

THE WONDER



Set in a small village in rural Ireland some ten years after the Great Hunger or Irish Potato famine, during which at least a million people died, this film explores the religious attitudes and bigotry of the time.

The basic plot revolves around eleven-year old Anna O'Donnell who has stopped eating for over four months but miraculously remains alive and well.

While some are rather sceptical of this claim, many others, including Anna's mother assert she has been surviving solely on 'manna from heaven'. A local committee of dignitaries decide outsiders should be called in to investigate by being with the girl every day and night for two weeks.

English nurse Lib Wright, who had served in the Crimean War, arrives in the village to observe Anna. After settling down at the local Inn, she sets up a twenty four hour seven days a week observation of Anna, assisted by a nun, Sister Michael.

It doesn't take long for the nurse to figure out that Anna is being fed from her mothers' mouth when she kisses her daughter goodnight. To prove her theory she decides to ban the family from touching the child. Back at the Inn the nurse meets a sceptical English reporter who has been sent to expose the miracle.

In conversation with Lib, Anna does not deny the source of her "manna", and she also discloses to Lib the reasons for her fast: her elder brother had repeatedly raped her, and she attributes his death to Gods wrath. Strangely Anna believes that by her fasting and prayers she will free her brother's soul.

After the council of dignitaries refuse to believe Lib's initial findings it becomes obvious that Anna will indeed soon die. Incredibly, rather than confront the truth the Mother

seems content to go along with the findings. In the end after setting fire to the family home while the others are at mass, Anna arranges for the near to death child to escape with Will the reporter. Months later after eventually being exonerated at a local enquiry they are finally united in Dublin as a new family where they set sail for a new life in Australia.

Told in a fairly straightforward way the excellent sets, acting, lighting and direction certainly added to an almost supernatural atmosphere to the story. Although perhaps the final happy outcome felt a little too predictable.

The one aspect that really jarred for me was the introduction and end which form very artificial 'bookends' to the film. During these short interludes we are shown in some detail the film set on the sound stage. I think the idea is to hammer home the fact the film is just a story to make you think, but I can't help feeling it is powerful enough to stand by itself without this rather convoluted technique.

While the religious subject matter would not normally attract me to this sort of film, the exploration of the attitudes of the day, culminating in Anna's Mother even being prepared to let her daughter die, proved to be a thought-provoking combination.

The Wonder is a Netflix feature film which has had only a limited cinema release, so thanks to the U3A film group we were very fortunate to enjoy a private showing on the big screen. However, if you missed it, the film is of course still available on Netflix for home viewing.

SLC