



SONG OF THE SEA is an Irish feature animation viewed recently by Kino Ken and the LVCA webmaster. Here is Kino Ken's review of that film.

**Ireland / Luxembourg / Denmark / Belgium / France 2014 color 93 minutes
feature fantasy animation Big Farm / Cartoon Saloon / Digital Graphics /
Irish Film Board / Magellan Films / Mélusine Films / Noerlum Studios /
Studio 352 / Super Productions Producers: Clément Calvet, Jérémie Fajner,
Samuel Feller, Claus Toksvig Kjaer, Tomm Moore, Stéphan Roelants,
Isabelle Truc, Marc Umé, Paul Young**

13 of a possible 20 points

*****1/2 of a possible *******

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates juvenile performer

Points:

- 1 Direction: Tomm Moore and Nora Twomey* (Voices Direction)**
- 0 Editing: Darragh Byrne**
- 2 Animation Camera**
- 1 Lighting**
Special Visual Effects: Eric Dupont* (Supervisor), Marc Umé* (Supervisor)
- 0 Story: William Collins and Tomm Moore**
- 2 Music: Bruno Coulais and Kila (a band)**
- 2 Production Designer: Adrien Merigeau***
- 1 Animation: Fabian Erlinghauser (Director), Danas Berznitsky,
Svend Rothmann Bonde, Alfredo Cassano, Giovanna Ferrari,
Denis Figueiredo, Tomislav Findrik, Walter Giampaglia,
Ole Christian Løken, Slaven Reese, Marion Roussel,
Alessandro Sorrentino, Stine Sæthre, Louise Bergholt Sørensen,**

Frederik Villumsen
2 Sound Designers: Felix Davin* and Alexandre Jaclain*
Dialogue Recordist: Garret Farrell
2 Voice Acting
13 total points

Voices Cast: David Rawle (j)* (Ben, a boy), Brendan Gleeson (Conor / Mac Lir), Lisa Hannigan (Bronach), Fionnula Flanagan* (Granny / Macha the Witch), Lucy O'Connell (j?) (Saoirse, Ben's younger sister, a selkie), Jon Kenny (Ferry Dan / The Great Seanachai), Pat Shortt (Lug), Colm O'Snodaigh (Mossy), Liam Hourican* (Spud / Bus Driver), Kevin Swierszcz (j) (Young Ben), others

Just in time for St. Patrick's Day, SONG OF THE SEA has come to the Regent Square Theater. Director Tomm Moore's new Irish fantasy feature is based on selkie myths. Selkies are half-human, half-seal female beings who become attracted to mortal adult males and often bear them a child. This offspring has special swimming instincts and, in this film, distinctive musical potency called into action by singing.

In the opening section of the film, a seemingly normal Irish family is about to welcome a new member. The mother has taught her firstborn son, apparently a child with no supernatural powers, a song relating to the sea. Thus the film's title. Ben, proud to take on unaccustomed role as big brother, eagerly awaits arrival of a sibling.

Here the story turns into a mystery. Pregnant mom Bronach vanishes into the sea. Dad Conor attempts a rescue of his wife, only to successfully retrieve a sealskin-wrapped infant. He gives her the name Saoirse, which means "freedom, liberty." So this child is connected to a concept of liberation.

Since the appearance of Saoirse seems to coincide with the disappearance of Bronach, Conor plunges into depression and mourning. Ben detests the new arrival, blaming her for the departure of their mother. This rejection causes Saoirse to retreat into muteness. She follows Ben around like a shadow, hoping for a friendly metamorphosis that so far has never transpired. Ben himself finds

consolation in his Irish sheepdog Cu, playmate for both children. But Cu's primarily loyal to the boy.

On Saiorse's sixth birthday, tension comes to a boil. Ben thrusts the girl's face smack into her birthday cake in a completely warped celebration rite. Visiting Grandmother witnesses this animosity against a smaller child who had in no way incited such malice. Granny scolds her son, charging Conor with too much immersion in private grief to properly discipline his children.

Making matters worse is Granddaughter's borrowing of Branach's conch shell gift to Ben. Playing it summons fairy lights. These lead Saiorse to discover a key which opens an attic trunk. Inside is what Conor claims to be his only souvenir of Branach: a sealskin swaddler that once protected her as an infant from drowning in the sea.

Wrapping herself inside it --- only by magic can the wrapper still be a comfortable fit --- the girl follows wispy spirits outside, down the beach, and into the ocean. There she transforms briefly into junior selkie, swimming and diving with a welcoming pod of seals.

Something strange is occurring. It's the first time in six years such creatures have been sighted in the area.

Eventually, the girl is returned by enchantment to the shore.

Luckily, her brother's conch shell has not been lost. It possesses a special gift, the tune to a lullaby assuaging unhappiness.

There is a great deal of sadness in the area. Grief is crushing Conor, embittering Ben, keeping sea-god Mac Lir in perpetual petrification. Unless pushed far back into remote memory, their selfish wallowing in lamentation will ever dull awareness of present needs. It will end by making them emotionally impotent, even threatening the continuing existence of seals and fairy folk.

