writing music and lyrics. The two hit it off well as musicians and co-writers, and soon they have rounded up others to complete their band, including the school's only black student Ngig (Percy Chamburuka). All of them commit to the one thing that usually separate the bands that make it from those that never venture out of their garage—or Eamon's room in this case—practice, practice, and more practice.

Back home Brendan, a connoisseur of bands and their albums, is impressed with his younger brother's enterprise. He himself had been a skilled guitarist, but had never followed through on his dream to form a band. He takes out numerous records from his large collection and gives them to Conor as "homework," thus expanding his brother's musical horizons. Brendan becomes his mentor, dispensing not only musical advice, but also giving him tips on dating Raphina. He imparts his philosophy of music, shared by many during the heyday of rock and roll. While watching a video of Duran Duran's *Rio*, he observes, "Look at it. The perfect mixture of music and visuals ... What tyranny could stand up to that?" The various interchanges between the two are as precious as the musical sequences. Through his brother's passion for music Conor arrives at the place where he can dream bigger things beyond

his present misery. He moves Conor and the band, named Sing Street after the street on which their school is located, to move from being a cover band to creating their own music. The music also helps Conor escape from the loud disputes between his parents, the two clearly heading for a divorce. But most of all, for Conor music provides a link to the girl!

The band's first music video features Raphina in "Riddle of the Model" with Daren moving in and out and around, capturing the group on his camcorder. Raphina is impressed so much that she agrees to appear in other videos, even serving as their make-up stylist. At one point she tells Conor, whom she comes to call Cosmo, "Your problem is you're not happy being sad. But that's what love is: happy-sad." Conor is happy to be with her, but also sad when he learns that she has been dating someone, an older boy with his own car. Here again Conor's brother amusingly strengthens his brother's resolve so as not to abandon hope of winning her over.

Part of the humor of the film is the group's frequent change of costumes, both their appearance and their sound influenced by the current band that Brendan has introduced Conor to. This includes not only Duran Duran, but other British musicians, such as The Cure, Spandau Ballet, and Joe Jackson. When Conor and his friends show up at school in their new garb, even with make-up, they are no longer ignored—indeed, they are now admired. With the exception of Brother Baxter who takes a very cruel action against the band leader. Like most musical (and sports) films, the plot leads to a grand finale at the high school's disco dance. The gig that we see is actually a fantasy in which the crowd adores the band; his parents appear, their harmonious dancing together indicating they are staying together; and even Brother Baxter is so caught up in the music that he executes a series of back flips across the gym floor. The film's climax is a bit of romantic fantasy also. The band's actual performance turns out to be a raucous but still funny act of rock rebellion against Brother Baxter,

one which induces the students to join in, though we are not shown the actual consequences.

The film's last shot of Conor and Raphina is itself more teenage fantasy than reality, reminding me a little of the young lovers of *The Graduate* riding off on a bus to an open-ended future—only this time they go off in a small boat. But by now the film's *joie de vivre* had so swept me up in its ear-pleasing music and two love stories—between a brother and a brother as well as the usual boy-girl affair—that I didn't mind. The songs are fun, inspired by hits of the 80s. John Carney co-wrote several, and Adam Levine's "Go Now," also written for this film, is especially inspiring. (Hear his YouTube rendition that includes shots from the film at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RJEo7fdl3ik>.) Even the director's dedication at the end of the film is enjoyable, "For Brothers Everywhere."

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the June issue of Visual Parables.