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Knocking on the door of success



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Peter McCarthy threw himself into Thai boxing to heal the mental scars of an assault and ended up selling the resulting film door-to-door, writes **ARMINTA WALLACE**.

IF YOU BOUGHT a DVD on the doorstep recently from a guy with a sad story and a sunny smile, and you haven't watched it yet, for goodness' sake dust it off and put it into the machine. Made by Good Dog Films, the documentary feature *Fight or Flight* is well worth a chunk of your time – which is perhaps why it's beginning to attract attention on the international circuit.

The film, which took six years to make, has already picked up awards at festivals in Hamburg, Toronto and California, and is in the running for another couple of prizes in Wisconsin and New York's Long Island over the next couple of weeks. Last weekend it was pipped at the post for an Irish Film and Theatre award, in the editing category, by Lance Daly's *Kisses*.

Curling his lanky frame around a table in a tiny coffee shop in a south Dublin suburb, the film's producer and chief protagonist Peter McCarthy explains how *Fight or Flight* came to be made. "About seven years ago I was walking out of a fast food shop with my brother," he says. "We'd been for a beer, then something to eat." As they walked past a group of about six people on the footpath, he heard remarks passing between the group and his brother, turned around to see what had happened – and got a bottle smashed in his face.

"It got a bit chaotic for a while after that," he says with a grim smile. "I can't exactly remember what happened, but I think my brother dragged me into a hackney office. When a taxi driver pulled up he didn't want me in his taxi because there was blood everywhere.

"They got me all the way down there," he says. He sweeps his hand downwards from his eyebrow to his mouth, all along the side of his nose. "If you look in the white of my eye you can still see a black mark. I was very lucky not to lose my eye." So far it's a story which is, sadly, all too common in contemporary Ireland. McCarthy's physical scars healed up pretty quickly; the psychological scars were a different matter. "From a mental point of view," he says, "it took about . . . well. Years. And a film. Figure *that* one out."

The attack left him totally paranoid, and obscurely angry. There seemed to be conflict everywhere in his life, even – perhaps especially – with his brother. But mainly, as he admits at the beginning of the film, he wanted "to be able to walk down the street and not get the s**t kicked out of me". So when a friend showed him a newspaper article about the extreme sport of Muay Thai boxing, he decided to go to Thailand and sign up.

Talk about facing up to your worst nightmare. An opponent in Muay Thai doesn't just wear boxing gloves and a murderous expression: he can also, suddenly and without warning, lash out with his feet.

McCARTHY THREW himself into this extraordinarily macho world with a will. He trained, sparred and, eventually, got into the ring for a full-on fight. It's all documented in *Fight or Flight* in vivid and, at times, unsparing detail. What gives the film its strange fascination, though, is that despite his obvious dedication, determination and courage, McCarthy just doesn't seem like the kind of guy who gets into fights. When he's not jumping up and down on rubber tyres or taking tactical advice from his Thai trainer and a translator – both of whom speak an amusingly impenetrable language which is definitely not English – he's travelling around Thailand on a motorbike, developing a healthy respect for the local people and weaving a compelling documentary out of an unlikely cocktail of Muay Thai, the monsoon, cockfighting and Buddhist principles of non-violence.

At one point McCarthy even spent a number of weeks in a Buddhist monastery. "It drove me mad," he says, "so I had to get out. You'd get up at four in the morning and sweep your room. The first day they give you an hour of meditation and then they gradually increase the time from one hour to two, to three, to five, to seven. Eventually you're doing 14 hours of meditation a day." Too much, he says, for the western brain to handle without serious psychological support. "But I think if you stay there for a couple of months, it probably works itself out."

If you're looking for a happy ending at this point – McCarthy becomes a monk and lives happily ever after – forget it. *Fight or Flight* is a non-judgmental exploration of themes of machismo and cultural rites of passage; and much of its appeal lies in its eschewal of simplistic solutions.

In any case, McCarthy's story still contains a twist or two. He had brought a camera to Thailand with a view to making a television documentary about his odyssey, but couldn't get a backer for the project. "I pitched the idea around to try and get it made, and just didn't get anywhere," he says. "I spoke to TV3, TG4, RTÉ, Channel 4. Nobody was interested. So I made it myself."

There followed a lengthy and difficult period during which he re-mortgaged his home, borrowed from family and friends and "burned out credit cards pretty badly".

Good Dog Films got some completion funding from the Irish Film Board – but it was a drop in a large and increasingly murky ocean.

"Before Christmas, I hit the wall financially," he says. "After going bust and not being able to afford the mortgage or credit card payments, let alone basic living, I decided to take to the streets to sell my film door to door. I mapped out my routes, made a grid of the city and then hit the streets of Clontarf, Fairview, Sandymount, Ballsbridge, Blackrock, Monkstown, Killiney, Dún Laoghaire, Sallynoggin and Ballybrack, among others. I also took to the streets of Cork."

It was, by his own admission, an extraordinary experience. "It's one of the toughest things I've done," he says. "I'd say I've rung two-and-a-half to 3,000 doorbells in the last couple of months."

Like all fledgling sales people, he swiftly found himself on a steep learning curve.

"Saturday's good because everybody's in – but if there's a match on, it's not good because they don't answer the door. Dinner time can be a pain in the neck, because when people come to the door they're eating something and you've just interrupted their evening meal."

Among his customers were Pat Kenny and Neil Jordan, both of whom happily stumped up for a copy of *Fight or Flight*. "Some people will go 'cool, yeah, okay'," he says. "Other people get grumpy."

One man slammed the door so hard that McCarthy feared for structural damage to the house. Another woman shooed him from the doorstep as if he were a stray cat. "That was just funny," he says. "Although it generally took me a couple of minutes to recover from rejections like that."

THERE WERE OTHER, more subtle, ethical dilemmas.

"I rang one doorbell and I could see an elderly woman making her way along the hall, very slowly. Now, I prefer not to talk to somebody who I think really isn't gonna be into the film – but I didn't want to just ring the bell and run away. When she answered the door I said, 'Ah, I'm just selling a DVD'. And she said, 'I've just got my pension – what's it about?' So I said, 'Ah, it's just a story, you know? You probably wouldn't like it. It's about fighting and stuff like that'. But she said, 'I'll have one.' Then I tried to reduce the price, but she was having none of it."

McCarthy made enough cash to keep the credit wolves from his own door – and is currently discussing a fiction version of *Fight or Flight* with various interested parties in the US. He's also exploring the possibility of a new project based on the story of the donations made by the Native American Choctaw tribe to Famine relief in Ireland in 1846. "I'm looking for a serious co-producer for that one," he says.

If it doesn't work out in the short term, he won't exactly be idle. His stint as a door-to-door salesman for *Fight or Flight* has opened a number of, ahem, unexpected doors.

After he sold a DVD to a doctor in Clontarf, the man's psychiatrist wife expressed an interest in having McCarthy speak to groups of young people who had suffered unprovoked assaults and were finding it difficult to recover. After our interview he's off to Ballymun to meet a class of 15-year-olds whose contract teacher showed them the movie and impressed them no end.

"I'm not sure how that'll go," he says, as he gathers his stuff to leave. But who's going to argue with a Muay Thai expert? Not me, that's for sure.

Fight or Flight can be purchased online at www.fightorflight.tv, €19.99