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Richard Harris' son, Jamie, forges own career in film

By **Karen Butler-McCully**
kbutler@irishecho.com

Growing up the son of a legendary Irish movie star, Jamie Harris says he never really considered an acting career himself. But after a chat with filmmaker Jim Sheridan on the set of his father's 1990 movie, "The Field," Harris said he decided to give it a shot.

"I used to love music and it didn't, unfortunately, work out," the late Richard Harris's 42-year-old son recently told the Irish Echo. "When I was young, I didn't want to become an actor... It was Jim Sheridan that said, 'You should try acting.' I thought I would hate it, but I just totally fell in love with it."

After making his big-screen debut in Sheridan's 1993 drama, "In the Name of the Father," Harris appeared in the films: "Princess Caraboo," "Made," "The Next Big Thing," "Rick" and "Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events." Having also acted in countless stage productions, as well as episodes of the TV shows "La Femme Nikita" and "Highlander," Harris completed work this summer on "I Believe in America," Michael J. Narvaez's film adaptation of his off-Broadway play, "A Doctor's Call."

In this contemporary epic, Harris plays a former Puerto Rican freedom fighter pulled back into the independence movement after his son is murdered. The story is an intensely personal one since it echoes events that happened in Narvaez's own family.

"I loved the story in general and I thought it was very powerful," the English-born actor confided. "It's the first time I play a father. I have two sons in the movie, which was quite bizarre. You have to accept that you're getting older. The whole story sort of jumped out at me and the character is great. He is someone who is trying to get on with his life in America and his son is killed and he wants to find out who did it and the more he finds out, the more he learns about his own family."

Asked how acting for Narvaez measured up to working on Terrence Malick's 17th century epic, "The New World," Harris cited both men's enthusiasm for their projects and their interest in hearing their actors' ideas.

"The difference, obviously, is you've heard of Terrence Malick for years," Harris observed. "It was quite nerve-racking in the beginning. They're both very charming and both very enthusiastic... (Malick's) only directed four movies, so I'm very proud to have been an actor in one of them. It's a small part in a big movie, so who knows, but it was an amazing experience."

The film also gave Harris the chance to work with Colin Farrell, the Castleknock actor whose off-screen antics have been compared by the media to Richard Harris's wilder younger days.

Admitting he had fun with Farrell on the set, Jamie Harris remarked: "He's a wonderful character: very charming, very sincere, very bright."

Now that Harris is committed to acting full-time he said he goes out for as many parts as he can in hopes of growing as an actor.

"Luckily, I seem to get varied roles," he said. "If I were playing the same thing again and again, I would get disheartened."

Emphasizing that he thoroughly enjoys filmmaking, Harris confessed it can sometimes be a long, tiring process, one that leaves him with thoughts of how he could have improved his performance. Stage acting, he said, is a way an actor can work on a role until he gets it right.

"My dad once said, 'Theater is acting, film is reacting,' and I think that is true," Harris recalled. "I try to do a play every two years or so, but, obviously, it's hard to just do theater."

So, once he got started, did he ever feel pressure to live up to his father's reputation as an actor?

"No, I didn't, actually," he said. "I was never going to fill those shoes. He was phenomenal, my dad. He was wonderful. I just do the best I can do. I don't think of it that way because I think you'd be in real trouble if you do. I don't look like Dad and we have very different personalities, so we couldn't be the same if we tried."

Since his Limerick-born father died of Hodgkin's disease in 2002 at the age of 72, the younger actor said he hasn't made it back to Ireland for a visit.

"I speak to my cousins a lot," he explained. "We have quite a big family over there and I lived there for three or four years, but I haven't been back for years since dad passed. I do miss it, but now that dad is gone, I don't see a reason for going."

Now that the acting thing is going so well, Harris said he has pretty much forsaken his dreams of a music profession.

"I have a guitar in L.A. and I play it very quietly," he quipped. "Whenever I play it, the dog runs out of the house. I think it's a sign. I think he is very happy I didn't take it up as a career."