Being contemporary and realistic, Ben doesn't believe olden days stories Bronach told him. Not until Saiorse morphs herself into a spirit creature, an exercise in breaking restraints that leaves her mortal body sick.

Granny resolves to carry the sufferer off to Dublin, assuming a change of scenery will enhance rapid recovery. The gloomy atmosphere around Conor's rocky outpost, mirrored by her son himself, must certainly be a contributor to

his daughter's odd behavior. Meddler and molder, Granny's convinced she can shape both grandchildren into happier human beings.

Conor compels his offshoots to accompany her back home. He will keep Cu with him for company.

Ben has a different plan. All during a car trip to Ireland's capital, he intently draws landmarks passed. This effort serves to apprise viewers of locales to be revisited later, acquainting them in the process with some Irish geography.

Meanwhile, his dad tosses Saiorse's troublemaking sealskin into the sea, thinking it good riddance.

Unhappily stranded in Dublin on Halloween, Ben and his silent partner take advantage of costumed throngs of children journeying through city streets on foot and by bus to camouflage an escape from Granny's. However, they are followed by a trio of spirits similarly focused on using holiday masking to disguise themselves. These three trackers, possibly representing The Fates, are aware of Saiorse's selkie identity. She must sing for them in order to keep the spirit world alive.

In order to assure that happens, they abscond with the girl to the interior of a nearby fairy mound. Ben trails behind, keeping out of sight. When ailing sister proves unable to produce song, he intervenes, supplying correct words. But not uncanny power. The leader of listening supernaturals insists Saoirse's sealskin is necessary to generate charmed crooning. Without it, the whole world will be drowned in an ocean of tears from inconsolable Mac Lair, already changed into rocky headland through loss of a loved one. His mother, the witch Macha, forestalled an apocalyptic floodtide by inducing amnesia, converting her son to emotionless stone, life and love locked impenetrably inside. For obscure reasons, Macha intervenes whenever anyone or anything attempts to revive the sea-god. Like Granny, she entangles herself unwisely in another's problem.

Owls are keeping watch from the skies. They hear Saiorse's song and dive down to attack, bringing transformation into stones rather than wisdom. Their command from Macha, their mistress, is to interdict all efforts to awaken joy in living. Successfully separating Ben and the girl, they fly off with the latter.

So Ben is ordered to pursue them by one of his companion musicians, just before the speaker is left mute inside a rock exterior. His tasks are to recover

selkie and skin before pain and suffering overtake the entire world, eliminating hope. Like any legendary hero, he must make a fateful journey alone, depending mostly on his own courage and strength.

Will he succeed? Only audiences watching the entire film know for sure.

As was the case with Moore's preceding production, *THE SECRET OF KELLS*, background art is richly detailed. Employing watercolors this outing, the director and art department create a fluid fictional world rooted in Ireland's hills, wells, raths, and waves. Even that most basic of Irishmen, the storyteller, materializes in profuse expansiveness as the Great Seanachai who informs Ben of tasks requiring accomplishment to bring his own tale to a fortunate conclusion.

Simplicity of line is contrasted with complexity of lighting, the two being interwoven to generate an atmosphere darkling and suspenseful. Scenes of tempest are ratcheted upward in intensity by violent musical outbursts and jagged lights of an unexpected aurora borealis. Celtic designs show up at intervals in ancient gnome statues, shrine decorations, and interlacing shrubbery.

Though the music score offers one rousing Irish tune and a dulcet lullaby, Bruno Coulais and Kila came up with a richer, more haunting concoction for *THE SECRET OF KELLS*. A rap-inclined number concludes the film jarringly, playing over end credits. Much of the cathartic atmosphere generated in *SONG OF THE SEA'S* climax is dissipated by contrastingly lightweight intrusion of this very foreign sound.

Voice acting is richly individuated. David Rawle's cranky Ben is wonderfully credible, mistreating his little sister while lavishing love on a pet dog. Just as winning is Fionnula Flanagan's twin achievements. She is equally persuasive in the roles of insinuating, balmy-voiced Macha and matriarchal, controlling Granny.

Editing relies too heavily on inexplicable interventions from mythological beings whose relationships to earthly family members is undefined and insufficiently motivated. This causes the middle portion of Moore's film to sag and lag. Here creatures from seemingly nowhere pop in and out of the story to offer pointers, musical diversion, conflict reinforcement, or mythical background illumination. They are less irksome than some comic relief

accompanying heroes in certain Disney and Dreamworks releases. Still, they fail to justify themselves as essential.

Lighting is satisfactory, sound clear and well-balanced. Recording pickup features superior quality, allowing full auditing across an enormous range of volumes.

Where the film signally fails is in providing distinct cause-effect relationships to drive plot. Character entrances and exits look to be consequences of engineering considerations and timing exigencies, rather than acts of personal choice.

Nonetheless, SONG OF THE SEA is entrancing, gorgeous entertainment, a rewarding treat for anyone seeking visual beauty and an authentically moving story about familial loss and resiliency. It is suitable viewing for ages seven and up, containing one strong Catholic profanity and two general ones.

SONG OF THE SEA is a probable future LVCA dvd donation to a Ligonier area library in 2015. Watch the LVCA website for updates on it.