

matt jones

Interview – The Director, Christopher Monger

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King of the mountain

There was a little boy who made a film about Garth Mountain. Now the Hollywood director has returned to his childhood home in Wales to make the real thing. By Matt Jones.

It's a warm, sunny day at Taff's Well railway station in August 1994. A young woman says a tearful goodbye to her boyfriend, a youth flicks through a morning paper while in the distance a lone cloud drifts over Garth Mountain, casting a shadow on the stark beauty of its summit.

In a terraced house on Cardiff Road, Christopher Monger relaxes with his mother Zena and sister Diane. Over a pot of tea and biscuits they share memories of his childhood in the sleepy village during the '50s and '60s. Curling photographs of family climbing expeditions are scattered on the floor and a book of yellow newspaper cuttings charting Monger's early film-making career provokes embarrassed guffaws from the son of the late village doctor.

His father Ifor's influence is at the heart of Monger's latest project, *The Englishman Who Went Up A Hill But Came Down A Mountain*, starring Hugh Grant, of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* fame.

The script is inspired by a true story he told Monger during one of their many walks on the Garth. It's a remarkable tale about the villagers' attempts to add soil to the top of the Garth after being told by visiting English map-makers that it was 15 feet too short to qualify as a mountain.

The scenes already completed at Pinewood Studios look promising, and with Grant as map-maker Anson, the finished product is bound to attract worldwide media attention on its release next year.

Ironically, the peak that provided the inspiration for his latest film was also the location for Monger's first ever film, an extraordinary family affair called *The Ascent of the Garth*.

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Monger/Page 2/...

“I must have been eight at the time,” he recalls. “My father started making short eight millimetre films complete with plot, sound and special effects. Me and my four-year-old brother Antony played two boys who were looking for the source of the River Taff. Dad was the director, my mother was the props person and my elder brother John, who was in his 20s, was in charge of the avalanche that knocks us down the hill. It was hilarious to watch. You could actually see the shadow of John’s arm as he threw the stones.”

Monger is not a famous film director but he’s certainly on his way. His off-beat 1989 comedy *Waiting for the Light* was overshadowed by the simultaneous release of leading lady Shirley Maclaine’s *Steel Magnolias* but his last film, *Just Like a Woman*, starring Julie Walters, has just had its theatrical release in the United States and the reviews have been flattering. Complimentary cuttings from the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* provide two more entries for proud Zena’s scrapbook.

In fact, Monger is now so busy in Hollywood it’s virtually impossible to get hold of him. Only by leaving a message in, of all places, Taff’s Well’s old iron-monger’s store did I finally get a call from him. By the time we meet for the first time in the living room that was once his grandfather’s grocery store, Monger is two weeks into filming *The Englishman*.

Although he now lives in the Mid Wilshire district of Los Angeles, near Paramount Studios, he returns to Taff’s Well as often as he can. “What’s nice about being here is that my grandfather lived in this house and places around the village have been familiar to my family for generations,” he says. “Los Angeles was built in the 1920s. It has no general history and no personal history but Taff’s Well fits like an old glove.”

In person, Monger loses the American brogue he has on the phone. He’s softly-spoken but talks with enthusiasm about growing up. “I had a blessed childhood,” he tells me when we next meet at Hampton Loade, an old Shropshire railway station that has been made to look like Taff’s Well station in 1916. “I never remember being bored. My parents were intelligent people who gave me an incredible amount of artistic and creative stimulation.

“We lived in a rabbit warren of a terrace. My father’s surgery was connected to our house and I used to paint in the upstairs study. The surgery waiting room was full of abstract paintings we’d done. Goodness knows what my father’s patients thought.”

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Monger/Page 3/...

Monger and his brother Antony were also encouraged to produce their own weekly paper, *The Taff's Well Times*. "It was a spoof newspaper but we still had a circulation of 250 copies at a shilling a time," Monger remembers with a smile. "We did a lot of trick photography. Our photographer was 'Mustafa Scoop' and one of his pictures showed Castell Coch [a nearby landmark castle] had been replaced with a block of flats. One of our readers believed it and rang in to complain."

His father would also talk Monger through the TV programmes of the time. "He would explain how they edited shows like *The Monkees*. The more cuts the faster the pace of the show. He knew an awful lot for a rural village doctor."

As Monger waits for the film crew to recreate his home village on the Severn Valley Railway, the 43-year-old film-maker says Cardiff has changed. "Sadly, the idiosyncrasies of the place have gone. South Wales is becoming more like America, one vast urban sprawl. Most of our filming is in North Wales because it's more like the South Wales of my childhood."

With that Monger turns to direct the first scene of the film to be shot on location. The lights are on, the cameras are rolling and the actors are at their marks: It's a warm, sunny day at Taff's Well station in June 1916. A young woman says a tearful goodbye to her soldier boyfriend, another soldier flicks through a morning paper while in the distance a lone cloud drifts...

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